ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF MADAGASCAR ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Friday, 28 March 2014

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

It is a joy for me to receive you on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit. I thank His Excellency, Archbishop Désiré Tsarahazana, President of your Episcopal Conference, for the cordial words he has just addressed to me on your behalf. Through you I send my warmest regards to the priests, consecrated persons, catechists and all the lay faithful of your dioceses. I hope that your pilgrimage to the Tombs of the Apostles be for you and for your local Churches an occasion of spiritual and missionary renewal as well as a sign of your communion with the Successor of Peter and the universal Church.

First, I would like to give thanks with you for the vitality of the Church in Madagascar, and to thank you for your courageous and persevering work of evangelization. The knowledge that in this work, which you carry out under difficult circumstances, the initiative is always God's "enables us to maintain a spirit of joy in the midst of a task so demanding" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 12). This joy finds its source in the personal encounter with Christ and the acceptance of his message of mercy. This is the first requirement for evangelists whose mission it is to foster this encounter with the Lord among the men and women to whom they have been sent.

Dear Brothers, your country has been going through a difficult period for many years and is still experiencing grave socio-economic difficulties. You have called the whole of society to pull together to build a new future. I cannot but encourage you to engage wholeheartedly in this work of rebuilding, respecting the rights and duties of each person. And it is important that you maintain positive relations with the Authorities of your country. The quest for unity, justice and peace is your responsibility so as to better serve your people, refusing any involvement in political disputes at the expense of the common good. Let your words and your actions always manifest the profound communion among you!

In this perspective, I want to acknowledge the invaluable commitment of your dioceses to social work. Indeed, there is an intimate connection between evangelization and human advancement. The latter must find expression and develop in every work of evangelization (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 178). I encourage you, therefore, to persevere in your care for the poor, by materially and spiritually supporting those who devote themselves to this, especially the religious congregations whom I thank with all my heart for their dedication and authentic witness through which they give the love of Christ to all people. I invite you also to challenge without fear the Malagasy society, and in particular its leaders, on the issue of poverty, which is due for the most part to corruption and a lack of attention to the common good.

Education also demands considerable effort from you, and I know all the good that Catholic schools do for the young and for their families through its evangelizing action.

The intellectual, cultural and moral contribution that Malagasy society as a whole receives from this is considerable. It is necessary, then, to endeavour to ensure that the greatest possible number of children, including those from poorer families, receive an education. Due to economic difficulties, many parents now have insufficient means. At the same time, I invite you to ensure that public institutions be assured of a Christian presence. May Christians engaged in the world of education contribute to forming the young generations — who will be the leaders of society to come — in evangelical and human values!

In your closing message for the Year of Faith, you expressed regret at the loss of true *fihavanana*, that manner of living which is specific to your culture, which favours harmony and solidarity among the Malagasy. The values instilled in your culture by the Creator must continue to be transmitted by being illumined from within the message of the Gospel. Thus, the dignity of the human person, the culture of peace, of dialogue and of reconciliation can recover their place in society for a better future.

In your dioceses you have implemented an ambitious and very dynamic formation programme for life and love. I can only encourage you to persevere in this direction, even if it clearly runs against the current mindset. Marriage preparation must, as far as it is possible, be thorough. There are many threats to the family, which is the vital cell of society and the Church; thus, the family “needs to be protected and defended, so that it may offer society the service expected of it, that of providing men and women capable of building a social fabric of peace and harmony” (*Africae Munus*, n. 42). Moreover, families need more than ever to be supported on their journey of faith. May they find perseverance and strength in prayer, attentive to Sacred Scripture and the Sacraments!

In the face of new challenges in the interreligious sphere, I feel it is urgent to develop, even at times opening, a clear and constructive dialogue, in order to keep the peace among communities and to foster the common good. But above all, I invite you never to doubt the power of the Gospel,

nor its capacity to convert hearts to Christ Resurrected, and to lead people on the path to salvation, which they are waiting for deep within them.

To that end, it is necessary that the faith be reflected in the daily lives of Christians. Their lives must be coherent with the faith, that their witness may be credible; likewise, I invite you to arouse in your communities, at every level, an effort to deepen the faith in order to live it in an ever more vigorous way. This invitation is addressed first to the clergy and the consecrated. The priesthood and consecrated life are not means to social advancement, they are a service to God and humanity. Special attention should be paid to the discernment of priestly and religious vocations both in the dioceses and in the different Institutes of consecrated life. Chastity and obedience are to be held in high esteem, and it is left to you to remind others of this ceaselessly; these virtues must be presented and lived without ambiguity by formators in both seminaries and novitiates. The same holds true with respect to temporal goods and prudence in their management. Counter-witness in this area is particularly harmful because of the scandal it raises, especially in the face of a population that lives in poverty.

You also have the duty to be close and very attentive to the life and situation of each one of your priests, whose lives are sometimes very hard due to loneliness, lack of resources, and the magnitude of their responsibility; they are particularly vulnerable. I assure them of my appreciation and of my encouragement in their mission, that they may be shepherds after the heart of God, close to the faithful and anxious to proclaim the Word of life. Dear Brother Bishops, love your priests, help them live in intimate union with Christ! The communion between you and your *presbyterium* is a source of joy and fruitfulness in the proclamation of the Gospel.

May the Lord continue to pour out upon your his grace of light, courage and strength! For my part I urge you to live always in the hope that comes to us from the presence of the Resurrected One and I express again my brotherly affection to you. I entrust each one of you and every one of your diocesan priests to the protection and the motherly intercession of the Virgin Mary and I bestow upon you a heartfelt Apostolic Blessing.

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