



The Holy See

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

18 September 1997

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. As I welcome you, the Bishops of the Sudan, on the occasion of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*, I am reminded of my own visit to your country four years ago. It was with great joy and satisfaction that I went to Khartoum, even if it was not possible to travel to other areas, for it was important to me to address the message of reconciliation and hope, the message which is at the very heart of the Gospel, to all the Sudanese people, regardless of differences of religion or ethnic origin. I was especially happy for the opportunity to offer encouragement to the citizens of your country who are sons and daughters of the Church, and whose deeply felt aspiration is to live in peace and to work side by side with their fellow countrymen in building a better society for all. In thanking God for enabling me to make that visit, I thank him also "for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus . . . who will sustain you to the end" (1 Cor 1:4,8).

2. Sadly, the Sudan still finds itself in the midst of great turmoil. The torment of a civil war which has brought untold misery, suffering and death, especially in the South, continues to afflict the land and to drain the life and energies of your people. Your communities are deeply affected by a breakdown in the good relations which should exist between Christians and Muslims. Despite your people's poverty and their resulting weakness by worldly standards, the Lord will not forsake you. Through the Prophet Isaiah he continues to say to you: "I will not forget you" (Is 49:15).

The Lord hears the voice of the innocent victims, of the weak and the defenceless who cry out to him for help, for justice, for respect of their God-given dignity as human beings, for their basic human rights, for the freedom to believe and practise their religion without fear or discrimination.

Christian faith teaches us that our prayers and sufferings are joined to those of Christ himself who, as Supreme High Priest of God's holy people, entered the Holy Place in order to intercede on our behalf (cf. Heb 9:11-12). And just as he did once on earth, so now from the Father's house he speaks to us: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). And as the words of this invitation sound in our ears, he adds: "Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:29).

These are the words of Christ, the One who alone knows the Father and who alone is known by the Father as the Only-Begotten Son. Today, I repeat these words to you, the Bishops of the Sudan, and through you to all the faithful entrusted to your care. As I wrote last year to the Dioceses of Southern Sudan: "The Successor of Peter is close to you and implores God for you, that you may have the strength to go forward ?rooted and built on Jesus Christ" (cf. Col 2:7)" (*Message to the Catholics of Southern Sudan*, 24 October 1996). I renew these sentiments and encourage you to stand firm and take courage. The Lord is at your side. He will never abandon you. The prayers of the whole Church are with you!

3. Despite the grave difficulties and suffering which the Christian community is facing, the Church in the Sudan continues to develop, with many signs of vitality. With the Psalmist we exclaim: "This is the Lord's doing, it is marvellous in our eyes" (Ps 118:23). Truly it is as the Lord said: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). For this reason, with Saint Paul, you are able to accept weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when we are weak, then we are strong (cf. 2 Cor 12:10).

In the present political and social situation you can easily become isolated from one another. For this reason you must take advantage of every opportunity to give expression to the collegial responsibility and communion which unite you in the service of the one "household of God" (Eph 2:19). I urge you to do all that you can to foster among yourselves a true spirit of mutual trust and cooperation so that you can develop — difficult circumstances permitting — a common plan of pastoral initiatives to deal with the current grave challenges. Such initiatives include providing pastoral care in areas deprived of priests, evangelizing and offering adequate catechesis and Christian formation, promoting the celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage among the faithful and strengthening family life. Your own individual ministries as Shepherds and Pastors of souls will become ever more effective the more you are able to identify common needs in your Dioceses and coordinate joint programmes to meet those needs. It also remains imperative for the Conference to ensure the responsible administration of resources, both your own and those coming from outside donors and benefactors.

I cannot fail to express my appreciation of all that you are doing to defend and strengthen the faith of your Catholic brothers and sisters, and I particularly wish to encourage the various efforts and programmes aimed at meeting the needs of the many refugees and displaced persons. "Sudanaid", the assistance fund administered by your Episcopal Conference, provides aid and

relief for the suffering and has already gained widespread esteem. Thus, notwithstanding the severe limitations encountered, the Church is able to move ahead courageously with her mission of service.

4. Your immediate co-workers in building up the Body of Christ are your priests, both diocesan and Religious, Sudanese and missionary. They have been consecrated to this service and have been given to you by God. All priests have received a call which has been subjected to testing and discernment during the years of preparation leading to priestly Ordination. After prayer, and with trust in God's unfailing grace, they have agreed to renounce the possibility of home, wife, children, social position and wealth (cf. Mt 19:29). This they have done not grudgingly but gladly, in order to serve the Kingdom and to devote themselves to their brothers and sisters in Christ. I join you in asking Jesus the High Priest to grant your priests the grace and perseverance — and the intimate joy — which comes from fidelity to the demands of their vocation.

