



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF EQUATORIAL GUINEA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Saturday, 15 February 2003

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*¹ Today I am pleased to receive you, Pastors of God's pilgrim Church in the *Republic of Equatorial Guinea* who have come to Rome for your *ad limina* visit. In these days you have had the opportunity to renew your faith at the tombs of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul and to show your communion with the Bishop of Rome through unity, love and peace (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 22), feeling co-responsible in pastoral solicitude for all the Churches (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 6). Besides, your visits to the various offices of the Roman Curia have helped to support and guide you in the mission entrusted to you. With you, Archbishop Ildelfonso Obama Obono of Malabo and Bishop Juan Matogo Oyana of Bata, I desire to greet the priests and religious who are your collaborators in the mission of making the Kingdom of God present in your country in conditions that are not always easy. In your local Churches and in the Diocese of Ebebiyin which now has no Bishop, all should know that they can count on the affection and prayers of the Pope, trusting that their generous actions will bear fruit in an ever more intense evangelization which can reach the hearts and minds of the men and women of Equatorial Guinea. The three dioceses, united in mind and heart, form the family of God in your country and must offer a constant witness of communion and fraternity.² More than 20 years have passed since I had the opportunity to visit your beautiful country. I have pleasant memories of that apostolic pilgrimage in February 1982 that took me to the places where you carry out your work as ministers of the Gospel. Today I would like to repeat the appeal I made then in Liberty Square, Bata, that every ecclesial community, on the mainland and on your islands, remain firm in a renewed faithfulness to the mission of evangelization (cf. *Mass*, Liberty Square, Bata, 18 February 1982, n. 8; *ORE*, 15 March 1982, p. 6). All the faithful and you, first of all, since you have been placed at the head of the people of God, must devote your best energies to the proclamation of the Gospel. Indeed, it is only in Jesus Christ, that the men and women of Equatorial Guinea who seek to satisfy their hunger for God and their legitimate aspirations to see respected their dignity and inalienable rights, will find the complete response to their deep questions about the meaning of life. The celebrations of the Great Jubilee made me realize the need for the gaze of the Church to be "more than ever firmly set on the face of the Lord" (*Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 16). In Equatorial Guinea, this consciousness should also guide the ecclesial life and mission. May all who have received the mission to lead and feed the flock find in Christ the sublime example, the best guidance for unselfish, generous pastoral service. On their part, the members of the faithful who are rooted in Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of mankind, will find the necessary strength to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (cf. Mt 5,13-14) so as in all circumstances to account for the hope that is in them (cf. I Pt

