



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF MALAWI
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 24 September 1993

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. With affection in the Lord I welcome you, the members of the *Episcopal Conference of Malawi*, in Rome for your visit "*ad Limina Apostolorum*". Four years ago I was a pilgrim to your homeland in order to visit, as I said, "the sanctuary of the People of God" which he has established as his dwelling place in that part of Africa (Cf. John Paul II, *General Audience*, 1, 10 May 1989). Now, at the tombs of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul you bear witness to the communion linking the Churches of Blantyre, Chikwawa, Dedza, Lilongwe, Mangochi, Mzuzu and Zomba to the Bishop of Rome and through him to the Church Universal. It is fitting that on this occasion we should rejoice in the intimate fellowship that is ours in the body of Christ.

Through you I greet the dear priests, Religious and laity of Malawi, and I ask you to assure them that they are never far from my thoughts and prayers. I continue to give thanks to God for granting me the consolation during the visit to your country to see for myself the faith of Malawian Catholics, and to join with them in proclaiming Christ's Gospel and in offering the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

2. Being so near to the very places where the Princes of the Apostles freely laid down their lives in witness to Christ gives us a vivid sense of how the grace of their calling to serve the Gospel reshaped their lives and their destinies. For us, who have been made successors of the Apostles by Episcopal Ordination, the transformation worked in us by the imposition of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit entails our complete consecration to the task of spreading the Gospel (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25). We must repeat with Paul: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1Cor. 9: 16), and we should say with Peter: "We have the prophetic word made more sure" (2Pt.

2: 19).

The youthfulness of the Churches which you shepherd makes you keenly aware that *evangelization is the fundamental responsibility laid upon a Bishop*. The Gospel was first effectively planted in Malawi little more than a century ago. I know from participating in your centenary celebrations that the self-sacrifice of those earlier generations of missionaries is a continual stimulus for you to imitate and continue their generous service in sowing the seed of God's word. Even today many of your co-workers come to you from abroad out of dedication to the *missio ad gentes*. The Church is grateful to them. She prays that they will be strengthened to persevere in their labours in your midst, and she asks her Lord to send many more faithful servants to work in his vineyard, already ripe for the harvest.

3. The task of incarnating the Gospel in the culture of Malawi, which began only a few generations ago, will continue until the end of time. With you I thank God for the positive fruits that it has already borne, and I pray that God will give you, the Pastors of Church in Malawi, the gift of discernment and right judgment so that you may exercise ever more effectively your indispensable role as leaders in this process. I likewise share with you and all the Bishops of Africa the hope that through the forthcoming *Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops* the genuine inculturation of the Gospel will receive new impetus throughout the Continent.

The family is at the heart of the life of society and its members, and for this reason is one of the most important objects of the Church's ministry and care. This is especially true in the African context, where the family and the ties binding together its members are of such great significance. The goal of your ministry in this field cannot be other than to foster that form of family life which is at one and the same time truly rooted in Malawi and completely filled with Christ.

4. In the process of the transformation of *family life* through the grace and light of the Gospel, one aspect which calls for particular attention – because it is always in need of being purified and elevated – is that of procreation: something which is so highly prized among the peoples of Africa. In the context of the new creation achieved by grace, parenthood takes on the sense of having a share in God's work as the author of all life. From him, all parenthood in heaven and on earth is named (Cf. Eph. 3: 15).

It follows that the proper context for engendering a new human life is the permanent and exclusive union which spouses establish by the complete and irrevocable gift of self to each other. The Church's insistence on monogamous *marriage* is not an imposition of a foreign reality displacing local traditions. Rather, in fidelity to her Lord, the Church proclaims – as the Apostolic Exhortation "[Familiaris Consortio](#)" states – that "Christ renews the first plan that the Creator inscribed in the hearts of man and woman... Just as the Lord Jesus is the 'faithful witness', the 'yes' of the promises of God and thus the supreme realization of the unconditional faithfulness with which God loves his people, so Christian couples are called to participate truly in the irrevocable indissolubility

that binds Christ to the Church his bride, loved by him to the end" (John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 20). The understanding of marriage and parenthood given us by Christ is the key for unlocking the fullest meaning of these realities in every time and place. As the Exhortation concludes: "To bear witness to the inestimable value of the indissolubility and fidelity of marriage is one of the most precious and most urgent tasks of Christian couples... in a humble and courageous manner, they perform the role committed to them of being in the world a 'sign' – a small and precious sign, sometimes also subjected to temptation, but always renewed – of the unfailing fidelity with which God and Jesus Christ love each and every human being" (Ibid.).

5. Living this renewed reality is the vocation to which the vast majority of the Catholics in Malawi are called by God. In order to respond well to his invitation, the faithful must receive the necessary formation, in regard not only to marriage and family life in particular, but to the whole Christian mystery which is their foundation. The efforts being made in your Dioceses to impart this training, especially to young people, who from the earliest age should be educated to walk in the ways of the Spirit, are the sure sources of the future strength of Catholic family life.

