



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE SYMPOSIUM OF EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES OF AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR (SECAM)

To the Most Reverend Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya

Archbishop of Kisangani

President of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar

1. As SECAM holds its 12th plenary meeting, I am pleased to extend my cordial greeting to all the participants and to assure them of my fervent prayers. Through them, I affectionately greet all the children of the African continent, "'a new homeland for Christ', a land loved by the eternal Father" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 6).

This year, when the Church is celebrating the Great Jubilee, you have wished to come to the tomb of the Apostles for this important meeting which enables you spiritually to relive that event of grace, the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa, held six years ago. The very theme of your meeting, *The Church-Family of God, Place and Sacrament of Reconciliation, Pardon and Peace in Africa*, is in full harmony with the Jubilee. For, "a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 51).

2. Five years after the promulgation of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, we must note that the overall view of the continent's situation, as expressed there, has not substantially changed. Many nations continue to be the scene of wars in which the people are the innocent victims. In glancing at the tragic geography of these armed conflicts, it is obvious that the one involving the Great Lakes region is, in a certain sense, the most symbolic. Our hearts as Pastors, however, must always remember those other, sometimes forgotten, conflicts which involve many African countries, often for many years. These conflicts, due to both internal and external causes, show contempt for the human person, his rights and his dignity. This attitude is in large part the cause of many other evils afflicting this continent, such as economic underdevelopment, poverty, forced migration, the spread of AIDS and pandemics that were thought to have been eradicated once and for all, the plundering of natural resources and environmental degradation.

3. The suffering-laden history of Africa's people is also that of the Church on this continent. In recent decades, Bishops, priests, missionaries, religious and lay people have been brutally persecuted and even killed. Structures that served the common good of the people without discrimination have been repeatedly ransacked and destroyed. Entire communities have been dispersed.

However, I would like to express my satisfaction here over the happy outcome of the painful events which have recently stricken the Church in Africa with the trial to which two of her Pastors were subjected: Bishop Misago of Gikongoro and Archbishop Kataliko of Bukavu. May the unexpected death of Archbishop Kataliko, the sad news of which we have just received, be a seed of hope and peace for the Church and for Africa! I would also like to pay homage to all who bear witness to Christ with courage and self-denial in difficult situations, sometimes to the point of giving their lives, and I ardently hope that the Church will be free to proclaim the message of Christ's love in her words and actions.

4. The plenary assembly of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar is a most fitting time to confirm the Church's option as the family of God, "an expression of the Church's nature particularly appropriate for Africa" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 63), and to define its practical consequences with ever greater precision, for the sake of ever more appropriate pastoral care. To fulfil the mandate Jesus entrusted to her and to play her prophetic role among the nations, the Church is involved in many areas of local life alongside the men and women of the continent, especially in order to encourage reconciliation between individuals and peoples, as well as to establish justice, solidarity, democracy and peace. More than ever, the Church must seek new and effective ways to take part, in accordance with her specific vocation, in integral human development in fraternal and peaceful societies. To this end, sincere collaboration with other believers and with all people of good will is an imperative that should motivate the faithful, united with their Pastors, in a spirit of truth and mutual respect.

I urge Catholic communities to be places of authentic reconciliation and to bear energetic witness to justice and peace in their structures and their relationships with their members, remembering that "if the Church is to give witness to justice, she recognizes that whoever dares to speak to others about justice should also strive to be just in their eyes" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 106).

The witness of the Church as a community must go hand in hand with the commitment of each of her members. Lay people who are humanly and spiritually well formed, therefore, must take their place in public life in order to be the salt of the earth. Everyone must also remember that he is called to live a holy life, to be an authentic and credible sign of God's love in the world.

5. Turning to my Brothers in the Episcopate and to all the people of this beloved continent, I repeat my heartfelt appeal for hope. In the difficult situations which you are experiencing, rays of light are not lacking; the Lord has not abandoned you! To build the reconciled world for which everyone longs, it is primarily up to Africans to take charge of the future of their nations. I again invite the international community not to abandon Africa. I know the efforts that have already been made, demonstrating true solidarity. These efforts must be pursued and made more effective, particularly by the cancellation or reduction of the national debt of the poorer countries.

My thoughts turn affectionately to the countries suffering from war. I strongly urge all who are responsible to seek paths

of reconciliation without respite and with sincerity, and to see that the peace agreements do not become commitments without a future but are effectively applied for the common good of their peoples.

6. During this Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the recent canonization of Sr Josephine Bakhita is a cause for joy and confidence, not only for Sudan, still sorely tried, but for all of Africa. The path she followed in her personal life can and must become a living sign for the whole continent: from slavery to liberation and to total human and spiritual fulfilment. With all the other African saints and blessed, she will not fail to intercede for her country and for the fruitful outcome of your Assembly's work.

Dear Brother in the Episcopate, I entrust you and all the other members of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar and their diocesans to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, Queen of Africa, as I cordially impart to all a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 4 October 2000.

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