



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF BENIN
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Pontifical Palace, Castel Gandolfo

Thursday, 20 September 2007

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

I am pleased to welcome you while you are making your *ad limina* visit, an expression of communion between Bishops and the See of Peter, and an effective means to respond to the requirement of reciprocal knowledge which stems from the reality itself of this communion (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, n. 57). Bishop Antoine Ganyé, President of your Bishops' Conference, has presented to me on your behalf some facts about the life of the Church in Benin, and I cordially thank him. Through you, I would like to greet warmly all the members of your diocesan communities, priests, men and women religious, seminarians, catechists and all the lay people, inviting them to grow in faith in Jesus, the one Saviour of humankind. Please be kind enough also to convey my affectionate greeting to dear Cardinal Bernardin Gantin. Lastly, I offer cordial good wishes to all the People of Benin, so that they may courageously persevere in their commitment to building a society that is increasingly fraternal and respectful of every person.

In past years you have given proof of great evangelical courage in steering the People of God through the numerous difficulties that your society has experienced, thereby showing your pastoral interest in the important issues that confronted it, especially in the field of justice and human rights. In all these situations, you tirelessly proposed the Church's teaching based on the Gospel, thus inspiring hope in your People's hearts and helping to preserve national unity and concord. In the face of the many challenges confronting you today, I strongly encourage you to develop an authentic spirituality of communion in order "to make the Church the home and the school of communion" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 43). In fact, this communion, which Bishops are first of all required to live with one another in order to find strength and support in their ministry, fosters missionary dynamism, "always ensuring the witness of unity so that the world may believe and

making ever greater room for love, so that all people may attain to the Trinitarian unity [communion] from which they have come forth and to which they are destined" (*Pastores Gregis*, n. 22).

I also ask you to encourage this communion in your *presbyterium*, helping your priests by the quality of your relationship with them to assume their priestly ministry fully. I would like to warmly encourage each and every one of them to keep a balance in his apostolic life, making ample room for an intense spiritual life in order to create and reinforce his relations of friendship with Christ, so as to serve generously the section of the People of God entrusted to him and to proclaim the Kingdom of God to all. It is then that the Gospel will be made truly present in society. In conformity with the Church's wisdom, may priests also be able to discern in their people's "traditions" the true goodness that favours growth in the faith and in genuine knowledge of God, and rejects all that is in opposition to the Gospel.

On the other hand, your quinquennial reports show how strongly traditions continue to influence social life. Although their best aspects must be encouraged, manifestations that are harmful, stir up fear or exclude others must be challenged. Christian faith must inculcate in hearts the inner freedom and responsibility that Christ gives to us as we face the events of life. A sound Christian formation will therefore be an indispensable support in helping the faithful compare the faith with the "traditional" beliefs. This formation must always enable them to learn to pray confidently, so as to be close to Christ always and in times of distress, in order to find support in the Christian communities through the effective signs of God's love which sets people free. The collaboration of catechists makes an invaluable contribution to this demanding task. I know of their devotion and of the care you take to train them and to enable them to live a dignified life. I offer them my cordial greetings, and tell them how grateful the Church is for their commitment to serving her.

Dear Brothers, the Institutes of Consecrated Life in your Dioceses make a generous contribution to the mission. May men and women religious always keep their heart and gaze fixed on Our Lord Jesus, so that through their works and through the total gift of themselves, they may communicate their own experience of God's love to all! In serving society's most deprived without distinction, which is an essential commitment for most of them, they must never leave aside God and Christ, whom it is right to proclaim but without seeking to impose the faith of the Church. "A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 31). I also invite the members of contemplative communities, by being a discreet presence, to remain a permanent appeal for all believers to seek God's Face ceaselessly and to thank him for all his goodness.

In your Country's cultural context, it is necessary that the Church's presence be expressed in visible signs that show the true meaning of her mission to men and women. Among these signs, warm and fervent liturgical celebrations have an eminent place. At the very heart of society, they eloquently witness to the faith borne by your communities. Thus, it is important that the faithful

take part in the liturgy in a way that is full, active and fruitful. To encourage this participation it is legitimate to permit certain appropriate adaptations to the different cultural contexts, with respect for the norms established by the Church. However, in order to avoid the introduction into the liturgy of cultural elements incompatible with the Christian faith or actions that give rise to confusion, seminarians and priests must be given a sound liturgical formation which enables them to deepen their knowledge of the theological foundations, importance and value of the liturgical rites.

Moreover, the Church's presence in society is also expressed through the public interventions of her Pastors. On various occasions, you have courageously defended the values of the family and respect for life when they were threatened by ideologies that proposed models and attitudes in opposition to an authentic conception of human life. I encourage you to continue this policy which is a service to the whole of society. In this perspective, the formation of young people is also one of your pastoral priorities. I would like here to pay a tribute to the work carried out by all the people who contribute to their human and religious education, especially in Catholic teaching whose quality is widely recognized. In helping young people to acquire human and spiritual maturity, help them to discover God, help them discover that it is in the gift of themselves to the service of others that they will become freer and more mature! Since young couples may meet obstacles - obstacles often linked to culture and tradition - to committing themselves to Christian marriage and in living with fidelity to the commitments taken, they need a serious preparation for this Sacrament as well as on-going guidance of families, particularly at the most difficult moments.

Lastly, I would like to tell you of my pleasure at noting that relations between Christians and Muslims take place on the whole in an atmosphere of mutual understanding. Therefore, to prevent seeing the development of some form of intolerance and to avoid all violence, it is right to encourage a sincere dialogue based on an ever truer reciprocal knowledge, especially through respectful human relations, through an agreement on the values of life and through mutual cooperation in all that furthers the common good. Such a dialogue also requires that competent people be trained to help spread knowledge and understanding of the religious values that we share and to respect loyally the differences.

Dear Brothers, now that our meeting is drawing to a close, I encourage you to persevere in your mission at the service of the People of God in Benin, living ever more intensely the mystery of Christ. Do not be afraid to propose the radical newness of life brought by Christ and offered to every human being so that he may fulfil his whole vocation! I entrust each one of you to the motherly intercession of Mary, Queen of Africa. May she intercede for the priests, men and women religious, seminarians, catechists and faithful of each one of your Dioceses. To you all, I warmly impart an affectionate Apostolic Blessing.

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