



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO THE BISHOPS OF NIGERIA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

*Consistory Hall
Saturday, 14 February 2009*

Dear Brother Bishops,

It is with great joy that I welcome you, the Bishops of Nigeria, on your *Ad Limina* visit to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul. As the Successor of Peter I cherish this encounter which strengthens our bond of communion and fraternal love and allows us to renew together the sacred responsibility which we exercise in the Church. I thank Archbishop Job for the kind words which he addressed to me on your behalf. For my part, I am pleased to express my sentiments of respect and gratitude to you and to all the faithful of Nigeria.

Brothers, since your last *Ad Limina* visit Almighty God has blessed the Church in your country with generous growth. This is especially visible in the number of new Christians who have received Christ into their hearts and accept joyfully the Church as "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (*1 Tim* 3:15). The abundant priestly and religious vocations are also a clear sign of the work of the Spirit among you. For these graces I give thanks to God and express my appreciation to you and to the priests, religious and catechists who have laboured in the Lord's vineyard.

Expansion in the Church calls for special care in diocesan planning and the training of personnel through ongoing activities of formation in order to facilitate the necessary deepening of the faith of your people (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 76). From your reports I see that you are well aware of the basic steps involved: teaching the art of prayer, encouraging participation in the liturgy and the sacraments, wise and relevant preaching, catechetical instruction, and spiritual and moral guidance. From this foundation faith flourishes in Christian virtue, and gives rise to vibrant parishes and generous service to the wider community. You yourselves, together with your priests must lead by humility, detachment from worldly ambitions, prayer, obedience to the will of God and

transparency in governance. In this way you become a sign of Christ the Good Shepherd.

The celebration of the liturgy is a privileged source of renewal in Christian living. I commend you in your efforts to maintain the proper balance between moments of contemplation and external gestures of participation and joy in the Lord. To this end attention must be given to the liturgical formation of priests and the avoidance of extraneous excesses. Continue on this path keeping in mind that the dialogue of love and veneration of the Lord is greatly enhanced by the practice of eucharistic adoration in parishes, religious communities and other suitable places (cf. *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 67).

The coming Synod of Bishops for Africa will address among other themes the topic of ethnic unrest. The marvellous image of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the gathering of innumerable men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation who have been ransomed by the blood of Christ (cf. *Rev* 5:9), encourages you to confront the challenge of ethnic conflict wherever present, even within the Church. I express my appreciation to those of you who have accepted a pastoral mission outside the limits of your own regional or linguistic group and I thank the priests and people who have welcomed and supported you. Your readiness to adapt to others is an eloquent sign that, as the new family of all who believe in Christ (cf. *Mk* 3:31-35) there is no place in the Church for any kind of division. Catechumens and neophytes must be taught to accept this truth as they make their commitment to Christ and to a life of Christian love. All believers, especially seminarians and priests, will grow in maturity and generosity by allowing the Gospel message to purify and overcome any possible narrowness of local perspectives.

Wise and discerning selection of seminarians is vital to the spiritual well-being of your country. Their personal formation must be assured through regular spiritual direction, sacramental reconciliation, prayer and meditation on Sacred Scripture. In the word of God seminarians and priests will find the values that distinguish the good priest who is consecrated to the Lord in body and spirit (cf. *1 Cor* 7:34). They will learn to serve with personal detachment and pastoral charity those entrusted to their care, strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus (cf. *2 Tim* 2:1).

I would like to highlight the Bishop's task of sustaining the important social and ecclesial reality of marriage and family life. With the cooperation of well prepared priests and lay people, experts and married couples, you will exercise with responsibility and zeal your solicitude in this area of pastoral priority (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 73). Courses for engaged couples, and general and specific catechetical teaching on the value of human life, marriage and the family will strengthen your faithful people for the challenges presented to them by changes in society. Likewise do not fail to encourage associations or movements that validly assist married couples in living their faith and marriage commitments.

As an important service to the nation, you have shown your commitment to interreligious dialogue especially with Islam, where with patience and perseverance, strong relations of respect,

friendship and practical cooperation are being forged with other religious people. Through your efforts as diligent and untiring promoters of goodwill, the Church will become a clearer sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the whole human race (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1).

Your dedication to derive from Catholic principles enlightened comments on current national problems is greatly appreciated. The natural law, inscribed by the Creator on the heart of every human being (cf. *World Day of Peace Message 2009*, 8), and the Gospel, properly understood and applied to civic and political realities, do not in any way reduce the range of valid political options. On the contrary, they constitute a guarantee offered to all citizens of a life of freedom, with respect for their dignity as persons, and protection from ideological manipulation and abuse based on the law of the strongest (cf. *Address to the Plenary Session of the International Theological Commission*, 5 December 2008). With confidence in the Lord, continue to exercise your Episcopal authority in the struggle against unjust practices and corruption and against all causes and forms of discrimination and criminality, especially the degrading treatment of women and the deplorable practice of kidnapping. By promoting Catholic Social Doctrine you offer your loyal contribution to your country and assist in the consolidation of a national order based on solidarity and a culture of human rights.

My dear Brother Bishops, I exhort you with the words of the Apostle Paul: "be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong; let all that you do be done in love" (*1 Cor* 16:13-14). Please convey my greetings to your beloved people, especially to those many believers who bear witness to Christ in hope through prayer and suffering (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 35 and 36). My warm affection goes also to those who serve in the family, in parishes and mission stations, in education, health care and other spheres of Christian charity. Commending you and those entrusted to your pastoral care to the prayers of Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi and to the maternal protection of Mary, Mother of the Church, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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