



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO BENIN

18-20 NOVEMBER 2011

MEETING WITH THE BISHOPS OF BENIN

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Apostolic Nunciature, Cotonou

Saturday, 19 November 2011

[Video]

Your Eminences,

Dear Archbishop Ganyé,

President of the Episcopal Conference of Benin,

Dear Brother Bishops,

It is a great joy for me to meet this evening with you, the pastors of the Catholic Church in Benin. I thank the President of the Episcopal Conference of Benin, Archbishop Antoine Ganyé, for the fraternal words of greeting which he offered in your name. With you, I am happy to give thanks to the Lord for the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the evangelization of your country. To be exact, it was on the 18th of April 1861 that the first missionaries of the *Society of the African Missions* disembarked at Ouidah, thus beginning a new page in the proclamation of the Gospel in West Africa. To all the missionaries, bishops, priests, men and women religious, and lay people who have come from their own homeland or whose origins are in this country, who have laboured since that time and up to our own day, the Church is particularly grateful. They have generously given their lives, at times in a heroic manner, so that the love of God may be proclaimed to all.

The celebration of this Jubilee must be for your communities and for each of their members, an occasion of profound spiritual renewal. It falls to you, as Pastors of the People of God, to discern its dimensions in the light of the word of God. The *Year of Faith*, which I announced to

commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the [Second Vatican Council](#), will certainly be a propitious occasion for enabling the faithful to rediscover and to deepen their faith in the Person of the Saviour of Man. It is because they chose to place Christ at the centre of their lives that, in the past one hundred and fifty years, men and women have had the courage to place everything at the service of the Gospel. Today, this same approach must be at the heart of the whole Church. It is the crucified and glorious face of Christ which ought to guide us, so that we may witness to his love for the world. This attitude requires a constant conversion in order to give new strength to the prophetic dimension of our proclamation. To those who have received the mission of leading the people of God, falls the responsibility of quickening this attitude in them and helping them to discern the signs of the presence of God in the heart of persons and events. May all the faithful have this personal and communal encounter with Christ, and become his messengers. This meeting with Christ must be solidly rooted in openness to and meditation on the Word of God. The Scriptures must have a central place in the life of the Church and of each Christian. Hence, I encourage you to help them to rediscover Scripture as a source of constant renewal, so that it may unify the daily lives of the faithful and be ever more at the heart of every ecclesial activity.

The Church can not keep this Word of God to herself; hers is the vocation to announce it to the world. This Jubilee Year should be a privileged occasion for the Church in Benin to give renewed vigour to her missionary consciousness. Apostolic zeal, which should animate all the faithful, is a direct result of their baptism, and they cannot shirk their responsibility to profess their faith in Christ and his Gospel wherever they find themselves, and in their daily lives. Bishops and priests, for their part, are called to revive this awareness within families, in parishes, in communities and in the different ecclesial movements. I would like once more to highlight the admirable and essential role played by catechists in the missionary activities of your dioceses. On the other hand, as I emphasized in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [Verbum Domini](#), “In no way can the Church restrict her pastoral work to the ‘ordinary maintenance’ of those who already know the Gospel of Christ. Missionary outreach is a clear sign of the maturity of an ecclesial community” (No. 95). The Church, therefore, must reach out to everyone. I encourage you to persevere in your efforts to share missionary personnel with those dioceses experiencing a shortage, whether in your own country, in other African nations or in distant continents. Do not be afraid to call forth missionary vocations among the priests, religious and the laity!

So that the world may believe this Word which the Church proclaims, it is indispensable that Christ’s disciples be united among themselves (cf. *Jn 17: 21*). As leaders and pastors of your people, you are called to have a lively consciousness of the sacramental fraternity which unites you, and of the unique mission which has been entrusted to you, so that you may be effective signs and promoters of unity within your dioceses. With your priests, an attitude of listening, and of personal and paternal concern must prevail so that, conscious of your affection for them, they may live their priestly vocation with peace and sincerity, spread its joy around them and faithfully exercise their priestly duties. I therefore invite you to help your priests and faithful to rediscover for

themselves the beauty of the priesthood and of the priestly ministry. The difficulties which are met along the way and which can at times be serious, must never lead to discouragement, but on the contrary become incentives to the awakening among priests and bishops of a deep spiritual life which fills their hearts with an ever greater love for Christ and with overflowing zeal for the sanctification of the People of God. Likewise, a strengthening of the bonds of fraternity and of friendship between all will be an important support, and will promote advancement in the search for spiritual and human development.

Dear Brother Bishops, the formation of the future priests of your dioceses is a reality to which you must pay particular attention. I strongly encourage you to make it one of your pastoral priorities. It is absolutely necessary that a solid human, intellectual and spiritual formation allow young people to attain a personal, psychological and affective maturity, which prepares them to assume to duties of the priesthood, especially in the area of interpersonal relations. For their part, as I noted in the Letter which I addressed recently to all seminarians, “the most important thing in our path towards the priesthood and during the whole of our priestly lives, is our personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ. The priest ... is God’s messenger to his people. He wants to lead them to God and in this way foster an authentic communion between all men and women”. It is in this perspective that seminarians must learn to live in constant contact with God. Since the choice of formators is an important responsibility incumbent upon you Bishops, I invite you to exercise this duty with prudence and discernment. Formators, each of whom must possess the necessary human and intellectual qualities, must be concerned with their own advancement along the path to holiness, as well that that of the young to whom they have the mission of helping in the search for the will of God in their lives.

The episcopal ministry to which the Lord has called you has its share of joys and sorrows. To each of you present here this evening, I would like to leave a word of hope. In the course of the last hundred and fifty years, the Lord has done great things in the midst of the people of Benin. Be assured that he will continue to accompany you from day to day in your commitment to the work of evangelization. Always be pastors after the heart of God, authentic servants of the Gospel. It is precisely this that men and women of our times expect from you.

Dear Brother Bishops, at the end of this time together, I wish to express my great joy at having returned to Africa, and in particular to Benin, for this double celebration: the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the evangelization of your country and the presentation of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*. I would like to thank you, and through you all the people of Benin, for the warm welcome, I would say simply for *the African welcome*, which you have given to me. I entrust all of your dioceses, as well as you and your episcopal ministry, to the Virgin Mary, Our lady of Africa. May she watch over the people of Benin! With great affection, I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing, which I happily extend to the priests, to the men and women religious, to the catechists and to all the lay faithful of your dioceses!

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