



The Holy See

**ADDRESS TO THE BISHOPS
OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
IN THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

27 September 1999

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. In making your *ad limina* visit together, you are coming to ask God to increase in you the inner strength and missionary zeal which inspired Peter and Paul when they came to Rome to bear witness to Christ's Gospel. As the Successor of the Apostle Peter, I am pleased to welcome you who have received the mission of leading the Catholic Church in the Central African Republic, in order to encourage you and to confirm you in the common faith we have received from our Fathers. From my assistants in the Roman Curia you will receive the necessary help for fulfilling the charge entrusted to you.

I thank Bishop Paulin Pomodimo of Bossangoa, President of your Episcopal Conference. In your name he has clearly expressed the sentiments that motivate you at this special time of reflection on your pastoral ministry.

When you return to your Dioceses, bring the Pope's affectionate greeting to the priests, men and women religious, catechists and lay people of your Dioceses; he is praying that the Lord will strengthen them in their Christian life and apostolic commitment. Convey my heartfelt wishes for peace and prosperity to all your fellow citizens at such an important moment for your country's future.

2. As we approach the time when we will solemnly enter into the joy of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the entire Church, ever more keenly aware of her mystery and mission, is called to "lift her eyes of faith to embrace new horizons in proclaiming the kingdom of God" (Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 *Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 2). I am very delighted to note the

many signs of the active presence of God's Spirit among your people. The recent creation of two new Dioceses has highlighted the apostolic vitality of your communities and the openness of the men and women of your region to the Lord's call. May the Catholics of Central Africa discover there a pressing invitation to renewed missionary zeal! My wish for you all, especially the new Bishops, is that you can respond with courage and daring to the spiritual needs of the people whom you have received the mission of gathering together to form the Church as the Family of God.

Church must call attention to dignity of human beings

In the difficult and complex situation your country is experiencing, the Church has a particular responsibility to sustain the hope of all the nation's members and to help them in their search for authentic and credible reasons for living, so that they can look to the future with confidence. In recent years, she has been the voice of the voiceless by fostering reconciliation and the development of a common conscience in view of building a national community of unity and solidarity.

It is the Church's duty to call attention, in season and out of season, to the fundamental values linked to the dignity of every human being, as well as to the truth and responsibility of his personal actions; for God wants all people to form a single family and to treat one another as brothers and sisters. As a result, "to proclaim Jesus Christ is therefore to reveal to people their inalienable dignity, received from God through the Incarnation of his Only Son.... Endowed with this extraordinary dignity, people should not live in subhuman social, economic, cultural and political conditions" (Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 69). I invite you and your communities to continue your courageous struggle for the integral development of the human person and for the promotion of justice and harmony among all the members of your nation.

3. Through her social involvement, the Church intends to fulfil her prophetic role at the service of the individual and his dignity. In fact, there is a close connection between evangelization and social action. The commandment of love cannot be proclaimed without promoting the genuine growth of the human person and of society. I know the generosity of your communities, which is often expressed with poor and limited means, but ones rich in human and spiritual meaning. I strongly encourage those who with great devotion serve their brothers and sisters in need or distress, the sick, the lonely, the elderly or refugees from neighbouring countries. May every Christian, in a spirit of sharing, and generously opening the treasures of his heart, regard himself as one sent by the Lord to relieve misery and to combat every form of marginalization. In this he will proclaim by his actions the Gospel of Christ!

You have wanted Catholic schools to have a particular place in your service to Central African society in order to prepare young people for life commitments, for their civic role and for their moral duty. In fact, these schools "are at one and the same time places of evangelization, well-rounded education, inculturation and initiation to the dialogue of life among young people of

different religions and social backgrounds" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 102). This approach should be encouraged with all due prudence, so that the Church may effectively enable all young people to receive an education and may find ways to pay special attention to the poorest among them. This requires a concrete expression of real solidarity on the part of the universal Church, so that they can be guaranteed the presence and the human, cultural and religious formation of teachers in sufficient numbers, and that the material problems which such a project necessarily entails can be overcome.

