



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO NIGERIA (MARCH 21-23, 1997)

MEETING WITH NIGERIAN BISHOPS

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Abuja, Nigeria

Monday, 23 March 1998

My Dear Brothers in the Episcopacy,¹ The echo of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, celebrated almost four years ago, is still strong in our memories. The Synod was a time of grace-filled, fruitful reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the Catholic community on this Continent as it continues to grow and develop. The Fathers explored at length and in all its complexity what the Church is called to do in the face of the present situation. With their confidence placed firmly in God's promises, and despite the difficulties being experienced in many countries, they re-affirmed the determination of the Church to strengthen in all Africans the hope of genuine liberation (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 14). As you work towards this end yourselves, I address this message to you today and place at the heart of what I say the words of encouragement and grace written almost two thousand years ago by the Apostle Paul to his own "beloved child" Timothy: "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control" (2 *Tim* 1:7). My Brothers, your own ministry — individually to the faithful of your particular Churches and collectively to the nation as a whole — already shows the mark of this spirit, and I wish to confirm your courage and steadfastness so that these may ever remain the hallmarks of your proclamation of the salvation offered in Jesus Christ. This is all the more necessary as the new Millennium approaches, the time of grace, the "hour of Africa" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 6). It is your continued bold and decisive leadership which will enable the Church in Nigeria to meet the challenges of the new evangelization at this moment of your history. I cannot adequately express my joy and gratitude at having been able to return to Nigeria and to celebrate in this blessed land the Beatification of Father Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi. I thank Archbishop Obiefuna for the kindness and warmth of the words with which, in the name of all of you, he has welcomed me. In turn, I now greet you, the Bishops of Nigeria, and through you I greet all the members of your local Churches. Please assure your priests, religious and lay faithful — especially the sick, the elderly, the children and the young people — of my love and esteem.

"Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (2 *Tim* 1:2).² In the work of evangelization the Church faces many obstacles, yet she does not give in to discouragement. Rather, she continues to bear eloquent witness to her Lord, and not only through the spiritual care which she provides to her own children, but also through her commitment to serving Nigerian society as a whole. Indeed, hers is a strength far beyond the sum of her human resources — "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power" (2 *Tim* 1:7) — and so she is confident that from the seeds she sows God will bring forth an abundant harvest. In truth, the word of God cannot be restrained (cf. 2 *Tim* 2:9) and it will always be clear that it is not to us but to the "Lord of the harvest" (*Lk* 10:2) that the glory is due. At the same time, however, the relevance and credibility of the Church's proclamation of the Good News is closely linked to the credibility of her messengers (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 21). For this reason those who have been called to the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 *Cor* 5:18) — both Bishops and priests — must show clearly and unmistakably that they firmly believe what they preach. In the words of my predecessor Pope Paul VI: "The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness in preaching. Precisely because of this we are, to a certain extent, responsible for the progress of the Gospel that we proclaim" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 76).³ Nigeria has one of the largest Catholic populations in Africa and the number of believers continues to grow. This is a sign of the vitality and growing maturity of this local Church. Particularly promising in this same regard is the increase of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. Since priests are your chief co-workers in carrying out the Church's apostolic mission, it is essential that your relations with them be marked by unity, fraternity and appreciation of their gifts. All who have been configured by Holy Orders to Christ the Good Shepherd must share his attitude of complete self-giving for the sake of the flock and the progress of the Gospel. Living the priestly life requires a deep spiritual formation, and especially commitment to unceasing personal conversion. Your lives and those of your priests should reflect the spirit of evangelical poverty and detachment from the things and attitudes of the world. The sign of celibacy as a complete gift of self to the Lord and his Church must be carefully guarded, and any behaviour which could give scandal must be carefully avoided and, where necessary, corrected. With more than three thousand seminarians currently in formation in your existing inter-diocesan major seminaries, you are planning to open new ones; this will allow you to ensure more readily the proper training of candidates to the priesthood. Moreover, the major seminaries for religious are also doing well and experiencing growth. Even as numbers increase, however, it remains of paramount importance to exercise careful guidance and direction in the selection and preparation of those called to priestly ministry in the Church. You can be sure that if your seminaries conform to the fundamental requirements of the Church's programme of priestly formation — especially those presented in the Conciliar Decree *Optatam Totius* and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* — they will bear excellent fruit for generations to come.⁴ A few short months ago, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria completed its National Pastoral Plan, a tool which will be of great value in giving impetus and direction to the new evangelization. As you implement this Plan, you will need constantly to evaluate its effectiveness and to make together the modifications necessary to meet the various pastoral needs of the particular Churches. No pastoral plan which is truly national can fail to consider ways in which ethnic and cultural differences can be brought into harmony in a spirit of genuine collaboration and ecclesial communion. Your joint support of pastoral projects such as the Catholic Institute of West Africa is one of the ways to overcome such differences. I wish to encourage you to make the Bishops' Conference an effective instrument of ever greater unity, solidarity and joint action on the part of the forty-five different Ecclesiastical Jurisdictions in Nigeria. Given the increasing numbers of priestly and religious vocations, I encourage you to foster missionary vocations and to facilitate the apostolate of priests and religious called to missionary work outside their own dioceses and outside Nigeria. These are some of the challenges facing the Church in Nigeria, a Church which has now come of age. Yes, Christianity "is well and truly planted in this blessed soil" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 35); Africa has become "a