I share, dear Brothers, your concern that a merely generic syllabus of *religious education in schools* is insufficient. I am confident that when such programmes are measured against the "Catechism of the Catholic Church", recently promulgated as "a sure norm for teaching the faith" (John Paul II, *Fidei Depositum*, 4), any inadequacies will be easily detected and corrected. To the devoted catechists, working tirelessly to help catechumens and the baptized to mature in the life of faith, I express the Church's appreciation. I pray that God will aid and sustain them in their vital work.

6. The witness given in Malawi by Religious is indispensable for evangelization. Through their lives of chastity, poverty and obedience in this world, *Religious are signs of the life of the world to come*. By giving up home and marriage, by forgoing the privilege of physically engendering new life, they show all the more clearly that the gift of self made under the impulse of grace is – even contrary to appearances – the true source of life (Cf. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 21).

With a powerful clarity their lives of self-denial remind us that it was on the seemingly most sterile tree, the Cross, that God brought forth the most abundant harvest.

Since religious life bears witness to the presence of God's Kingdom and to the power of the Gospel to transform the realities of daily existence into channels of supernatural life, your efforts to foster an increase of vocations to the consecrated life and your support of initiatives aimed at strengthening formation are vitally important.

7. *Priestly zeal and dedication* is likewise so necessary for the growth of the Church that Bishops must give their primary care to the members of their presbyterates. Priests must be encouraged to support one another and to challenge one another to achieve an ever closer identification with

Christ the Good Shepherd. Especially important in this regard is the good influence which older priests of proven virtue can have, in trying situations, upon those who have just begun their ministry. When difficulties arise, a Bishop must earnestly seek guidance in prayer, and be like the Lord himself who was "gentle and lowly in heart" (Cf. Mt. 11: 29), always ready to save the brother who was lost and is found (Cf. Lk. 15: 32).

The *celibate life of priests* fittingly expresses the new identity received at Ordination. Sacramental configuration with Christ calls for total dedication to the pastoral care of God's people. Priests' manner of living should show that zeal for the salvation of others has become the all-consuming purpose of their activities. Through a priest's spiritual fatherhood the Holy Spirit brings to birth new children of God, and these brothers and sisters of Christ are brought to their full stature in Christ (Cf. Eph. 4: 13).

Your conviction of the importance of having priests truly filled with zeal for the Lord's house (Cf. Jn. 2: 17) is the reason for *your special concern for the Seminaries in your nation*. It is indispensable to have exemplary priests as directors of priestly formation. This is the best guarantee that those to be ordained will receive the spiritual, intellectual, human and pastoral formation they require if they are to be worthy ministers of the Gospel. Those of your clergy assigned to this significant work are especially deserving of your support. Even when there is an urgent need for more priests, pressures to lower standards or to overlook deficiencies in candidates must be resisted. The Church's wisdom, valid no less today than in the past, is that a lessening of demands is no real solution to the scarcity of priests. God is with his Church, and exemplary ministers of the altar are his most effective instruments for building up the Church and providing for the needs of the faithful.

8. The more deeply the Gospel takes root in Malawi, the greater will be the transformation of society, for evangelization offers the basis for authentic human development (Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 58). Recently, your Episcopal Conference has devoted a great deal of attention to applying the wisdom and light of Christ's message to current challenges. In this regard your Pastoral Letters "Living Our Faith" (Lent 1992) and "Choosing Our Future" (2 February 1993) have been of particular significance. In the evolving political context such help is especially important in guiding the members of your flock as they exercise their rights and duties in the life of the nation. I am pleased that the efforts of the Pontifical Representative and other officials of the Holy See have been of assistance in fulfilling your responsibilities as the chief teachers of your particular Churches.

What the Church seeks is her rightful freedom to teach the message entrusted to her by the Prince of Peace (Cf. *Nostra Aetate*, 13). By faithfully carrying out her divine mission she helps the peoples of the world to achieve their just aspirations. By conscientiously discharging your obligation to teach the Church's social doctrine, you loyally serve the nation and make a necessary contribution to the common good. Dear Brothers, I share your hope that under the

guiding hand of God's Providence Malawi will move steadily along the path of justice and solidarity towards that authentic development which supports the whole good of the human person.

9. In Malawi, those who first planted the Gospel and those who preach it today have generously devoted themselves to *works of charity and service*, which are an essential part of proclaiming the Good News. They were so in Jesus' own earthly ministry and they remain so today, for love remains the driving force of mission (Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 60). Through schools, hospitals and dispensaries, indeed in all your efforts to promote full human development, the message of God's love in Christ is made perceptible, and the dignity and transcendent destiny of every human person is upheld and promoted. I express the ardent hope that all these good works will be able to continue in a climate of peace and social harmony based upon the mutual respect and understanding of all sectors of society.

With full trust in the unfailing love of Mary Mother of the Church, I commend you and your Dioceses to her protection. To you and all the faithful I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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