Serious spiritual and human formation for seminarians

4. In your Dioceses the pastoral care of vocations is experiencing a new vitality, for which I am delighted. It is essential that all Catholics, particularly in their families, be aware of their responsibility to promote and encourage vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life. I hope that young people who feel called by the Lord to follow him in this way will bravely accept the Lord's loving gaze at them and will freely and generously respond to him. It is up to the Bishops, with the help of those responsible for vocational guidance and later of the seminary educators, to discern and confirm the authenticity of the call received.

So that young people can advance in their quest and be given the means to deepen their human, cultural and spiritual knowledge, it seems important to establish a propaedeutic year. In this way they will be able to enter the first cycle of the major seminary with greater benefit.

The formation of future priests is one of the Bishop's essential responsibilities and requires him to pay particular attention to its organization as well as to the life of the educators and of each seminarian. A serious spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation, indispensable for carrying out the priestly ministry, should be combined with a solid human and cultural formation. "The whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation" (Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 43). Future priests should acquire the human qualities necessary for them to be balanced people who are strong and free. It will be particularly important to insist on the candidates' affective maturity, a decisive factor for their education in true and responsible love, which is necessary for those called to celibacy, that is, "to offer with the grace of the Spirit and the free response of one's own will the whole of one's love and care to Jesus Christ and to his Church" (ibid., n. 44).

I warmly greet each of your priests. They are your valuable and indispensable co-workers in proclaiming the Gospel, and I am delighted with your attention and concern for them. I thank them for their generosity in serving Christ and his Church, often under difficult conditions. May they remember that, in profound communion with their Bishop and as brothers among their baptized brethren, their mission is to gather the People of God so that all its members, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, may offer themselves as "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (*Rom* 12: 1). This means that priests must live a worthy and holy life in keeping with their vocation and the witness they are to give as men of God set apart for the service of the Gospel, never letting

themselves be lured by worldly desires (cf. *Eph* 4: 22). "Priests, therefore, should occupy their position of leadership as men who do not seek the things that are their own but those of Jesus Christ" (Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 9). Through a vigorous spiritual life based on prayer, the Eucharist and the sacrament of Reconciliation, they will become authentic guides for their people on the ways of holiness, to which all the baptized are called.

5. The consecrated life, in its great diversity, is a treasure for the Church in your country. The spiritual quality of its members, a blessing for the faithful and a valuable support for priests, continually fosters in the People of God an awareness of "the need to respond with holiness of life to the love of God poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit, by reflecting in their conduct the sacramental consecration which is brought about by God's power in Baptism, Confirmation or Holy Orders" (Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 33). I encourage those responsible for the institutes in your Dioceses to give young religious a human, intellectual and spiritual formation rooted in the country's culture, which will enable them to be converted to Christ with all their being, so that their consecration in the *sequela Christi* may configure them ever more closely to the Lord Jesus in his self-offering to the Father.

Consecrated persons will also remember that the call they have received involves a commitment to give themselves to their mission. In fidelity to their own charism, in communion and dialogue with other Church members, first of all with the Bishops, religious institutes will generously respond to the Spirit's call and be concerned to search for new forms of mission, so that Christ may be proclaimed to all cultures even in the most distant regions.

I take this occasion to thank God for the immense work achieved in Central Africa by religious institutes since the arrival of the first missionaries over a century ago. The development of an already well-established local Church is the sign of the spiritual and apostolic dynamism that they were able to instil in proclaiming the Gospel message. I also thank the *Fidei donum* priests and the lay missionaries, who concretely express their solidarity and that of their local Churches of origin with the mission in Central Africa.

6. In your reports you stressed that many lay people in your Dioceses are involved in Catholic movements and associations. I congratulate them on their willingness and their fervour. I warmly encourage them to make their various groups the primary place for increasing their missionary commitment among their brothers and sisters. In every place may they be signs of God's mercy by their generous openness to the material and spiritual needs of others! May they not be afraid to proclaim the Gospel by an exemplary Christian life in keeping with their baptismal commitments!

