



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BENIN
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 16 June 2001

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. It gives me great joy to welcome you during these days when you are making your *ad limina* visit. By your meetings with the Successor of Peter and his collaborators, you show the communion of the Dioceses of Benin with the universal Church. I hope that these days of pilgrimage and reflection will be a source of spiritual renewal and apostolic zeal for each one of you in carrying out your episcopal ministry.

In his kind words, Archbishop Nestor Assogba of Cotonou, the President of your Bishops' Conference, has expressed your hopes and concerns at the beginning of this new millennium. I thank him most cordially. I extend a special greeting to the bishops who are making this visit for the first time. I warmly encourage them in their task as Pastors, at the service of the Church's mission. Take back my affectionate greetings to your priests, the religious, the catechists and all the faithful of your dioceses. May the Lord make the graces of the Jubilee Year fruitful in them! I hope that all the people of Benin, whom I have had the joy to visit twice, will live in peace and prosperity, asking God to accompany them in their efforts to build a society that is more and more brotherly and supportive.

2. The challenges which the Church is facing at the beginning of the new millennium are a pressing incitement to renew within us the commitment to proclaim the Gospel to all. Today, the urgent need for the mission is more obvious than ever. As successors of the Apostles who have a living experience of the Word of life, bishops have received the responsibility of directing human eyes to Christ's mystery. In this new phase of evangelization which is unfolding before us, only a close encounter with the Lord can provide the daring of an authentic and determined commitment

to the service of the Gospel. May the Successor of Peter invite your communities and their pastors to make a determined act of faith in the word of Christ, which strongly impels us to put out into the deep. May this act of faith be expressed first of all in a renewed commitment to prayer and confident dialogue with God!

Thus the missionary task must first consist in helping the faithful strengthen their faith in Christ the Saviour, so that confronting the many demands that we made on them, they are not tossed about by every wind of doctrine but, living in truth and love, are built up in every way into Christ (cf. Eph 4,14-15). May they all find strength to persevere on the paths of the Gospel and its demands in their attachment to Jesus and in their community's support. May they remember that "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk 9,62)!

In their efforts to build the Church, God's family, may the Christians of your dioceses also be men and women of communion and unity! As I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*, in order to be faithful to God's plan and to respond to the world's profound expectations, before we think of concrete projects, "we need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained, wherever families and communities are being built up" (n. 43). In spirituality of communion we can locate an essential path for each person, if he is to be recognized and respected in his own vocation, sharing the gifts he has received from the Spirit, to build a supportive and fraternal humanity.

May the unity of your communities, based on Christ's design for his Church, be a concrete sign of the presence of God who dwells in them and whose light must shine on the faces of all!

3. For several years you have made a wonderful effort to foster vocations. The number of young people entering seminaries is constantly growing. So it is important that these young men have a keen awareness that their vocation is a gift of the Lord which they receive through the intermediary of the Church, and that it is through the Church that this vocation is fulfilled. "The candidate to the priesthood should receive his vocation not by imposing his own personal conditions, but accepting also the norms and conditions which the Church herself lays down, in the fulfilment of her responsibility" (Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 35). It is therefore a serious responsibility of the bishop to discern the human, intellectual, moral and spiritual aptitudes of candidates, and to recognize the authenticity of their vocation.

Life in the seminaries is a constant concern for you. I earnestly ask that you continue to be demanding about the quality of the formation provided there in all areas. Seminaries must enable young men who are called to the priesthood to set out generously to follow Christ and to let themselves be introduced by him to the service of the Father and of men. This requires a sufficient number of formation staff, teachers and spiritual directors, who are well trained and exemplary in their priestly life. It is to be hoped that, with the generous participation of other local Churches, you

can assure seminarians effective spiritual direction, so that they will have a clear view of their true vocation and respond to it in a free and conscientious way.

4. On your return to your dioceses, take my cordial greeting to each of your priests. The Church is counting on them, so that, through their exemplary life, they may be credible witnesses of the Word they proclaim, fully committed to the path of holiness to which Christ calls them and on which they must guide the faithful. Throughout their ministry, priests are required to be attentive to their continuing formation, which has become indispensable in order to respond to the new demands of evangelization. May they find in this formation, first and foremost, the expression and condition for fidelity to their ministry and to their very existence! May they be convinced of accomplishing in it an act of love and justice to the People of God whose servants they are!

Moreover, I insistently invite priests to become ever more aware of the missionary dimension of their priesthood. Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council recalled, "the spiritual gift which priests have received in ordination does not prepare them merely for a limited and circumscribed mission, but for the fullest, in fact the universal mission of salvation.... Priests, therefore, should recall that the solicitude of all the Churches ought to be their intimate concern" (Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 10). In this perspective, I encourage the dioceses that are more greatly endowed to continue exchanging priests generously with those who are less well endowed. These exchanges will also encourage the unity of the People of God in the different regions of the country, whose missionary and pastoral situations vary considerably.

