



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE BISHOPS OF CHAD IN THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. It is a great joy for me to welcome you during your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles. Bishops of the Catholic Church in Chad, you have come to the same places where Peter and Paul bore witness to Christ, even making the supreme sacrifice of their lives. There you will find peace and comfort for carrying out the mission entrusted to you of service to God's People. Through your meetings with the Successor of Peter and those who assist him, may the Lord continue to increase your spirit of communion with the universal Church and her Pastors united with the Bishop of Rome!

Archbishop Charles Vandame, President of your Conference, clearly and precisely explained in your name the joys, sufferings and hopes that are yours in your episcopal ministry. I thank him very cordially for this.

Convey the Pope's affectionate greeting to your priests, to the men and women religious, to the catechists and lay people of your Dioceses. May God shower them with his blessings so that they may be generous witnesses to the Gospel! Also bring my best wishes for happiness and peace to all the people of Chad, whose generosity I know well.

2. Since your last ad limina visit, two new Dioceses have been created to further the proclamation of the Gospel in regions that until now have been among the most isolated. We can only rejoice at the energy of your communities, of which these new sees are an eloquent sign. I hope that the Bishops who have come to enrich your Episcopal Conference with the wealth of their missionary experience will fully enjoy the fraternal and collegial atmosphere that mark it.

It is a joy for me to see the Church's spiritual progress in Chad and her praiseworthy efforts to become more and more incarnated in the country's social and cultural realities. I invite your communities to remain faithful to the Holy Spirit's work among them and to bear the witness of a sincere mutual love, so that everyone will recognize the One who is the source of this love and believe in him. May each one remember "that we are missionaries above all because of what we are as a Church, whose innermost life is unity in love, even before we become missionaries in word or deed" (Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, n. 23).

3. In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of Chadian priests. I cordially greet them and encourage them in their often difficult but exalting ministry of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to their brethren and of administering the Church's sacraments to them. I know their fidelity to their vocation and their pastoral dedication. I urge them to have an ever deeper sense of their priestly identity. May they find the vital source of their life and ecclesial mission in a personal encounter with the risen Lord through prayer and the sacraments! Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I know how concerned you are about their priestly life and their needs, especially in the area of continuing formation. May they always find in you a father who knows how to encourage and guide them in their ministry!

You have wanted to diversify the origins of the missionaries who come to share in the work of evangelizing your country. I congratulate them on their generous response to the appeals of the Church in Chad, and I hope that in every place they will be ardent witnesses to the Gospel spirit, which must lead us to overcome cultural and nationalistic barriers, avoiding all isolationism (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 130). Coming from Africa, a continent now fully integrated in the Church's missionary activity, but also from other regions of the world, they clearly show the universality of the Gospel message and of the Church, but also their desire to help Chadian priests to take ever greater responsibility for the local Church.

Men and women religious also participate fully and with great self-denial in the life of your Dioceses. Their commitment is essential to the work of evangelization and service in your communities. I hope, then, that the consecrated life will enjoy new growth among the young people of Chad, so that the Church can benefit from this "precious and necessary gift for the present and future of the People of God, since it is an intimate part of her life, her holiness and her mission" (Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 3). In fact, the consecrated life is an eloquent witness to the free gift of self to the Lord and of a life focused on the Absolute and the essential, which brings happiness. Thus it is essential for the basic values of religious life to become deeply rooted in the culture of your country so that it can leaven it with the Gospel.

The formation of future priests is one of your major concerns. You have already seen the first fruits of your effort to discern vocations capable of bearing the weighty commitments of the priestly life. The establishment of a new seminary is an encouraging sign for you and a special occasion for giving thanks for the generosity of the young men in answering the Lord's call. I urge you not only

to give future priests a solid intellectual and spiritual formation, but also to educate them "to love the truth, to be loyal, to respect every person, to have a sense of justice, to be true to their word, to be genuinely compassionate, to be men of integrity and, especially, to be balanced in judgement and behaviour" (Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 43). By cultivating these human qualities, they will become balanced individuals who can assume the pastoral responsibilities that will be entrusted to them.

4. In your Dioceses, basic ecclesial communities are a privileged means of enabling the Church to grow as the Family of God and of assisting evangelization. We can only be delighted at seeing the development of a quality laity who are gradually taking their place in the life of the Church and of society. In the pastoral care of your Dioceses, then, the proper doctrinal and spiritual formation of the laity should have ever greater importance so that their faith may be strengthened and their witness be true and credible.

I warmly greet the catechists, who generously fulfil the mission you have entrusted to them. Through serious doctrinal and spiritual formation they acquire a competency that makes them worthy of their task. I encourage them to be faithful and energetic members of the Church in Gospel service among their brothers and sisters. With their whole lives may they be ardent disciples of Christ and examples of Christian living!

