



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF RWANDA  
"AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" VISIT**

*Thursday, 17 September 1998*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. During these days as you make your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles, I am pleased to welcome you, the Pastors of the Church in Rwanda, to my home. You have come to share with the Successor of Peter the joys and concerns of your Episcopal ministry, the sufferings and aspirations of the people entrusted to your care. I hope that your meetings with the Apostolic See will bring you comfort and encouragement, so that with ever greater confidence you can pursue your mission of continuing Christ's work of love for all people, in union with the Sovereign Pontiff and subject to his authority (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 2). You are also aware of the Holy See's abiding concern for you, through the attentive listening and support you can always find from the Apostolic Nuncio and his staff.

I cordially thank Archbishop Thaddée Ntihinyurwa of Kigali, President of your Episcopal Conference, for his perceptive words expressing in detail the concerns but also the hopes of the Church in Rwanda.

Through you I would like affectionately to greet the priests, religious, catechists and faithful of your Dioceses, as well as all the Rwandan people, to whom I feel particularly close during the sufferings which have tragically stricken them. I also know of their wish to rebuild a common life based on brotherhood and mutual understanding. May God heal their painfully wounded hearts and bless the efforts of all the peacemakers!

2. In recent months it has been possible to re-establish the Rwandan Episcopate. As I commend to the Father of all mercy the Bishops who died during the tragedy your country has experienced, I encourage the new Bishops to be Pastors according to Christ's heart, to guide the People of God during this difficult stage of its life. The charge you have received to teach, sanctify and govern obliges you to develop ever greater bonds of unity in charity among yourselves. Indeed, as I wrote in the Motu Proprio *Apostolos suos*: "the unity of the Episcopacy is one of the constitutive elements of

the unity of the Church” (n. 8) and of her growth. Active, fraternal co-operation will enable you to carry out your mission fruitfully and thus, in the present circumstances, to show your ecclesial communion and common concern for the entire people. “When the Bishops of a territory jointly exercise certain pastoral functions for the good of their faithful, such joint exercise of the Episcopal ministry is a concrete application of collegial spirit (*affectus collegialis*), which is the soul of the collaboration between the Bishops at the regional, national and international levels” (ibid., n. 12).

The tragedy experienced by your people in recent years has destroyed many structures which you must rebuild to enable the Church to continue her activities of service to her members and to the people as a whole. But these misfortunes have especially afflicted hearts. To help the faithful find healing for their deep wounds, they must be imbued with a true longing for holiness, taking the path of conversion and personal and community renewal in a spirit of prayer, charity and interior poverty. May the Christian communities boldly and tenaciously exhibit a prophetic attitude of mutual reconciliation and resolutely walk the paths of harmony in renewed brotherhood and trust!

3. The celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 is now at hand. For the Church in Rwanda, it will coincide with the first centenary of evangelization. In fact, the first parish was founded in Save on 8 February 1900, in what is now the Diocese of Butare. With you and with the whole Church of your country, I give thanks to God for all that has occurred over these years, for the apostolic zeal of the first missionaries who brought the Gospel to your land and for the courage of all who have faithfully borne witness to the Spirit of Christ. I would also like to express the Church’s gratitude to the missionaries who, through their tireless and disinterested labours, continue today the work of those who have preceded them. May their presence at the service of your diocesan communities retain all its significance. It is a sign of the universality of God’s love and of the mission of the Church, which is sent to all human beings without distinction.

The preparatory period for the Jubilee celebrations is the right time for an honest look at the past. Do not be afraid to face historical reality as it is! During this first century of evangelization, there have been some admirable acts of heroism, but also infidelities to the Gospel which demand an examination of conscience on the way the Good News has been lived over the past 100 years. Belonging to Christ has not always taken precedence over belonging to human communities. A “spiritual awakening” is essential on the threshold of this stage in the Church’s journey among men. An in-depth, “new evangelization” is urgently needed if the Gospel message is to be proclaimed, accepted and truly lived by the people of our time.

4. Nevertheless, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, it is essential to state clearly that the suffering still felt from the shadows of the past cannot hide the light that has illumined and will continue to illumine the way of the Church and of society in your country. There have been beautiful fruits of fidelity to Christ among Christians who had a heroic attitude in the tragic moments of the nation’s life. In your country many disciples of Christ have been generously willing to lay down their lives for their brothers and sisters. Bring to light the witness of these martyrs of love who have revealed the Church’s most authentic face, so that their blood will be a Gospel seed and that future generations will not forget them! They will help you not to despair of man and to look courageously to the future, in order to usher in this civilization of love which humanity awaits.

