



The Holy See

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

MASS AT KUBWA ARENA

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Abuja

Monday 23 March 1998

"You are citizens like all the saints, and part of God's household" (*Eph 2:19*) Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,¹ These words from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians take on a special significance here in the new Federal Capital, the City of Abuja. In a very real way, this City is meant to represent the dawning of a new era for Nigeria and for Nigerians, an era filled with hope, in which every Nigerian citizen — every man and woman — is called to play a part in the building of a new reality in this land. Nigeria, like all of Africa, is searching for a way to meet the aspirations of its peoples, to leave behind the effects of poverty, disputes, wars, despair, in order to make proper use of the continent's immense resources and achieve political and social stability. Africa needs hope, peace, joy, harmony, love and unity: this was an affirmation made by the Fathers of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 40). This is what we ask of God in our prayer here today. From Abuja I wish to express my esteem and affection for every Nigerian: for those of you present at this Eucharist and for those watching on television or listening on the radio. I offer a special word of greeting to Archbishop John Onaiyekan, to the other Bishops, to the priests, the Religious and the lay faithful from all the local Churches of Nigeria and from other parts of Africa. I greet the Government leaders, the traditional rulers and other authorities who are present this morning. I cordially welcome the members of the other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, represented in the Christian Association of Nigeria, as well as the followers of other Religious Traditions who have come to join us, in particular the members of the Muslim community.² Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, it has been sixteen years since my last visit to Nigeria. The warmth of your welcome makes me feel once more at home. And are not we all, each and every one of us, called to be at home as members of the one great family of God? This is precisely what Saint Paul is telling us: we are "part of the household of God", that is, members of God's family! In the natural order, the family is the foundation and basis of every human community and society. From the nucleus that is

the family, there arise clans, tribes, peoples and states; even the great family of African nations finds its ultimate source in the human family of husband and wife, mother and father and children. African culture and tradition hold the family in the highest regard. This is why the peoples of Africa rejoice in the gift of new life, life which is conceived and born; they spontaneously reject the idea that life can be destroyed in the womb, even when so-called "progressive civilizations" try to lead them in this direction; they show their respect for human life until its natural end, and keep elderly parents and relatives within the family (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 43). African cultures have an acute sense of solidarity and community life, especially in relation to the extended family and the village (cf. *ibid.*). These are signs that you understand and fulfil the requirements of that justice and integrity about which the Prophet Isaiah speaks in the First Reading (cf. Is 56:1). It is precisely in relationships within the family and between families that justice and integrity become an immediate reality and a practical commitment.³ When this natural order is raised to the supernatural order we become members of God's family and are built into a spiritual house where the Spirit of God dwells. But how does the natural gain access to the supernatural? How is it that we become members of God's family and are made holy temples for God's Spirit? The reality of the family, as it exists at the cultural and social level, is elevated by grace and brought to a higher level. Among the baptized, relationships within the family take on a new character: they become a grace-filled communion of life and love, at the service of the wider community. And they build up the Church, the family of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 6). The Church, through her evangelizing mission and her active presence in every part of the world, gives new meaning to the very concept of the family and, consequently, to that of the nation as a "family of families", and to that of the world as "the family of nations". A wonderful sign of the universal character of the family of God, which truly includes all peoples, was the Beatification yesterday in Onitsha — the first ceremony of this sort ever to take place on Nigerian soil, in honour of one of Nigeria's own sons. This was a family celebration for the Nigerian people and nation. At the same time it was a celebration for all of God's family: the whole worldwide Church of God rejoiced with the Church in Nigeria, and has now received from Nigeria the edifying example of the life and witness of Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi. In human terms, Father Tansi was a son of this country, born in Anambra State. In the supernatural order of grace, however, he became something more: without losing his natural ancestry, he transcended his earthly origins and became, in the words of Saint Paul, "part of God's household", "part of a building that has the apostles and prophets for its foundation, and Christ Jesus as its main cornerstone" (*Eph 2:19,20*). By grace, he was "made joyful in God's house of prayer" (*Is 56:7*). And he understood that God's house is a "house of prayer for all the peoples" (*ibid.*). It is a house of prayer for the Hausa, for the Yoruba, for the Igbo. It is a house of prayer for the Efik, the Tiv, the Edo, the Gwari, and the many other peoples — too numerous to mention by name — who inhabit this land of Nigeria. And not just for these peoples alone, but for all the peoples of Africa, for all the peoples of Europe, of Asia, of Oceania, of the Americas: "my house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples"⁴. In today's Gospel, Jesus himself shows us how to understand the family of God and how it can include all peoples. He tells us: "Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother" (*Mk 3:35*). And with this, Jesus reveals a secret of his Kingdom. He tells us something about his relationship with Mary his Mother. No matter how much Jesus loved her because she was his Mother, he loved her all the more because she always did the will of his Heavenly Father. At the Annunciation she said "Yes" to God's will, manifested by the Angel Gabriel (cf. *Lk 1:26-38*). At every step, she shared her Son's life and mission, all the way to the foot of the Cross (cf. *Jn 19:25*). Like Mary, we too learn and accept that every human relationship is renewed, elevated, purified and given new meaning through the grace of Christ: "Through him, all of us have in the one Spirit our way to the Father . . . being built into a house where God lives, in the Spirit" (cf. *Eph 2:18,22*). This is the spiritual house which the missionaries began to build over a hundred years ago. Nigeria owes them a great debt of gratitude for their evangelizing efforts, spent largely in schools, hospitals and other areas of social service. Following the lead of these intrepid heralds of

