



# The Holy See

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## **ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF THE IVORY COAST ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. As you make your pilgrimage to the tomb of the Apostles Peter and Paul, it gives me great joy to welcome you, the Pastors of the Catholic Church in Côte d'Ivoire. Indeed, the *ad limina* visit is a very important moment in the life and ministry of Bishops, who come to give glory to God for all the benefits they have received from him and to express their communion with the Successor of Peter and the universal Church. From their meetings with the Bishop of Rome and his assistants, they can also draw comfort and support to carry out the mission entrusted to their care.

I thank Archbishop Auguste Nobou, President of your Episcopal Conference, for his kind words to me on your behalf. I also express my best wishes to Archbishop Vital Komenan Yao of Bouaké, whom you have elected to succeed him in a few days.

When you return to your Dioceses, please bring your priests, religious, catechists and all the faithful the affectionate greetings of the Pope, who still cherishes the memory of their warm welcome during his three visits to their country. Convey to all your fellow-citizens his best wishes for a future of peace and prosperity.

2. The Church in Côte d'Ivoire has known various stages of development and growth in her history. Today she shows a wonderful vitality which makes it possible to look confidently to the future. Professions of faith in Jesus Christ and requests for the sacraments of Christian initiation are numerous. Liturgical celebrations are very well attended and lively. With their joyful, friendly spirit, your communities express the fraternal love that Jesus taught his disciples. In this way your people show their thirst for God and their desire to live the divine commandments to the full! During the African Synod, in which several of you took part, the Fathers reflected on these signs of hope but also on the shadows and challenges facing their mission. In recalling the urgent need to proclaim the Good News to the millions of people who do not yet know it, they expressed the hope

that a new evangelical zeal would enliven the local Churches. They also wished to call the Catholics of the entire continent to a new, in-depth evangelization, inviting them to walk courageously on the difficult paths of conversion of heart and continual renewal.

Following this Synod, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* I myself wanted to present the decisions and guidelines that will enable the Church to carry out her mission as effectively as possible. It is in some ways the missionary charter of the Church as the Family of God in Africa, which everyone is invited to put into practice in his personal life and in specific situations. I ardently hope that, at this privileged time when the 2,000th anniversary of the Incarnation is being celebrated, everything will be directed to the Jubilee's priority objective: the strengthening of the faith and witness of Christians (Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 42). I urge Christ's disciples to strengthen the ties that bind them to the Saviour of humanity in order to be faithful and generous witnesses. To do this, it is essential to present the Christian message fearlessly in its entirety with all its prophetic power, using and adapting the means that the modern world can offer. However, we should remember that the witness of a life of holiness is indispensable for an authentic Gospel proclamation, whose primary goal is to present the risen Jesus himself as the only Saviour of all mankind.

3. For some years the number of priests has been steadily growing; this gives us hope and optimism for the future. As I renew my cordial greetings to all your priests, I encourage them in their ministry to be authentic servants of Christ who sent them, and of the people for whom they are responsible, in ever more vital communion with their Bishop and with the whole Church. Indeed, the vocation to the priesthood obliges priests to adopt with determination the very attitude of Jesus, the chaste and faithful servant who gave his life unsparingly to fulfil the mission entrusted to him by his Father. I therefore invite them to be zealous in following the Lord, like the Apostles, by living their priesthood as a specific way of holiness. Thus in all circumstances they will be true and credible witnesses to the Word they proclaim and the sacraments whose ministers they are. In carrying out this service in a spirit of Gospel detachment from the inordinate search for material goods and personal advantage, they will be signs of the generosity of God who freely lavishes his gifts on human beings.

With continuing formation that deepens their knowledge of theology and the spiritual life and also takes into account the sound values of their living environment, priests will be able to express and faithfully carry out their ministry and to integrate their life. An act of love for Jesus Christ, who must be constantly recognized and sought, this continuing formation is also an act of love for the People of God whom the priest is called to serve (Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 70).

Permit me to express here the Church's recognition of the work accomplished in your country for more than a century by so many missionaries, men and women, who left their countries of origin to proclaim the Gospel in Côte d'Ivoire. Today their witness, at times heroic, continues to be the model of a life totally given to God and to others and a source of dynamism for the many religious,

*Fidei donum* priests and lay people who are generously committed to following in their footsteps. God bless their work and grant the Church of Côte d'Ivoire an ever greater concern for the universal mission! Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, in this missionary spirit which you have received from your fathers in the faith, I encourage you constantly to develop the great African tradition of solidarity by sharing resources of apostolic personnel with the less fortunate Dioceses in your country and beyond your borders.

4. I know how keen you are to give your future priests genuine formation. The close relationship that must exist between the Bishop and the seminary is crucial. It is a serious responsibility but also a great joy for a Pastor to follow the progress of those who are called to become his closest co-workers in the apostolic ministry. In fact, as I wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*: "The presence of the Bishop is especially valuable, not only because it helps the seminary community live its insertion in the particular Church and its communion with the Pastor who guides it, but also because it verifies and encourages the pastoral purpose which is what specifies the entire formation of candidates for the priesthood" (n. 65).

The initiative you recently took to set up a propaedeutic year deserves encouragement. This period of preparation before entering the major seminary is a privileged opportunity to clarify the candidates' motives, deepen their Christian and ecclesial life, and help formation personnel in their task of vocational discernment.