3,15).3. One of the greatest difficulties that your particular churches face is the shortage of priests. Thus there is still great need for the work of promoting local vocations who will become part of your diocesan communities of priests and join the missionaries in serving the various communities. Vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life are a gift of God that it is necessary to ask for with insistent prayer; hence the importance of prayer for vocations, following the Lord's mandate (cf. Mt 9,38). It is also important to be able to count on strong and healthy families in which genuine values are learned, as well as on ecclesial communities where the figure of the pastor is properly esteemed and appreciated. It is in these contexts that young people will clearly hear the voice of the Teacher inviting them to follow Him (cf. Mt 19,21) and leads them to place themselves generously at the service of their brothers and sisters. Since your last *ad limina* visit, you have shown great concern in improving the national seminary for the formation of new priests. I encourage you to continue in this work. The creation of satisfactory places where candidates can receive the appropriate education in the different human and theological sciences is, in turn, of great importance. It is equally important to teach them a lifestyle in which prayer and frequent reception of the sacraments will bring these future ministers of the Church to an ever-growing intimacy with Jesus Christ, supported by discipline, fraternal community and by learning those habits that form the attitude of the priest or consecrated person of our time. It is an indispensable responsibility of the bishop and of the directors of formation to accept for priestly ordination only truly suitable candidates who, in presenting themselves, are prompted only by the desire to follow Jesus Christ and are never inspired by ambiguous ambitions or material interests.4. In Equatorial Guinea, the works of assistance and evangelization are the responsibility of men and women religious, many of whom traditionally come from Spain. For this work, with you, I would like to express my gratitude to them, for all that they are doing to ensure that the seed of the Gospel, planted in your land long ago, may continue to bear abundant fruit. According to the specific charism of each institute, men and women religious work in many areas, from the direct apostolate in parishes and missions, to education and health-care initiatives and works for social or charitable assistance. The religious enrich your local Churches, not only with the effectiveness of their services, but above all, with their personal and community witness to the Gospel. Consequently, while they work in close communion with the Pastors, they not only deserve their thanks but the gratitude of the whole community and the constant respect of civil society, so that they may maintain and increase their generosity and dedication.5. The laity, by virtue of their baptismal vocation, have an important role in facing the challenges posed by the present and future of Equatorial Guinea. Never forget, therefore, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, the importance of offering them a permanent and well-organized catechesis that will help them to grow in and consolidate their faith, to reinforce their hope and to make their charity more active. The laity have a specific mission which is to witness in the world to an irreproachable life, to the pursuit of holiness in the family, at work and in society, along with the commitment to infusing "the Christian spirit into the mentality and behaviour, laws and structures of the community in which [they] live" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 13). Pastors must therefore ask all the baptized not only to express their Christian identity clearly, but also to be the effective persons who usher in a social order that is inspired by justice and never conditioned by antagonism, tribal pressures or lack of solidarity. To enable them to live this way, they must receive a satisfactory religious and human formation that will help them withstand the erroneous forms of religiosity or the pseudo-religious movements that are so widespread today. Like leaven in the dough, they must promote human and Christian values in accord with the political, economic and cultural reality of the situation, with the goal of establishing a social order that is more just and equitable. In their communities they must give an example of honesty and transparency, and individually or in legitimate associations, they must act, whenever possible, in public life, enlightening it with the values of the Gospel and the Church's social teaching.6. Your country's last century of history marked by a number of painful episodes, has suffered serious consequences whose negative effects still need to be corrected in both the social and ecclesial fields. Facing this task,

the Church, who wants to serve the cause of advancing every aspect of human dignity, so men can enjoy proper freedom, understanding and respect, is determined to continue sowing the good seed. In this sense, it is important, dear Brothers, that you and your collaborators, always be ministers of reconciliation (cf. II Cor 5,18), so that the people entrusted to you, overcoming the difficulties of the past, may advance on the paths of reconciliation with all, without exception. Forgiveness is compatible with justice and offers the best future for the country built on peace, the fruit of justice and forgiveness, given and received, in a way that will consolidate a just and dignified national life in which all may find an equitable atmosphere of mutual respect.⁷ The Church's patrimony of social doctrine presents an ethical project that aims at fostering the dignity of the human being, a creature of God and, for this reason, the depository of inalienable rights that cannot be denied or disregarded. These rights must be considered in their integrity, from the right to life of the human being, including that of the unborn child, to natural death, the right to religious freedom and other rights, such as the right to nourishment, education, the right to the exercise of the freedom of movement, expression and association. It is true that in the world human rights are still not a fully implemented project; but not for this reason should we give up the firm resolution not to forget them and to respect them. Whenever the Church is concerned with the dignity of the person and his inalienable rights, she is concerned to see that no one's rights are violated by other human beings, by their authorities or by foreign authorities. Therefore, without a spirit of challenge, but in the fulfilment of your mission, continue to work patiently for justice, true freedom and reconciliation.⁸ Dear Brothers, at this meeting I have reflected with you on several aspects of your pastoral activity. In Bata when I said goodbye, I told you, "I carry with me a striking memory of your Christian enthusiasm and your kindness.... I shall continue to pray for you all to our common Father in heaven, that he may grant you peace and serenity, that you may always be good Christians and citizens" (*Farewell address at Bata Airport*, Equatorial Guinea, 18 February 1982; *ORE*, 15 March 1982, p. 6). I say it again to you today, as I warmly impart to you, to your priests, your religious and to all the faithful of the three dioceses of Equatorial Guinea, my Apostolic Blessing.