new homeland for Christ" (*ibid.*, 56) and Africans are now missionaries to one another. In a very special way your Dioceses can count on the witness and work of many men and women Religious who, giving freely of themselves, contribute so much to the life and vigour of your communities. Their special consecration to the Lord enables them to bear a particularly effective witness to God's love for his people and makes them living signs of the truth that "the Kingdom of God is at hand" (*Mk* 1:15). They are an integral element of the Church's life and mission in Nigeria: let them never be absent from your fatherly care and concern; be close to them and cherish their charisms as an extraordinary gift of the Lord. It is also fitting at this point that I say a word of praise for the increasing involvement of the lay faithful in the task of advancing the Kingdom of God in this land. In fact, the strength of the Church's witness to the Gospel will depend more and more on the formation of an active laity, enabling them to bring the spirit of Christ into the political, social and cultural arenas and to offer increasingly competent cooperation in planning and carrying out pastoral initiatives. Your particular Churches are blessed with catechists and "evangelizers" who zealously go about the task of announcing Christ and making his ways known to their brothers and sisters. Moreover, the specific gifts of societies of the lay apostolate and prayer groups, as long as they carefully avoid all exclusivism, are a vital force for the growth of your faith communities.⁵ The Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops considered the evangelization of the family to be a major priority, since it is through families that the African family will be evangelized (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 80). Moreover, marriage and family life are the normal path of holiness for the majority of the faithful entrusted to your care. Therefore, your unremitting efforts to lead couples to discover the truth, the beauty and the richness of grace to be found in their new life together in Christ remain an essential part of your pastoral responsibilities and the surest way to ensure a genuine inculturation of the Gospel. In a similar manner, young people, who are the future of the Church and of the nation, must be given every help and assistance in overcoming the obstacles which might thwart their development: illiteracy, unemployment, idleness, drugs. An excellent way of meeting this challenge is to call upon young people themselves to be the evangelizers of their peers — for no one can do this better than they. Young people should be helped to discover very early on the value of the gift of self, an essential factor in reaching personal maturity. And I would add that you must make it a particular concern of yours to do all that you can to ensure that Nigerian youth — especially girls and young women — are protected from becoming victims of unscrupulous exploitation, which often forces them into particularly degrading forms of slavery with tragic and devastating consequences. The Synod Fathers also called the Church in Africa to be actively involved in the process of inculturation, respecting the two important criteria of compatibility with the Christian message and communion with the Universal Church (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 62). I encourage you therefore to do all that you can — liturgically, theologically, administratively — so that your people will feel more and more at home in the Church, and the Church more and more at home among your people. Necessary here will be research into African Traditional Religion and culture, and the prudent exercise of discernment and vigilance. May the Holy Spirit guide you in these efforts.⁶ The members of the particular Churches entrusted to your care are citizens of a nation which must now meet several serious challenges as it attempts to implement political and social change. In this context, ever greater significance accrues to your role as leaders in the Catholic community, leaders who recognize the desirability and need for constructive dialogue with all sectors of society regarding the just and solid bases of life in society. Such a dialogue, while seeking to keep open all channels of communication in a spirit of patience and good will, does not prevent you from presenting openly and respectfully the Church's convictions, especially regarding such important matters as justice and impartiality for all citizens, respect for human rights, religious freedom and the objective moral truth which ought to be reflected in civil legislation. It is of the utmost importance that all Nigerians should work together to ensure that necessary changes may be brought about peacefully and without undue hardship to the weaker segments of the population. In this, it is clear that the zealous efforts of Pastors and faithful, in close cooperation with

Christians of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, play an important role in ensuring a positive outcome to this period of transition. In fact, as the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council noted, common action of this sort "vividly expresses that bond which already unites" Christians and, insofar as all join in service of the common good, it "sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 12).⁷ This atmosphere of dialogue and cooperation must likewise extend to Muslim believers of good will, for they too "try to imitate the faith of Abraham and to live the demands of the Decalogue" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 66). Today, as I meet you, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, I repeat the call that I made yesterday in my meeting with Muslim leaders: the call for peace, understanding and mutual cooperation between Christians and Muslims. The Creator of the one great human family to which we all belong desires that we bear witness to the divine image in every human being by respecting each person with his or her values and religious traditions, and by working together for human progress and development at all levels. Christians, Muslims and followers of African Traditional Religion should continue to pursue a sincere quest for mutual understanding. This will ensure that all citizens will be truly free to work for the good of Nigerian society, united in the "common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom" (*Nostra Aetate*, 3).⁸ "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control" (2 *Tim* 1:7). It is precisely this spirit, the spirit of steadfast commitment to the Gospel and complete trust in God's love, which will enable you to fulfil the mission to which the Lord has called you as Bishops. Strengthened by faith and hope in the saving power of Jesus Christ, you will become ever better equipped to meet "the challenge of being instruments of salvation for every area of the life of the peoples of Africa" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 70). Know that my prayers accompany you always, and once more I assure you of my affection and esteem. Commending you and all the faithful of Nigeria to the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, I invoke upon you "grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (2 *Tim* 1:2). Amen. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana