



The Holy See

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

MASS FOR THE BEATIFICATION OF FATHER CYPRIAN TANSI

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday 22 March 1998

"God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19) *Dear Brothers and Sisters*,¹ God has given me the joy, for the second time, of coming here to Onitsha to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass with you. Sixteen years ago you welcomed me to this fair land, and I experienced the warmth and fervour of a faith-filled people, men and women reconciled to God and eager to spread the Good News of salvation to those near and far. Saint Paul speaks of "the new creation in Christ" (cf. 2 Cor 5:17) and goes on to tell us: "God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that they are reconciled . . . the appeal we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:19-20). The Apostle is touching here on the history of every man and woman: God, in his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ, has reconciled us to himself. This same truth is presented even more vividly in today's Gospel. Saint Luke tells us of a young man who left his father's house, experienced the painful consequences of this action, and then found the road of reconciliation. The young man comes back to his father and says: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants" (Lk 15:18-19). The father welcomes his son back with open arms, he rejoices because his son has returned. The father in the parable represents our Heavenly Father, who wishes to reconcile every person to himself in Christ. This is the reconciliation which the Church proclaims. When Bishops from all over Africa gathered for a Special Session of the Synod to discuss the problems of this continent, they said that the Church in Africa has to become, through the witness of her sons and daughters, a place of true reconciliation (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 79). Being first reconciled among themselves, the Church's members will bring to society the forgiveness and reconciliation of Christ our peace (cf. Eph 2:14). "Otherwise" — the Bishops said — "the world will look more and more like a battlefield, where only selfish interests count and the law of force prevails" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 79). Today I wish to proclaim the importance of reconciliation: reconciliation with God and reconciliation of people among themselves. This is the task which lies before

the Church in this land of Nigeria, on this continent of Africa, and in the midst of every people and nation throughout the world. "We are ambassadors for Christ . . . and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is: be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). For this reason, the Catholics of Nigeria must be authentic and effective witnesses to the faith in every aspect of life, both in public affairs and in private matters.² Today, one of Nigeria's own sons, Father Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, has been proclaimed "Blessed" in the very land where he preached the Good News of salvation and sought to reconcile his fellow countrymen with God and with one another. In fact, the Cathedral where Father Tansi was ordained and the parishes where he exercised the priestly ministry are not far from this very spot in Oba where we are gathered. Some of the people to whom he proclaimed the Gospel and administered the sacraments are here with us today — including Cardinal Francis Arinze, who was baptized by Father Tansi and received his first education in one of Father Tansi's schools. In the great joy of this event I greet all those taking part in this liturgy, especially Archbishop Albert Obiefuna, Shepherd of this local Church of Onitsha, and all the Bishops from Nigeria and neighbouring countries. With particular affection I greet the priests, the men and women Religious, the catechists and all the lay faithful. I thank the members of other Christian Ecclesial Communities, of the Muslim community and of other Religious Traditions who have joined us today, and the various state and local authorities present at our celebration. In a special way, I ask God to reward those who have worked so hard, giving generously of their time, talents and resources, so that this Beatification might take place on Nigerian soil. I make my own the words of the Psalmist as I invite all of you: "Glorify the Lord with me; together let us praise his name" (*Ps.* 34:3)!³ The life and witness of Father Tansi is an inspiration to everyone in the Nigeria that he loved so much. He was first of all a man of God: his long hours before the Blessed Sacrament filled his heart with generous and courageous love. Those who knew him testify to his great love of God. Everyone who met him was touched by his personal goodness. He was then a man of the people: he always put others before himself, and was especially attentive to the pastoral needs of families. He took great care to prepare couples well for Holy Matrimony and preached the importance of chastity. He tried in every way to promote the dignity of women. In a special way, the education of young people was precious to him. Even when he was sent by Bishop Heerey to the Cistercian Abbey of Mount Saint Bernard in England to pursue his monastic vocation, with the hope of bringing the contemplative life back to Africa, he did not forget his own people. He did not fail to offer prayers and sacrifices for their continuing sanctification. Father Tansi knew that there is something of the Prodigal Son in every human being. He knew that all men and women are tempted to separate themselves from God in order to lead their own independent and selfish existence. He knew that they are then disappointed by the emptiness of the illusion which had fascinated them, and that they eventually find in the depths of their heart the road leading back to the Father's house (cf. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 5). He encouraged people to confess their sins and receive God's forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He implored them to forgive one another as God forgives us, and to hand on the gift of reconciliation, making it a reality at every level of Nigerian life. Father Tansi tried to imitate the father in the parable: he was always available for those searching for reconciliation. He spread the joy of restored communion with God. He inspired people to welcome the peace of Christ, and encouraged them to nourish the life of grace with the word of God and with Holy Communion.⁴ "God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). When we speak of the world as reconciled to God, we are speaking not only of individuals but also of every community: families, clans, tribes, nations, states. In his providence, God made covenant after covenant with mankind: there was the covenant with our first parents in the Garden of Eden; the covenant with Noah after the Flood; the covenant with Abraham. Today's reading from the Book of Joshua reminds us of the covenant made with Israel, when Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in the land of Egypt. And God has now made the final and definitive covenant with all of humanity in Jesus Christ, who reconciled individual men and women — as well as entire nations — to God by his Passion, Death and Resurrection. Christ is thus a part of the history of the