From the example of united and fraternal educational communities that present a concrete image of ecclesial communion, seminarians will learn in turn to become men of faith who are faithful to the Church and to the commitments they will be called to make. For this reason it is necessary to choose, prepare and guide priests of exemplary life who have all the human, intellectual, pastoral and spiritual qualities needed by those responsible for clerical formation. In a context where it is often difficult to hold up a life of asceticism and inner discipline to young people, suitable ways should be sought to present the demands of priestly life to them clearly, avoiding all ambiguity and compromises, which are harmful both to their personal life and to the Church.

5. To be faithful to her mission of proclaiming the Gospel, the entire Church must be missionary. By their Baptism and Confirmation, all the members of the People of God, each according to his own specific vocation, have received the responsibility to bear witness to their faith in Christ. Therefore priority should be given in pastoral programming to the formation of the lay faithful, so that they can lead a life that is fully consistent and can give an account of it to their brethren. This formation must enable lay people to know clearly the truths of the faith and its requirements, so that they will not be "tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles" (Eph 4: 14). It will help guide them so that they accept their own responsibilities in the Church and in society, as well as in the sociopolitical and economic domains, in the light of the Gospel and the Church's teaching. "Christians must be formed to live the social implications of the Gospel in such a way that their witness will become a

prophetic challenge to whatever hinders the true good of the men and women of Africa and of every other continent" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 54).

Among the lay faithful, catechists, whose role is crucial in the Christian communities, are particularly called to acquire an ever deeper formation in order to be true Gospel witnesses by the example of their life and by their competence in the mission entrusted to them. Please convey my encouragement to each of them and my gratitude for their generous service to the Church and to their brothers and sisters.

6. The family plays a fundamental role in African culture and tradition because it is the first pillar of society and the primary cell of the ecclesial community. That is why the African Synod considered the evangelization of the family a major priority. I firmly encourage you to continue strengthening a pastoral programme for the guidance of families in the various phases of their formation and development. It is particularly necessary to prepare young people for marriage and family life. They should be helped to understand the greatness and the demands of the sacrament of Matrimony, which gives the married couple the grace to love one another as Christ loved his Church, thereby perfecting their human love, strengthening their indissoluble unity and sanctifying them on the path of eternal life (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1661). It is the Church's duty to affirm forcefully the unity and indissolubility of the conjugal union. "To all those who, in our times, consider it too difficult, or indeed impossible, to be bound to one person for the whole of life, and to those caught up in a culture that rejects the indissolubility of marriage and openly mocks the commitment of spouses to fidelity, it is necessary to reconfirm the good news of the definitive nature of that conjugal love that has in Christ its foundation and strength" (Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 20). The witness of united and responsible homes as well as education in the meaning of fidelity, without which there is no true freedom, will set a valuable example for young people that will give them greater knowledge and acceptance of the rich human and spiritual reality of Christian marriage.

I invite the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church to love and support the family in a special way, with great esteem for its values and potential, to recognize the dangers and evils which threaten it, so that it can overcome them and be assured of an environment that will foster its development (cf. *ibid.*, n. 86)!

7. The new evangelization to which the Church is called must take a renewed interest in the close relationship between human cultures and the Christian faith. The African traditional religion, from which many Christians come, deeply marks your people's culture and still exerts a great influence on how the faithful understand and live the faith, sometimes giving rise to inconsistencies. As I wrote in *Ecclesia in Africa*, calm and prudent dialogue with the followers of this religion "will be able, on the one hand, to protect Catholics from negative influences which condition the way of life of many of them and, on the other hand, to foster the assimilation of positive values such as belief in a Supreme Being who is Eternal, Creator, Provident and Just Judge, values which are readily

harmonized with the content of the faith" (n. 67). However, it is essential to help the baptized form a deep and authentic relationship with Christ, who must become the real centre of their lives. Such an encounter, where the human being discovers the mystery of his own life, implies a radical conversion on the individual's part and the purification of all religious practices prior to this encounter.

Moreover, a fraternal dialogue of life with Muslims is also indispensable for building the future in peace. Despite the obstacles and difficulties, it is urgently necessary that all believers and the people of good will who share essential values with them join forces in building the civilization of love, based on the universal values of peace, solidarity, brotherhood, justice and freedom. To this end, they should work together for the harmonious development of society, so that the mutual rights and duties of all the nation's sons and daughters can be recognized by one another, and that all can have the freedom to fulfil the requirements of their religion in mutual respect.

To foster the dialogue between faith and culture, I am delighted with the presence in your country of several international Catholic institutions, especially the Catholic Institute of West Africa. They are a sign of the Church's growth, since they integrate in their research the truths and experiences of faith and help them to be interiorized (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 103). Many young people also receive a human and intellectual formation at educational institutions maintained by the Church or the State and are privileged places for the transmission of culture. I therefore urge you to focus special attention on pastoral care in schools and universities, and even more broadly in the world of culture, so that the Gospel can be truly rooted in your country.

8. At the end of our meeting, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I thank God with you for his work among your people. The approach of the Great Jubilee invites all Catholics to fix their gaze on the mystery of the Incarnation of God's Son, who came for the salvation of the human race. May our entry into the new millennium spur Pastors and faithful to look with the eyes of faith to new horizons, so that God's kingdom will be proclaimed to the ends of the earth! I entrust each of your Dioceses to the motherly intercession of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Peace, particularly venerated at her shrine in Yamoussoukro. I implore her Son Jesus to shower an abundance of divine blessings upon the Church in Côte d'Ivoire, so that she will be a living sign of God's love for everyone, especially the needy, the sick and the suffering. I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and willingly extend it to the priests, religious, catechists and all the lay faithful of your Dioceses.

*From Castel Gandolfo, 28 August 1999.*

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