The faithful are still deeply affected by ideas of life and practices from their traditional culture and often have difficulty in living the demands of Christian marriage. Therefore they should be given points for reflection that can help them understand the dignity and role of marriage, which is an authentic way of holiness. "Marriage thus demands an indissoluble love; thanks to this stability it can contribute effectively to the complete fulfilment of the spouses' baptismal vocation" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 83). A deeper realization of the equal dignity of man and woman, particularly in their love for each other, will help to show more clearly that the conjugal union requires the unity of marriage. A serious preparation for marital commitment as well as the witness of united, radiant Christian homes, so important for expressing the authenticity of a life-choice, will instil strong convictions in young people to take up their responsibilities as spouses and parents. In this regard, I am delighted with the attention being given to family ministry, for it is from married couples that children learn the basic elements of the spiritual and moral life, as well as how to conduct themselves in society. This same concern spurs you to promote due respect for women and the defence of their rights, since, however different they may be, men and women are essentially equal with regard to their humanity.

5. Guided by the Church's social teaching, for many years you have taken a number of initiatives in the areas of health care, education, and social and charitable works. You have also reflected in depth on the implications of the Gospel in the various situations faced by the people of your country. The commitment of your communities to aiding human advancement and development

deserves to be strongly encouraged. The faithful thus have a new awareness of their responsibilities as Christ's disciples in the life of society and have resolutely rejected all complicity with injustice or violence. They are extensively involved in defending human rights wherever they are threatened.

The imminent celebration of the Great Jubilee is also an appropriate time for Christians to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world and to demonstrate clearly the Church's preferential option for the poor and the outcast. They will do so especially by giving thought, as I have already written, "to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations" (Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 51), in ways that do not penalize in any way the most disadvantaged peoples and by raising the question of a management of national resources that enables everyone to lead a life of dignity and solidarity.

Catholic schools are an important contribution the Church makes to the education of Chad's young people, regardless of their social or religious background. We can only rejoice at the balance maintained between the demands of an educational programme faithful to the Gospel and administrative constraints. When society is undergoing significant change, young people must be given reference points that will enable them to meet the challenges they face today and to overcome the obstacles to their development by offering them an education that takes into account the human and spiritual realities of their lives and helps them to live among young people of different religions and social backgrounds. In this way they will be better prepared to build the future in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation.

If the life of your communities and the service of their compatriots are to develop peacefully, it is your responsibility to pursue dialogue with the civil authorities, so that the Catholic Church may be seen more and more as an institution that is fully a part of society.

6. In your country, which has traditionally been a land of peaceful encounter between cultures and religions, relations of goodwill should be fostered between the Catholic community, other Christians and Muslims, so that any source of misunderstanding or confrontation will vanish and the principles of tolerance and brotherhood will preside over the building of a united and harmonious nation. Certain recent changes have occasionally led to conflicts that are in danger of becoming lasting antagonisms. Catholics must resolutely refrain from any attitude of fear or rejection of others. For this reason I encourage you to persevere in the initiatives you have taken to foster a knowledge of one another that transcends all prejudice. It is a question of enabling people to meet one another in truth and especially of encouraging the dialogue of life, which will allow them to accept others and their differences and to work together for the common good. It would also be helpful to maintain a sincere dialogue with the Muslim religious authorities in order to promote understanding between the communities.

In this perspective of openness and dialogue, Christians must nevertheless remain conscious of

their own rights in the national community, of which they are fully-fledged members, and defend them in a spirit of justice by striving with all for the establishment of fraternal ties that respect the rights and duties of every individual and community. As I have often stated, religious freedom, which includes the right to manifest personal beliefs, whether individually or with others, in public or in private, and which rejects all segregation for religious reasons, constitutes the very heart of human rights and makes the other personal and collective rights possible. Recourse to violence in the name of one's religious belief is a perversion of the very teachings of the major religions (cf. *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 1999, n. 5; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 23/30 December 1998, p. 10). I fervently hope that all believers will resolutely overcome their antagonisms and join forces in fighting everything that is opposed to peace and reconciliation, so that they can help to establish the civilization of love, which should be a way for everyone to give glory to God.

7. At the end of our meeting, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, as the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 draws near, I invite you to look at the future with hope. The grain of wheat sown by the first missionaries 70 years ago has never ceased to bear fruit. The selfless dedication of men and women who in years past gave their lives to pass the torch of Christian faith on to Chad, and to whom I wish to pay homage, should remain for present and future generations an example of apostolic life and a constant appeal to bear fervent witness to the message they have received and to the Lord who came so that they might have true Life.

I entrust your ministry and each of your Dioceses to the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of mankind. May she firmly lead you to her Son! I wholeheartedly give you my Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to the priests, to the men and women religious, to the catechists and to all the faithful of Chad.

Castel Gandolfo, 9 September, 1999