



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE INTERTERRITORIAL
EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF THE GAMBIA, LIBERIA
AND SIERRA LEONE ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

Thursday, 8 January 1987

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. I am pleased to welcome you, *the Bishops of the Interterritorial Episcopal Conference of The Gambia, Liberia and Sierra Leone*. Our meeting today calls to mind in a special way the collegial communion that we are privileged to share. It was the Lord's will that Saint Peter and the other Apostles should form an apostolic college. We are gathered here as their successors while sharing the bonds of unity, charity and peace (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 22).

This is your second *ad limina* visit since the formation of your joint Conference. I wish to thank you for the kind greetings and for the assurance of prayers which you have expressed to me on behalf of the clergy, religious and laity of your three countries. Each of you represents in a special way your local Church, and I wish to reciprocate by offering through you my cordial greetings to all the People of God entrusted to your pastoral care. "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word" (Cfr. *2 Thess. 2,16*). 2. During the years since your last visit, *your young Churches have experienced continued growth and development*. The Apostolic Vicariates of Monrovia and Cape Palmas have been erected as an Archdiocese and a Diocese respectively, and just recently the new Diocese of Gbarnga has been established. These three new Dioceses bring to seven the total number which constitute your Conference. It was my privilege to *ordain two of your brothers* to the Order of Bishop on the Solemnity of the Lord's Epiphany. These episcopal ordinations here in Rome near the Tomb of the Apostle Peter, surrounded by brother Bishops not only from West Africa but also from other countries, serve to strengthen and manifest clearly universal communion of the Episcopal College. May you both -

Bishop Sekey of the new Diocese of Gbarnga and *Bishop Biguzzi* of the Diocese of Makeni - find great joy and peace in Christ as you dedicate yourselves to work in close collaboration with your brother Bishops. Always remember that as Pastors of your local Churches you are entrusted with this charge by Christ the Lord. He summons you to feed the faithful in word and sacrament, exercising in their midst the role of the Good Shepherd, who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Cfr. *Matth.* 20,28). 3. It is my fervent prayer that you will renew yet again your efforts in the great *task of evangelization* which is the essential mission of the Church. I praise the many courageous initiatives that you have already undertaken for spreading the Gospel. And I take this opportunity to repeat the words of Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World: Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of his Death and glorious Resurrection" (Cfr. Pauli VI , *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14). There are considerable *difficulties that you must face* in proclaiming the Good News of salvation to the many who have not yet heard of Christ. You are called upon to bear witness to him daily in a multireligious society where the majority of the population is Muslim and where many others are adherents of traditional African religions. The truth of our faith that the plan of salvation in some way includes all those who acknowledge the Creator certainly offers us a basis for dialogue and peaceful coexistence with non-Christian believers. The teaching of the of the Second Vatican Council in its Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christians encourages all Christians and Muslims to overcome the difficulties of the past and "to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom" (Cfr. *Nostra Aetate*). In your particular countries of West Africa, the Gospel must be spread above all by the witness of an *exemplary Christian life*. Such a witness is already an *initial act of evangelization*, though it must be added that personal Christian witness in the ordinary events of daily life needs to be *accompanied by the public proclamation* of the Kingdom of God and the person of Jesus Christ our Saviour. For at the centre of all the Church's attempts at evangelization is the clear message of eternal life offered to all people in Christ as a free gift of God's grace and mercy. 4. In the *areas of education and health care* your local Churches are making a noteworthy contribution towards the work of evangelization. I am told that the Catholic schools in your countries enjoy the reputation of being among the best, especially on the secondary level. At the same time I know that the Church's role in health care is greatly esteemed by your Governments and by the general population. We can see clearly that in these two sectors of loving dedication the members of your local Churches are exerting an influence far beyond their limited numbers, thus enabling the Christian way of life to be better known and accepted. The Church's presence in the spheres of health care and education is primarily *carried out by the members of the various Religious Institutes*. I know that you willingly join me in expressing thanks to Almighty God for all the men and women Religious who for many years have laboured despite great difficulties to plant the Church in your particular region. By a truly evangelical life they have given witness to the Lord and borne abundant fruit. I likewise praise and