nations. He is a part of the history of your own nation on this continent of Africa. More than a hundred years ago missionaries arrived in your land proclaiming the Gospel of reconciliation, the Good News of salvation. Your forebears began to learn of the mystery of the redemption of the world, and came to share in the New Covenant in Christ. In this way the Christian faith was firmly planted in this soil, and in this way it continues to grow and to produce much fruit. Blessed Cyprian Michael Tansi is a prime example of the fruits of holiness which have grown and matured in the Church in Nigeria since the Gospel was first preached in this land. He received the gift of faith through the efforts of the missionaries, and taking the Christian way of life as his own he made it truly African and Nigerian. So too the Nigerians of today — young and old alike — are called to reap the spiritual fruits which have been planted among them and are now ready for the harvest. In this regard, I wish to thank and to encourage the Church in Nigeria for her missionary work in Nigeria, in Africa and beyond. Father Tansi's witness to the Gospel and to Christian charity is a spiritual gift which this local Church now offers to the Universal Church.⁵ God, in fact, has blessed this land with human and natural wealth, and it is everyone's duty to ensure that these resources are used for the good of the whole people. All Nigerians must work to rid society of everything that offends the dignity of the human person or violates human rights. This means reconciling differences, overcoming ethnic rivalries, and injecting honesty, efficiency and competence into the art of governing. As your nation pursues a peaceful transition to a democratic civilian government, there is a need for politicians — both men and women — who profoundly love their own people and wish to serve rather than be served (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 111). There can be no place for intimidation and domination of the poor and the weak, for arbitrary exclusion of individuals and groups from political life, for the misuse of authority or the abuse of power. In fact, the key to resolving economic, political, cultural and ideological conflicts is justice; and justice is not complete without love of neighbour, without an attitude of humble, generous service. When we see others as brothers and sisters, it is then possible to begin the process of healing the divisions within society and between ethnic groups. This is the reconciliation which is the path to true peace and authentic progress for Nigeria and for Africa. This reconciliation is not weakness or cowardice. On the contrary, it demands courage and sometimes even heroism: it is victory over self rather than over others. It should never be seen as dishonour. For in reality it is the patient, wise art of peace.⁶ The passage from the Book of Joshua which we heard in the First Reading of today's liturgy speaks of the Passover which the children of Israel celebrated after arriving in the Promised Land. They celebrated it with joy because they saw with their own eyes that the Lord's promises to them had been fulfilled. After forty years of wandering in the desert, their feet now stood on the land which God was giving to them. The Passover of the Old Testament, the memorial of the exodus from Egypt, is the figure of the Passover of the New Testament, the memorial of Christ's passing from death to life, which we recall and celebrate at every Mass. As we stand before the Altar of Sacrifice, soon to be fed and nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, we must be convinced that each of us, according to our particular state in life, is called to do no less than what Father Tansi did. Having been reconciled with God, we must be instruments of reconciliation, treating all men and women as brothers and sisters, called to membership in the one family of God. Reconciliation necessarily involves solidarity. The effect of solidarity is peace. And the fruits of peace are joy and unity in families, cooperation and development in society, truth and justice in the life of the nation. May this be Nigeria's bright future! "The God of peace be with you all. Amen" (*Rom 15:33*).