



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE REGIONAL BISHOPS'  
CONFERENCE OF NORTH AFRICA (CERNA)**

*Saturday, 22 February 2003*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,*

1. I am happy to welcome you, pastors of the Church of Christ in the Region of North Africa who have come on pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul. I thank Archbishop Teissier of Algiers, President of your Bishops' Conference, who has just told me, on your behalf, of the hopes you nourish, the difficulties you encounter and the deep solidarity that binds you to your peoples. I hope this visit, which manifests your fraternal communion with the Bishop of Rome, will be a support and an opportunity for renewed enthusiasm for you, so that you may always fulfil with courage the office of the apostolic ministry in your dioceses. For all your faithful, may you also be witnesses of the Pope's concern for the Church in the countries of the Maghreb!

2. The world we live in is defined by a multiplication of contacts, a stronger interdependence and the ever-greater opening of frontiers. This is the phenomenon of globalization, with its positive and negative aspects, which nations must learn to manage constructively! The Catholic Church is fully conscious of the universal dimension that is constitutive of her identity. Since the day of Pentecost (cf. *Acts 2,8-11*), she is conscious that all nations are called to hear the Good News of salvation, and that the people of God are present among all the peoples of the earth (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 13). Your dioceses have always been sensitive to this dimension of catholicity and to the vital link that binds them to the universal Church, for your pastors and faithful come from different countries.

However, in recent years, this fact has been expanded with a new dimension in your region as you develop relations and contacts between the North and South of the Sahara. For many reasons,

many men and women natives of the sub-Saharan Christian countries have come to settle or to reside for a time in the countries of the Maghreb. Your Bishops' Conference, the CERNA, along with the Bishops of the Southern Saharan regions, has recently organized a pastoral reflection on this subject. I congratulate you on the expert way in which you dealt with this issue, which I invite you to continue and intensify. I am convinced that this "exchange of gifts" is a grace that enriches and renews all the parties concerned.

3. Be deeply rooted in the mystery of the Church! It is the Church that Christ sends to men and women to bring the Good News of the love of God. As the Second Vatican Council rightly recalled, "that messianic people, although it does not actually include all men [and women], and at times may appear as a small flock, is, however, a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a communion of life, love and truth, it is taken up by him also as the instrument for the salvation of all; as the light of the world and the salt of the earth (*Lumen gentium*, n. 9).

In this spirit I invite you to make the most of the wealth of different spiritual traditions which have nourished the Christian history of your country from ancient times to the great missionary movement of the last two centuries. They have focused on various facets of the treasure of the Gospel: a sense of community and the need of fraternal communion, the sign of poverty and availability for one's neighbour, attentive listening to others, a discreet and loving presence, the joy of proclaiming and sharing the Good News. These spiritual gifts, also lived with fidelity by the religious families that share in the life of your dioceses, can always bear fruit for the good of your communities. Do not be afraid to welcome the newness that brothers and sisters from other continents or cultures can bring, with their different forms of spirituality and sensibility! The Church can never rejoice enough in being, in the image of the first community of Jerusalem, a fraternal community in which each may find his/her place at the service of the common good (Acts 2,32).

4. In this regard, you also emphasize in your reports, the important and active presence in your dioceses of young people who come from the sub-Saharan countries for a period of study at the universities in your countries. To welcome them and help them share in the life of the Christian communities clearly shows that the Gospel is not restricted to a single culture. You have offered to these young people considerable pastoral attention to help them overcome their isolation, and you have offered them a solid Christian formation to enable them to grow in the faith.

5. Dear Brothers, you point out the good relations that exist between the Christians of your communities and the Muslim population and I wish to acknowledge the good will of the civil authorities toward the Church. All this is possible thanks to the reciprocal knowledge acquired in daily meetings and in contacts, notably with families. Continue to encourage these daily meetings as a priority on both sides, for they contribute to a mutual development of mentalities and help to move beyond the stereotypes of the Church that too often the media love to present. Accompanied by important and necessary official dialogues, your contacts build new bonds

between religious cultures and, especially, between persons, and foster in everyone the esteem of religious freedom and mutual respect, that are the foundations of personal and social life. In revealing the values common to all cultures since they are rooted in the nature of the person, they reveal that "mutual openness between the followers of the various religions can greatly serve the cause of peace and the common good of the human family" (*Message for World Day of Peace 2001*, n. 6).