They also remind you that “the *communio sanctorum* speaks louder than the things which divide us” (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 37). For the Church must first give the world a witness of her unity in Christ and around her Pastors. In the

Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, the Second Vatican Council paid special attention to the unity of the Church, whose members constitute one Body in Christ, who is their Head. It is indeed essential that everyone, Bishops, priests, religious and lay people become ever more keenly aware of their responsibility that the unity of Christ's Body, founded on the action of the Spirit and guaranteed by the apostolic ministry, be sustained by true mutual love. This is the sign by which the disciples of the Lord Jesus are recognized.

5. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, through you I would like to convey to your priests the affection and encouragement of Peter's Successor, so that they will find in their ministry the joy and strength to continue being faithful servants of Christ. I know of their attachment to God's People, which many of them demonstrate today as they did during the tragedy, as well as of their zeal in proclaiming the Gospel to them. May the Lord give them all the grace to overcome in truth the disagreements that may have arisen from the dramatic circumstances! May there be an ever more real communion between the diocesan priests and the missionaries from abroad! Today I warmly invite each one to strengthen the bonds of unity and brotherhood with his brothers in the priesthood, and with the Bishops whose priests must be his loyal and generous co-workers in sincere and trusting dialogue, and in full communion of heart and spirit. This unity expresses the very nature of their ecclesial service, which is a participation in Christ's mission for the People of God gathered in the unity of the Holy Spirit. May your priests recognize you as the father of the presbyterate, who regards his priests as sons and friends, after Christ's example towards his disciples! May they be "attached to their Bishop with sincere charity and obedience" (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 7)! They will remember that they are first and foremost pastors who must care for all people without exception. It is therefore important that they not be involved in political or ideological associations or movements which would impede their ministry of communion and their bond with the Bishops and the universal Church. I invite all Rwandan priests to maintain their concern to serve their country's Church. I also hope that the communities will welcome their priests with joy and warmth, to regain their Gospel dynamism.

If they are fully to live their priestly vocation, Christ's ministers must always keep the mystery of the Lord at the centre of their daily life. This requires that in exercising their ministry they give an essential place to their spiritual life, especially to the Liturgy of the Hours, the regular celebration of the Eucharist and meditation on the Scriptures. In continuing formation, which they will try to pursue throughout their lives, they will find a valuable help for ensuring that their life and conduct always conform to the Lord's will and to the mission they have received from him and from his Church.

The formation of future pastors is one of your most constant concerns. The flourishing vocations are a sign of your communities' vitality. Despite the nuncountered, you have made remarkable efforts to improve your seminarians' spiritual direction and the quality of their intellectual formation. I urge you to persevere in these efforts and to entrust a task so essential for the Church's future to priests who are experienced in the spiritual life, have sound theological and philosophical knowledge and are concerned to foster communion with the whole Church. They will be able to provide serious vocational discernment and help the young men to receive sound formation for their future ministry.

6. I hope that the men and women religious who generously live their consecration to Christ will be genuine witnesses to him everywhere, making the paternal face of God and the maternal face of the Church visible to all. May their whole life be a sign of the primacy of God and of Gospel values in Christian life! May their community life eloquently show that among Christ's disciples "there can be no true unity without that unconditional mutual love which demands a readiness to serve others generously, a willingness to welcome them as they are, without 'judging' them (cf. Mt 7:1-2), and an ability to

forgive up to 'seventy times seven' (Mt 18:22)" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 42)!

7. In your Dioceses, catechists and pastoral volunteers are often true community leaders, especially where, due to the circumstances, priests cannot be regularly present. Their witness of Christian life is of great importance in proclaiming the Gospel as well as in maintaining ecclesial life in some regions. While safeguarding the irreplaceable character of the ordained ministry for the community, you should support them in fulfilling the mission you have given them. This will encourage them to be ever more aware of their responsibility to their brethren, in communion with their pastors. An appropriate formation, which helps them to develop the human and spiritual virtues necessary for their commitment, will enable them to acquire increasing maturity, in order to bear abundant fruit.

