



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF BURKINA FASO AND NIGER**

*Friday, 4 July 1997*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. With great joy I welcome to this house you who have received from the Lord the mandate to guide his Church in Burkina Faso and Niger. You have come to Rome to visit the tombs of the Apostles and to meet the Successor of Peter in order to find light and support in your episcopal mission of "building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12), in communion with the universal Church. I thank Bishop Jean-Baptiste Somé of Diébougou, President of your Bishops' Conference, for his kind words and his clear-sighted presentation of the Church's life in your country. Through you, I extend an affectionate greeting to each one of your diocesan communities and to all the inhabitants of your region, whose warm hospitality I have twice been able to appreciate. May I be permitted to mention here dear Cardinal Paul Zoungrana, a great churchman in Burkina Faso, as well as the recently appointed Bishops, to whom I express my encouragement and fervent prayers. The creation of new Dioceses in your country is an eloquent sign of the Church's vitality among the peoples of this region. In the year that the Church in Niger is celebrating the 50th anniversary of her foundation, I am pleased to share in the joy and hope of Bishop Guy Romano, recently appointed diocesan Bishop of Niamey, and of the Catholic community in that country whose Gospel dynamism I know well.

2. On the threshold of the third millennium, the Church will celebrate the *first centenary of the beginning of evangelization in Burkina Faso*. It is fortunate that through your initiative, Christians have been invited to know and reflect on the history of their communities during this century, which has seen the blossoming and growth of the seed sown since the foundation of the first mission station in Koupéla in 1900. With you, I pay homage to the missionaries who strove with admirable zeal to spread the Good News and give life to the new indigenous communities which today we see flourishing in a remarkable way. In recalling this progress of the Church in Burkina Faso towards her centenary, Christians will give fervent thanks to the Lord for all the gifts they have

received and will be encouraged to continue zealously the work undertaken by their fathers in the faith.

This jubilee is a privileged opportunity for the faithful of your two countries to deepen the roots of their faith in Jesus Christ, the one Mediator and Saviour of all mankind; it will enable them also to renew their missionary effort so that the message of salvation may reach a greater number. In this regard, the work of building the Church-Family, which you are pursuing with self-sacrifice and great concern for inculturating the Gospel, witnesses to the love and respect that as disciples of Christ you bring to your peoples, their cultures and the whole of Africa. I fervently hope that the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, the fruit of that moment of grace which was the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, may be for each one of your local Churches the charter for her mission of evangelization on the threshold of the new phase opening up before her.

3. In communion with you in your episcopal duties, your priests work generously to give life and growth to the People of God, as faithful witnesses to Christ among their brothers and sisters. The Council teaches that priests, called to perfection by the grace of their Baptism, must seek holiness more intensely by virtue of their own ministry entrusted to them in the sacrament of Holy Orders (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 12). I therefore invite those whose "first task" is "to preach the Gospel of God to all men" (*ibid.*, n. 4) to conform their whole life to the greatness of the mystery which they proclaim, by a spiritual life nourished with the word of God and by constantly seeking the signs and calls of God in their life and in the life of men. May they also remember that their priestly life is rooted in the celebration of the Eucharist, "the source and summit of all evangelization"! With Christ, who gave his life for the salvation of all people, they will then become true servants of their brothers and sisters.

To have an ever vital sense of the mission entrusted to them and to respond to it appropriately, priests at every age and in every condition of life must take part in *continuing formation*.

In fact, while they continue to carry out the priestly ministry, this formation "has as its aim that the priest become a believer and ever more of one: that he grow in understanding of who he truly is, seeing things with the eyes of Christ" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 73). I therefore hope that this concern, indispensable for fulfilling one's priestly duties, will remain alive in your Diocese.

The imminent opening of a new inter-diocesan seminary for the first cycle is an important sign of hope for the Church's future. The demanding discernment of vocations and the need to give candidates for the priesthood a sound human, spiritual and pastoral foundation are serious responsibilities for the Bishops, Christ's first representatives in priestly formation (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 65).

The vitality and growth of consecrated life, especially of institutes founded in your region, are significant advances for an authentic inculturation of the Gospel message. "If the consecrated life

maintains its prophetic impact, it serves as a Gospel leaven within a culture, purifying and perfecting it" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 80).

4. In your reports, I have noticed the important place of *the laity* in the life of your communities. Through the diversity of their commitments, they fulfil their vocation as baptized persons in the Church and in society. I call on them to remain "devoted ... to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42), especially by actively participating in the life of parishes and basic Christian communities, which are privileged places for the birth and development of the Church-Family. I hope that in their many pastoral movements and spiritual groups they may find the means to create, in fraternal union, enthusiastic centres of evangelization and that through their action in urban life they may become a leaven for transforming society. You wish to support the young people of your Dioceses in their aspirations to find an active and recognized place in the Church-Family and in the life of their country.