Since sacramental configuration with Christ, the Shepherd and Head of the Church, cannot be separated from the daily following of his example of self-giving love, all priests are called to cultivate genuine asceticism. In order to remain faithful to the gift of celibacy in perfect continence, it is essential — as the Second Vatican Council affirms — that they should pray humbly, make constant use of all the helps available to them for this purpose, and observe the prudent norms of self-discipline recommended by the Church's long experience (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 16). With regard to the loneliness which can sometimes accompany the pastoral ministry, your priests should be encouraged, as much as the local situation permits, to live in common and direct their efforts entirely towards the sacred ministry. They should come together as often as possible for a fraternal exchange of ideas, counsel and experience (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 74).

Seminarians too remain one of your chief priorities. It is vital that future ministers of the Gospel should be not only well instructed academically but also, at the deepest level, totally dedicated to the care of souls, eager to shepherd their brothers and sisters in the ways of salvation. Those involved in formation must be in a position to assist the candidates in their growth toward the new "identity" conferred at Ordination. They themselves ought to be exemplary models of priestly conduct. They must be clear about the behaviour expected of candidates to the priesthood, for it would be an injustice to let seminarians go forward to Ordination if they have not internally and consciously assimilated the objective demands of the office which they are to undertake.

5. In the work of advancing the Kingdom of God, men and women Religious play a vital role in your local Churches. Likewise, the missionary priests, Sisters and Brothers who share with you the pastoral burdens of your Dioceses are courageous servants of the Gospel whose presence and generous dedication is a great source of encouragement to the faithful. In them is effectively seen the universality of the Church and the solidarity which characterizes the communion of the particular Churches with one another.

In the Sudan where there are simply not enough priests to preach the Gospel and exercise the pastoral ministry, catechists play an essential part in meeting the spiritual needs of your communities. They therefore need to have a deep awareness of their role and should be helped in every possible way to meet their responsibilities and obligations towards their own families.

6. In spite of the many difficulties which you face, the Church in the Sudan is actively involved in education. Catholic schools enjoy a good reputation and offer a high level of instruction, such that many people seek to enrol their children. The Church's concern for the moral and civic formation of young people, and of adults through the evening classes offered in many of your parish schools, constitutes an ever more important contribution to the future of the Christian community and of society as a whole. Such educational activity can offer a great help in overcoming ethnic tensions, since it brings together people of different tribal and social backgrounds.

Since local law makes religious instruction in public schools obligatory, the Church in the Sudan needs to ensure that Catholic students can avail themselves of this opportunity and therefore needs to provide properly trained Catholic teachers to present the faith to Christian students. Your priests and the members of religious communities are particularly well-suited to this task and should receive the encouragement and necessary preparation to undertake this important apostolate.

During my visit to Khartoum in 1993, I expressed the hope that a new era of constructive dialogue and good will would evolve between Christians and Muslims. Interreligious dialogue is not an easy task at the best of times. In your country it is a courageous act of hope for a better Sudan and a better future for its peoples. As I noted in my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, an essential subject for Christian-Muslim dialogue should be the principle of religious freedom, with all that this freedom entails — including external and public manifestations of faith (cf. No. 66). I urge you not to desist in your efforts to establish and carry forward such dialogue at every level.

7. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, there is no doubt that the circumstances under which you must exercise your pastoral ministry are extremely trying. The thoughts which I share with you today are meant to be a source of encouragement as you seek "to confirm many in the faith, strengthen those who are wavering and call back those who have lost their way" (Pastoral Letter of the Sudanese Bishops, *He Should Be Supreme in Every Way*, October 1995). The Christians of the Sudan are every day in my thoughts and prayers. The whole Church feels a deep solidarity with the victims of injustice, conflict and famine, with the plight of refugees and displaced persons, with the sufferings of the sick and the injured. Each one of us, Bishops, priests, religious, lay men and women, are called to be one with the Paschal mystery of our Lord's Death and Resurrection, to pass from death to life, to accept trials which purify and help us to live what is truly essential: the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, who assures us that "I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

I commend you and the Church in the Sudan to the intercession of Blessed Josephine Bakhita and Blessed Daniel Comboni, Heavenly Patrons whose lives and whose witness to the Gospel are so intimately linked to your land, and I invoke upon all of you the divine gifts of hope and trust. As a pledge of peace and strength in the Lord I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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