Each lay person must also be "fully aware of being a 'member of the Church' yet entrusted with a unique task which cannot be done by another and which is to be fulfilled for the good of all" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 28). The vitality of basic communities like that of the apostolic and spiritual movements is a sign of hope for the Church's renewal, especially where ecclesial structures have disappeared because of the violence.

8. Through her works of charity, the Church, in fidelity to the Gospel, fulfils an important and inalienable part of her mission at the service of man. Your Dioceses are very generously involved in helping orphans, widows, refugees, prisoners and all who are suffering or are in moral or material distress. The Catholic Church's work in the areas of education and health care is an essential contribution to the building of society, in order to give hope to the young generations and to prepare them to take responsibility for the nation's life in the future. I deeply encourage you to continue this work, which shows Christ's love for all human beings without distinction, thus helping to restore their dignity.

The difficulties connected with the demographic imbalance in society, as a result of recent events and their aftermath, have introduced a new situation for marital relations. Taking these circumstances into account, the pastoral care of the family will help the faithful to reflect on the meaning of the commitments of marriage and on the ways to guide couples, especially young ones. Those who must live a single life should also be supported.

9. To make communion effective between all the Church's members, it is essential that a climate of mutual trust be created which will spread throughout society. Wherever conflict threatens peace and understanding between groups, the Church is called to work energetically to reduce divisions, especially by encouraging and practising dialogue herself, which will lead to reconciliation. Acceptance of one's brothers and sisters with their differences, so as to find in them the riches offered by God, is required of every disciple of Christ.

The formation of young people must integrate this new spirit which should prevail in interpersonal relations and between human communities. A society cannot be firmly established in mutual understanding without a culture of truth, justice and forgiveness. The genocide your people have experienced has caused unspeakable suffering, which can only be overcome in solidarity and unity of heart, and by the commitment of all to creating conditions of greater justice. Peace is inseparable from justice! It will only be achieved by defending life, all human life, which in God's eyes has a unique and inestimable value. In effect, "the acknowledgement of the personal dignity of every human being demands the respect, the defence and the promotion of the rights of the human person. It is a question of inherent, universal and inviolable rights. No one ... can change — let alone eliminate — them because such rights find their source in God himself"

(*Christifideles laici*, n. 38).

10. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, you have told me of the difficulties the Church encounters in seeking to make the meaning of her mission understood in the present situation. "As a body organized within the community and the nation, the Church has both the right and the duty to participate fully in building a just and peaceful society with all the means at her disposal" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 107). She therefore has a particular role to play in national life, loyally increasing her co-operation with the State to foster the conditions for establishing a society that is ever more just and peaceful. Her presence in public life is clear and her proper responsibility does not interfere with that of the individuals whose mission it is to lead the nation on its earthly path. While violence continues to affect several regions of your country and to bereave many families, I ardently hope that all people of goodwill can join forces so that Rwandans may at last enjoy security and a tranquil life. Thus they will be able to seek together the means to rebuild a prosperous and fraternal nation in real solidarity, where each person's dignity as a human being and a citizen is recognized, and he can freely take part in promoting the common good. I invite all those responsible for the nation to spare no efforts to ensure that, in an atmosphere of mutual trust and reconciliation, an era of justice and peace may at last return to Rwanda and to the region of the Great Lakes. I ardently hope in particular that no one will tire of seeking a negotiated solution to the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, so that the hostilities will cease and armed warfare be replaced by a lasting agreement and collaboration between all the countries of the region for the greater good of their peoples and the whole continent. May violence and discord never again set brother against brother!

11. At the end of our meeting, I invite you to turn your gaze to the future with full trust. As we approach the celebration of the Great Jubilee and the centenary of the Church in Rwanda, I encourage your faithful to renew their adherence to Christ, Saviour of all mankind, and to give bold witness that they are disciples of the Gospel. May everyone remember that the Lord abandons no one and never forgets any of his children, whose names are written on the palms of his hands (cf. Is 49:16). "Yes, on the palms of Christ, pierced by the nails of the Crucifixion. The names of each one of you [Africans] is written on those palms" (*Homily in Khartoum*, 10 February 1993, n. 8, cited by *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 143). In your efforts for the rebirth of your communities, you can count on the fraternal support and prayer of the universal Church. I entrust to the Virgin Mary's intercession the future of your Dioceses as well as that of the whole nation. I particularly ask her to help you in your Episcopal mission, so that you may find in her an unfailing guide who will lead you to her Son. I wholeheartedly impart to you my Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to all the faithful of your Dioceses.

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