As I have already done, I urge young Africans to have the Gospel boldness to take their nation's development in hand, to love the culture of their people and to work for its renewal in fidelity to their cultural heritage, by sharpening their scientific and technical expertise, and especially by witnessing to their Christian faith (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 115).

I would like to convey a special word of encouragement to the trained *catechists* and their assistants, to the "father and mother catechists" whose role in handing on the faith is paramount. I invite them to use the means offered them to deepen their knowledge of Christ and of the Church's doctrine. They will thus be able to fulfil their mission more and more competently, sharing with their brothers and sisters their own experience of meeting the Lord. Bishops and priests, be attentive guides and supports for them every day! Furthermore, catechists, under your leadership and in close association with their priests, play an invaluable role in welcoming and guiding people who wish to follow Christ, in order to lead them through the catechumenate to a commitment of sincere faith and to full integration into the ecclesial community. In fact, Baptism signifies and effects "rebirth from the Spirit, establishes real and unbreakable bonds with the Blessed Trinity, and makes us members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church'. Therefore a journey of conversion that did not culminate in Baptism would stop half-way" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 73).

5. In African societies, the *family* has a fundamental place. Its essential values must therefore be preserved. The Christian family should be a privileged place for bearing witness to Christ and his Gospel. A teacher for each of its members, it is a school of human and spiritual formation. Christians will also remember that "marriage thus demands an indissoluble love; thanks to this stability, it can contribute effectively to the complete fulfilment of the spouses' baptismal vocation" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 83). A serious preparation of young people for the sacrament of marriage will lead them to success and to the full maturity of their commitment to forming a true community of love. I therefore encourage you to promote the guidance of Christian families at the different stages of their formation and development. Pay very special attention to young families, to help

them discover and live their vocation and responsibilities. Be close to those who are more likely to encounter difficulties in life.

6. Thanks to her *works of mutual aid, of social advancement, of service in the world of health care and education*, the Church in your country participates in the development of man and society. And here I would like to acknowledge the admirable work of so many Christians, priests, religious and lay people who generously show that charity is the heart of the Church's mission. I hope that from Ouagadougou my appeals for solidarity towards the peoples of the Sahel may continue to resound. It should also be recalled that "a people's development does not derive primarily from money, material assistance or technological means, but from the formation of consciences and the gradual maturing of ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour. Man is the principal agent of development, not money or technology" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 58). I am pleased with the involvement of pastors and community leaders in this work of educating consciences. Furthermore, Bishops of Burkina Faso, you recently called the faithful and all people of goodwill to safeguard and reinforce social peace, in order to contribute to "humanizing society" in a sensitive period of social life. I fervently hope that peace and concord will reign among all the members of the nations in your region, and that a definitive solution based on justice and solidarity will be found for the problems that still occur.

7. Following the Second Vatican Council, the African Synod recalled with insistence that "openness to *dialogue* is the Christian's attitude inside the community as well as with other believers and with men and women of goodwill" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 65). The fraternal relations of Catholics with other Christians must concretely express the common responsibility of Christ's disciples for the witness they must give to the Gospel. Believers in Islam are also numerous in your region. I congratulate you on the peaceful relations that usually exist among believers. I keenly hope that they will continue to grow in mutual knowledge. The freedom, recognized by society, to choose one's religion will help to create an atmosphere of respect, brotherhood and truth, which will encourage a common effort for the advancement of individuals and society. In this same spirit of fraternal dialogue, may Christians clearly witness to their faith in Jesus the Saviour among those who belong to the Traditional Religion or other currents of thought.

8. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I am aware of the diversity of situations that the Church encounters in your countries, and of the great needs your Dioceses have, especially for pastoral personnel. I also encourage you to continue, through your Bishops' Conference, to show *generous solidarity towards the missions*. The sharing of human and material resources, even when one has one's own urgent needs, is an expression of the communion that must exist among all the local Churches. Be especially concerned to help the neediest Dioceses to form leaders and catechists who will make it possible to establish living and active communities. I invite priests and religious to be open to the Holy Spirit, to their Bishops or superiors and be willing to be sent to preach the Gospel beyond the borders of their own Diocese or country (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 133). It is your task today to give others what you yourselves received from the missionaries who came from

elsewhere and which the Lord has increased among you.

9. At the close of our meeting, I would like once again in mind and heart to join the people entrusted to you in the lands of Burkina Faso and Niger. We have now started the immediate preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, a time when we are called to focus our attention on the person of Christ, the Son of God made man. It is with trust then that I invite you to face the future in his presence. Amid the difficulties and conflicts that the African continent is experiencing, may your communities be bold signs of hope through the charity they will be able to live and transmit. May they show everyone that the Lord never abandons those who suffer or those who feel rejected or excluded by society! I entrust the hopes and sorrows of your peoples to the motherly intercession of the Mother of the Saviour. And I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing, which I gladly extend to the priests, religious, catechists and all the lay faithful of your Dioceses.

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