the Gospel, the Catholic Church in Nigeria today is deeply committed to the struggle for integral human development. God has blessed the Church in Nigeria, to the point that Nigerian missionaries are working outside their own dioceses, in other countries of Africa and on other continents. Under the guidance of your Bishops and priests, the whole Catholic community must continue along this path, cooperating with all men and women of good will through an intense ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. To build God's spiritual house, the Church calls all her members to respond with unfailing compassion to those in need: to the poor, the sick and the elderly; to refugees who have had to flee violence and strife in their native lands; to men, women and children suffering from AIDS, which continues to claim numerous victims on this continent and throughout the world; to every person who must endure persecution, affliction and poverty. She teaches respect for every person, for every human life. She preaches justice and love, and insists on duties as well as rights: the rights and duties of citizens, of employers and employees, of Government and people. There exist, in fact, basic human rights of which no individual can ever be legitimately deprived, for they are rooted in the very nature of the human person and reflect the objective and inviolable demands of a universal moral law. These rights serve as the basis and measure of every human society and organization. Respect for every human person, for his dignity and rights, must ever be the inspiration and guiding principle behind your efforts to increase democracy and strengthen the social fabric of your country. The dignity of every human being, his inalienable fundamental rights, the inviolability of life, freedom and justice, the sense of solidarity and the rejection of discrimination: these must be the building blocks of a new and better Nigeria.⁵ The whole Church will soon celebrate the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Christ, the Word of God made man. I therefore say to you: today, you are the hope of this two-thousand-year-old Church of ours. Being young in faith, you must be like the first Christians and radiate enthusiasm and courage. Set yourselves on the path of holiness. Thus you will be a sign of God in the world, and you will re-live in your own country the missionary epic of the early Church (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 136). The Great Jubilee is meant to give life to the spirit of renewal which the Prophet Isaiah proclaimed and Jesus confirmed: to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed (cf. *Lk* 4:18). Make this spirit the very climate of your national life. Let the time of transition be a time of freedom, of forgiveness, of union and solidarity! Blessed Cyprian Michael Tansi clearly saw that nothing enduring can be achieved in the service of God and country without true holiness and true charity. Make him your example. Pray to him for the needs of your families and of the entire nation. With gratitude for all that Divine Providence continues to do for the people of Nigeria, we repeat with the Psalmist: "O sing to the Lord, bless his name . . .

Tell among the nations his glory

And his wonders among all the peoples" (*Ps* 95:3). Amen. *At the end of Mass the Holy Father added*

extemporaneously: Thank you for this beautiful liturgy. I am sure Cardinal Arinze is very proud of you, and also Cardinal Gantin and Cardinal Tomko, and in the first place, your Archbishop of Abuja.