You report how much the tragedies suffered by members of the Christian community and mourned by the Muslim population have not only increased human solidarity, but have drawn attention to others and to their religious values. The spiritual experience of the Church who recognizes in the Cross of Our Lord the greatest expression of love has always considered the gift of the martyrs as an eloquent witness and fertile seed for Christian life. It is then legitimate to hope that from these tragic events will come the fruits of peace and holiness for all.

On the path of dialogue, attention to culture is a high priority: thanks to your openness and the high quality of the Study Centres and libraries which you operate, you are careful to offer access to the knowledge of religions and cultures, giving the inhabitants of the Maghreb countries the means to rediscover their past. In particular, I applaud the welcome initiative of the colloquium dedicated to St Augustine, which was organized by the Algerian authorities in partnership with the Church.

6. In every Christian community, even if it is small in numbers and fragile, the service of charity to the poorest remains a priority, for it is the expression of God's goodness for all human beings and of the sharing which we are all called to live without distinction of race, culture or creed. You live this service, especially with the sick and the disabled, whom you welcome and care for in the hospitals and clinics which the women religious staff as a service to the people. Continue also to care for the migrants who pass through your countries of the Maghreb hoping to reach Europe; offer them in their privation and precarious situation a period of rest and fraternal cordiality!

Through such charitable organizations as Caritas and cooperating with local associations, continue to witness to the love of Christ, who came to give rest to all who are heavily burdened (Mt 11,28).

7. I know that your priests are carrying out their ministry with great pastoral charity and courage and with great efforts to be close to the people. Through you I would like to tell them of my great esteem for them, and urge them to put the Eucharist at the centre of their lives. It is the daily source where they nourish their personal relationship with Christ, and from it flows the charity that ceaselessly expands their prayer and their missionary spirit, as the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer says: "Remember ... those here present and all your people, and all who seek you with a sincere heart". In fact, it is through participation in the intercession and sacrifice of Christ that the people of God is built up. I invite the priests, once again, to be available for the call of the Church to face

new issues. May they maintain the concern to cultivate fraternal relations with one another at the heart of the diocesan presbyterate, sharing their apostolic experiences, and their different pastoral approaches and spiritual discoveries!

I cordially greet the men and women religious who are often the permanent core of Christian presence in your communities. Their fidelity, rooted in prayer and, lived even in a tragic way, is an essential support for the ministry of priests and for the laity who wish to live their baptismal commitments. I therefore invite the institutes of consecrated life, despite the current difficulties, to maintain and renew their important presence in your dioceses.

I further encourage all the laity: some have stayed on in the country after it gained its independence, others have come for a specific period of service or study, yet others to participate, temporarily in the country's economic development and lastly, others are born there. I offer a very special greeting to them in particular, and I urge them to nurture their faith by rooting it in prayer and by an appropriate formation; thus they can discern the signs of Christ's presence more clearly, and respond generously to his call. I assure them of my prayers and of my fatherly affection.

8. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood, as you note in the document you published for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, *The Churches of the Maghreb in the Year 2000*, which Archbishop Teissier has given to me in your name, we have just entered the new millennium, and we already know that the path to peace is strewn with obstacles that we must overcome with courage and perseverance. Interreligious dialogue should be pursued with patience and determination, in order to overcome mutual distrust and to learn how to serve together the common good of humanity. The path to full Christian unity also calls for time and the commitment of firm determination. Far from being discouraged at these challenges and difficulties, let us make our own the confidence of the Apostle that: "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ... may enlighten your hearts and [will] give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation.... May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places" (Eph 1,17-20).

Thus established in the love of Christ, who died and rose from the dead, be strongly determined to live the Gospel of peace (cf. Eph 6,15) witnessing each day, by your presence and welcome of others, to God's unconditional love for everyone!

I ask the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Atlas, to watch over each of you and ever more to deepen your encounter with her divine Son. I cordially impart to you, as well as to your priests, the men and women religious and the laity of your dioceses, an affectionate Apostolic Blessing.

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