5. Since the origins of the proclamation of the Christian faith in your countries, religious institutes have played an important role. One cannot but admire the work of the missionaries, men and women religious and lay people who, at the price of great self-denial, made it possible for the Church to be born and grow among you. Today, although their numbers are lessening, their courageous and disinterested work is still appreciable, demonstrating the Church's universality. I hope that fraternal collaboration in a spirit of mutual esteem will be increasingly reinforced among diocesan priests and the members of the missionary institutes.

I am also aware of the high esteem which the people have for women religious, who give themselves without counting the cost to serve the poorest and most forsaken of society, regardless of their origins. The Church is grateful to them because in so doing they express, often very humbly and in difficult conditions, Christ's love for suffering humanity. Indeed, the commitment of consecrated men and women to the Church's mission is an eloquent expression of God's love for every man and woman. Through their fidelity to their commitments and the deepening of their friendship with God in prayer and in inner renouncement, may consecrated people also be daring models for their brothers and sisters, who help them in the quest for perfection to which all are called! I hope that many young people, attracted by this gift of self to Christ and to others, will accept to respond to it, to show the world the primacy of God and the Gospel values in Christian life.

6. To broaden the horizons of evangelization, it is right to stimulate and support a mature and responsible laity, by giving them a solid human and spiritual formation, which will make them conscious of their responsibilities in the Church and in the world. In fact, because they are members of the Church, the laity have the vocation and the mission to announce the Gospel in their own walks of life. The fields in which they can exercise their missionary action are vast. Thus they have a special place in the Christian reshaping of the temporal order. Christians must take their place and act competently in the highly complex world of politics, social life and the economy, in accordance with the Church's social teaching, holding up to their compatriots a vision of man and society in conformity with the fundamental human values. I ask them most particularly to work tirelessly to promote respect for the inviolable dignity of every human person. "The dignity of the person is the most precious possession of an individual. As a result, the value of one person transcends all the material world" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, n. 37). Christians have an urgent duty to champion respect for the life of every human being, from his conception to his natural end. This respect for the person should therefore be shown in particular to the most underprivileged, the sick, all life's injured. May they never be forgotten in your communities! "There is a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the Church to make a preferential option for them" (*Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 49).

Within the Church, the different types of services and forms of inculcating awareness which are entrusted to lay people must be appreciated, in order to give renewed vigour to Christian life and to the apostolate. Brothers in the Episcopate, may I address a special word of gratitude and encouragement to the catechists of your dioceses. They are irreplaceable evangelizers in the life of your communities. By their witness of an irreproachable life and their commitment to serving the Gospel, they always show the happiness of having discovered Christ and of living from his life to their brothers and sisters!

7. The involvement of lay people finds a primordial place for growth in couples and in the family. In your quinquennial reports, you have highlighted the serious problems which today are threatening families, their unity and their indissolubility. I warmly encourage you to persevere with a vigorous pastoral approach to families, and I rejoice in your efforts for formation, especially the establishment of a university centre. It is fundamental for the future to teach young people the proper hierarchy of values and to prepare them to live conjugal love responsibly in relation to the needs of communion and the service of life. The Christian outlook on marriage must be presented with its full greatness, stressing that, without love, the family cannot live, grow or perfect itself as a community of individual people, and that husbands and wives are called to grow constantly in communion through daily fidelity to the promise of the mutual, unique and exclusive gift which marriage entails. It is therefore necessary that the Church's solicitude also be expressed by a discreet and sensitive guidance of families, which will effectively help to face and solve the problems of married life.

8. Contact with the faithful of other religions, which is often experienced peaceably in the sharing

of daily life, can sometimes come up against more difficult situations. For the Catholic Church, interreligious dialogue is a very important commitment which aims to encourage unity and charity among individuals and peoples. "Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practise dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way" (Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, n. 57). I encourage you in your efforts to foster a better mutual knowledge as well as truer and more fraternal relationships between individuals and between communities, and particularly with Muslims. While you may long for true reciprocity, you must persevere with faith and love, precisely where your efforts meet with neither attention nor a response (cf. *ibid.*).

The formation of competent people in this field is essential to help the faithful have an evangelical view of their compatriots of different religions and collaborate with everyone for the common good of society. Furthermore, from their earliest education, young people must be encouraged to have respect and mutual esteem in a spirit that calls for the development of authentic freedom of conscience.

9. Brothers in the Episcopate, at the end of our meeting, I ask you to continue your episcopal ministry with unconditional trust in Christ's fidelity to his promise to stay with us until the end of time (cf. Mt 28,20). In the face of difficulties, his loving presence never fails those who remain faithful to the grace received. As I stressed in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*, "At the beginning of this new century, our steps must quicken as we travel the highways of the world" (n. 58).

Keep close to your people, particularly the young, whom I invite to look to the future with a gaze full of hope. May they retain their enthusiasm, to build a new world! Morning watchmen, now, more than ever, leave wide open the living door that is Christ!

I entrust you all to the motherly intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, and Mother of mankind, and I wholeheartedly impart an affectionate Apostolic Blessing to you, which I extend to all the members of your dioceses.