



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO REPRESENTATIVES OF THE SYMPOSIUM
OF EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES OF AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR**

*Consistory Hall
Saturday, 7 February 2015*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brother Bishops,

I am pleased to meet with you, the representatives of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, and to encourage your work. SECAM was conceived and developed to be at the service of the local churches in Africa. It seeks to provide a common response to the new challenges facing the continent, allowing the Church to speak with one voice and to witness to her vocation as a sign and instrument of salvation, peace, dialogue and reconciliation. To fulfil this mission, it is important that SECAM remain faithful to its identity as a vibrant experience of communion and of service to the poorest of the poor.

To this end, pastors must remain free from worldly and political concerns, that they continually strengthen the bonds of fraternal communion with the Successor of Peter (through cooperation with the Apostolic Nunciatures), and through easy and direct communication with other Church bodies. At the same time, it is necessary to maintain the simple ecclesial experiences available to all, as well as streamlined pastoral structures. Experience teaches that large bureaucratic structures approach problems in the abstract and risk distancing the Church from people. For this reason, it is important to be concrete: that which is concrete is in touch with reality.

Above all, it is the youth who need your witness: young men and women look to us. In Africa, the future is in the hands of the young, who need to be protected from new and unscrupulous forms of “colonization” such as the pursuit of success, riches, and power at all costs, as well as fundamentalism and the distorted use of religion, in addition to new ideologies which destroy the identity of individuals and of families. The most effective way to overcome the temptation to give in to harmful lifestyles is by investing in education. Education will also help to overcome a

widespread mentality of injustice and violence, as well as ethnic divisions. The greatest need is for a model of education which teaches the young to think critically and encourages growth in moral values (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 64). An important component in this educational process is the pastoral care of students: in Catholic or public schools there is a need to unite academic studies with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 132-134).

There are various reasons why we are seeing, also in Africa, a trend towards the breakdown of the family. In response, the Church is called to evaluate and encourage every initiative to strengthen the family, which is the real source of all forms of fraternity and the foundation and primary way of peace (cf. John Paul II, *Message for the XXVII World Day of Peace*, 1 January 1994). More recently, many priests, men and women religious as well as members of the lay faithful have admirably taken responsibility for the care of families, with a special concern for the elderly, the sick and the handicapped. Even in the most distant and remote regions, your local Churches have proclaimed the Gospel of Life and, following the example of the Good Samaritan, have come to the help of those most in need. A magnificent witness to charity has been given in response to the recent outbreak of the Ebola virus, which has struck many communities, parishes and hospitals. Many African missionaries have generously given their lives by remaining close to those suffering from this disease. This path must be followed with renewed apostolic zeal! As followers of Christ, we cannot fail to be concerned for the welfare of the weakest; we must also draw the attention of society and the civil authorities to their plight.

Dear brothers, I express my appreciation for the invaluable contribution made by so many priests, men and women religious and lay faithful to the proclamation of the Gospel and the social advancement of your people. SECAM is also a means of promoting respect for the law, so as to ensure that the ills of corruption and fatalism may be healed, and to encourage the efforts of Christians in society as a whole, always in view of the common good. The great work of evangelization consists in striving to make the Gospel permeate every aspect of our lives so that we, in turn, can bring it to others. For this reason, it must always be borne in mind that evangelization implies conversion, that is, interior renewal. The process of purification, which is inherent in evangelization, means accepting the call of Christ to “repent and believe the Good News” (cf. *Mk* 1:15). As a result of this conversion to salvation, not only individuals but the entire ecclesial community is transformed, and becomes an ever greater and more vital expression of faith and of charity.

May the light and the strength of the Holy Spirit sustain your pastoral efforts. May the Virgin Mary protect you and intercede for you and for the entire continent of Africa. To each of you, I give my Apostolic Blessing. Please pray for me.

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