The formation of the laity has crucial importance for the future of the Church. In fact: "The fundamental objective of the formation of the lay faithful is an ever-clearer discovery of one's vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfil one's mission" (Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, n. 58). I invite you to pay particular attention to the doctrinal and

spiritual formation of young people and of those called to positions of responsibility at every level and in every area of social life. In a world that needs to regain its bearings and reasons for hope, the teaching of the Church's social doctrine will make it possible to prepare Christians for political, economic and social tasks so that they can be active witnesses to Christ in their living situations and be effectively involved in building the nation.

Among those lay persons particularly involved in serving the community, I greet and congratulate the catechists, whose generosity I know well, and their families. For you and your priests they are irreplaceable collaborators in the apostolate. In our day, the changes occurring in the Church and in society require that they all receive a thorough doctrinal and pedagogical training as well as constant spiritual and apostolic renewal. I hope that in their work, which is so critical for the birth and growth of the Church, they will show an ever greater sense of belonging to the ecclesial community and of the dignity of their role.

7. Many and varied are the threats which weigh heavily today on the African family and its foundations, thus affecting the cohesion of society as a whole, since it is an irreplaceable pillar of the social edifice. "From the pastoral point of view, this is a real challenge, given the political, economic, social and cultural difficulties which African families must face as a result of the great changes which characterize contemporary society" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 80). It is essential, then, to encourage Catholics to work with all their strength to preserve and promote the fundamental values of the family. The faithful should have a high regard for the dignity of Christian marriage, which reflects and gives concrete expression to Christ's love for his Church. This is why the truth about marriage and the family as God established them must be clearly taught, especially by calling to mind that the love of husband and wife is one and indissoluble, and that, because of its stability, marriage contributes to the fulfilment of their human and Christian vocation.

Serious preparation of the couples, which takes into account their particular situation and culture, will make them realize that the sacrament of marriage is a grace which God gives them for the growth of their love throughout their lives. They should be helped to acquire the human maturity that will enable them to assume their responsibilities as Christian spouses and parents, and be offered a solid marital spirituality so that they can discover ways of sanctification in marriage and family life. Throughout their lives, may they receive support for facing their daily tasks and problems from their pastors and from the Christian community, especially from the witness of evangelical life given by other families!

8. To express her mission of communion among all people, the Church, called to be a sign and sacrament of the unity of the human race, must maintain and encourage fraternal relations with everyone for the sake of building a united and harmonious society. The fostering, in a spirit of dialogue, of cooperation among Christ's disciples as well as with other believers and all people of good will cannot but help contribute to the common good. However, you must see that Catholics are helped to exercise careful discernment at the level of faith and its ecclesial expression,

especially in meetings with the baptized brethren of other Christian denominations, in order to foster relations based on truth, while taking into greater account what unites than what still prevents total communion.

In a society of growing religious pluralism, it is also more and more necessary to pay particular attention to relations with Muslims. A genuine knowledge of the spiritual and moral values of Islam, based on a desire for mutual respect, will foster a better understanding as well as a sincere acceptance of religious freedom. With this in mind, I encourage you, as some of you are already doing, to train experts in religious studies and interreligious issues, who will be able with discernment and wisdom to establish a genuine dialogue with other believers and to advise the Christian communities more directly concerned.

9. Dear Brother Bishops, as you return to your country, I invite you to look to the future with confidence. The closeness of the Jubilee Year, when we will celebrate the 2,000th anniversary of the central mystery of our faith, is a powerful invitation to hope. I fervently wish that this time of grace may be a precious opportunity for your communities to deepen their faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who is the origin and the goal of our journey. In contemplating the Incarnation of God's Son, may all the faithful of your Dioceses see revealed the face of the merciful and compassionate Father! By constantly listening to the Spirit, may they recognize the signs of the new times and wait ever more ardently for the Lord's return in glory!

I entrust your episcopal ministry to the motherly intercession of Mary, that most holy Virgin called to be the Lord's Mother. For you and for the people entrusted to you, may she be the Mother who shows all her children the way that leads to her Son, assuring you of her protection on the paths of life!

I wholeheartedly give you my Apostolic Blessing, which I gladly extend to the priests, to the men and women religious, to the catechists and to all the faithful of your Dioceses.