thank God for the *dedication of the local clergy*, who are gradually growing in numbers. 5. It is with special satisfaction that I have learned of the *ever-increasing role that the laity* of your three countries is assuming in the Church's activities. The laity's particular vocation is to act as a leaven in the midst of the world and thus to exercise a vital role in the great work of evangelization. Their specific field of spreading the Gospel includes professional work, and, in the case of the married, their role as parents entrusts them with the primary responsibility for the Christian education of their children (Cfr. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 3). Your Conference has placed great emphasis on *the formation of the laity*, particularly through the establishment of national and diocesan *pastoral centres* for their education and for the formation of catechists. The close cooperation of these centres with the Interterritorial Pastoral and Social Development Centre in Kenema, Sierra Leone, is making an important contribution not only to your own Conference but to the work of the whole Church in Africa. Your praiseworthy initiative in the erecting of these pastoral centres gives a clear response to the appeal of the Second Vatican Council: "There should, then, be an increase in the number of schools, both on the diocesan and on the regional levels, in which future catechists can study Catholic doctrine, especially in the fields of Scripture and the liturgy, as well as catechetical method and pastoral practice. Let there be more schools in which they can develop Christian habits in themselves and can devote themselves tirelessly to cultivating piety and sanctity of life" (Cfr. *Ad Gentes*, 17). 6. In the ecclesial structure of your local communities, *lay catechists* play a fundamental role by dedicating their lives to the education of both children and adults in the Christian faith. The growth of these communities is in a large measure the result of their labours. At the same time there exists a need to clarify the specific role of lay catechists and their place in the Church's mission of evangelization. Great care should be given to their formation as teachers of the faith and witnesses to the Gospel. With regard to their role in the whole process of evangelization, I wish to reiterate "that there is no separation or opposition between catechesis and evangelization. Nor can they be simply identified with each other. Instead, they have close links whereby they integrate and complement each other" (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP II , *Catechesi Tradendae*, 18). In a word, *catechesis is one of the essential moments of evangelization* and can be defined as "an education of children, young people and adults in the faith, which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life" (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP.II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 18). 7. One of the primary means of catechesis suggested by the Second Vatican Council and adopted in your Dioceses is *the catechumenate*. As the Council says: "the catechumenate is not a mere expounding of doctrines and precepts, but a training period for the whole Christian life. It is an apprenticeship of appropriate length during which disciples are joined to Christ their Teacher. Therefore, catechumens should be properly instructed in the mystery of salvation and in the practice of gospel morality". (Cfr. *Ad Gentes*, 14) Given the importance of the catechumenate as an *apprenticeship in Christian life*, it is clearly necessary to insist on a period of appropriate duration for this intensive baptismal preparation. The radical newness of Christian life is to be emphasized throughout the period of the catechumenate. 8. It is with much hope for the future of your Dioceses that I refer to *Saint Paul's Major Seminary and your other four minor seminaries*. I note that Saint Paul's Seminary serves in the preparation of

candidates for the priesthood not only from the seven Dioceses of your Episcopal Conference but also from some of the Dioceses of Ghana. The growing number of seminarians, representing different ethnic groups, and many of them coming from non-Christian families, is a source of great promise. I know that you face great difficulties in supporting financially and in staffing your major seminary and the minor seminaries. I encourage you in your efforts to obtain qualified professors for the theological education and spiritual formation of your students. Be assured of my prayers in this overall endeavour of priestly formation, so essential to the future of the Church in your countries. May you always be true fathers in Christ to each of your seminarians (Cfr. *Optatam Totius*, 5). 9. In union with you, my dear Brothers, I continue my own mission as the Chief Pastor of the universal Church. As we serve the Gospel, let us recall that it is "primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus - the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity" (Cfr. Pauli VI , *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41). I take this occasion of your *ad limina* visit to commend you once again to Mary, the Queen of the Apostles, asking her to help you by her prayers. In the love of Jesus her Son I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and all those entrusted to your pastoral care.

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