



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO NIGERIA, BENIN

GABON AND EQUATORIAL GUINEA

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE LAITY, CATECHISTS AND CATHOLIC WOMEN

Kaduna (Nigeria)

Dunday, 14 February 1982

*Dear leaders of the laity in Nigeria,
dear catechists, dear Catholic women,*

I experience great joy in meeting you today. This encounter gives me the opportunity to speak to you about your respective contributions to the Gospel, as well as about your common vocation in the Church. All of you have been commissioned by Christ himself to have a share in the saving mission of his Church.

1. I appreciate the way in which you the laity of Nigeria work together with your bishops and priests in order to bear witness to Christ, in order to communicate Christ to others. This unity with the pastors of the Church is indeed an essential condition for the supernatural success of your efforts. Under their guidance you have the National Laity Council and the Catholic Women's Organization at all levels: national, provincial, diocesan, parochial and stational. There is much grassroots activity, and there are many worthy organizations. In all of this you are striving to activate the grace of your Baptism and your Confirmation.

Having been called by Christ himself, you are his chosen partners in evangelization. This leads you to share the Church's zeal to provide Catholic religious education for all Catholic-children in all types of educational institutions. You are truly aware of the mystery of the Church, that all of us who are baptized in Christ make up his Body, the Church. In this Church there is diversity of apostolate or ministry but oneness of mission: the spreading of the Kingdom of Christ. Bishops, priests, religious and laity – each group has its specific contribution to make.

2. As lay people you know that your special apostolate is to bring Christian principles to bear upon the temporal order, that is, to bring the spirit of Christ into such spheres of life as marriage and the family, trade and commerce, the arts and professions, politics and government, culture and national and international relations. In all these areas lay people must,

in the expression of the Second Vatican Council, play their own distinctive role. From priest chaplains you receive the Word of God and sacramental strengthening. Fortified in this way, you enter into the arena of ordinary daily life and confess Christ there.

3. In society you are called to be a leaven for Christ: to witness to Christ in the school, in the Government office, in the company works, in the club gathering, in the town development union, in age grade meetings, in the university, in the market, in the trade union, and in politics. In all these secular spheres you will promote justice, unity, honesty, and public-spiritedness. Together you will seek Gospel-inspired and concrete answers to problems of bribery, corruption, lack of discipline, ethnicism and other such evils.

In your Church organizations you will be models of unity, discipline, hard work, loyalty to your leaders, forgetfulness of self, rejoicing when others have done well, not seeking fame but only the Kingdom of Christ, and not struggling for the first place in society, or wanting to be called master: "For you have one master, the Christ".

It is above all in the family that you will be able to communicate Christ. You will be exemplary husbands and wives, setting up a community of love and life, and exercising as fathers and mothers a real ministry in educating your children. It is through you that members are provided for the Body of Christ, and candidates for the priesthood and religious life. Nigeria looks to you with confidence to train good citizens for society.

4. As you engage in your numerous initiatives in the apostolate, you will place great importance on prayer and union with Christ. I am happy to know that your chaplains emphasize this, that you receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation often, that the Holy Eucharist is the centre of your Christian lives and of all your activities. Indeed, your evangelizing zeal comes above all from the Eucharist.

With God's grace, the days of recollection and the yearly retreats that you hold for spiritual rejuvenation can also help you to continue to grow in the faith which you have received.

5. I owe a special word of greeting to you, beloved catechists of Nigeria. Your role in initial and continuing evangelization is of such importance that I could not make a pilgrimage to Nigeria without this happy encounter with you.

From the very beginning when the first missionaries arrived in Nigeria more than a hundred years ago, you have been constant and indispensable partners of the priests. You assisted them at every turn. When they did not know the local languages, you acted as interpreters. You prepared people for the various sacraments. You baptized the dying when no priest was available. You animated the local Catholic community and led it in Sunday worship when there was no priest. You spearheaded most Church development projects. In all this you have abundantly contributed to the spreading of the Gospel.

6. Your special area of competence and dedication is catechetics, and its "twofold objective of maturing the initial faith and of educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the person and the message of our Lord Jesus Christ". You introduce neophytes to the faith, whether they are young, middle-aged, or old. You teach them Catholic doctrine, prayers and hymns. You help them to take part in the sacred liturgy, especially the Holy Eucharist.

You visit the sick on behalf of the whole Church. You make contact with non-Christians. You animate lay apostolate associations at grassroots level. You attend parish and diocesan meetings and help build bridges of understanding. You help the young to grow to Christian maturity by inspiring them to generosity and chastity. You discover likely candidates for the priesthood and religious life and bring them to the priest. Moreover, you facilitate people's contacts with the priests. Often you are able to be of special assistance when no priests can be found. For these and all such services, I express the gratitude of the universal Church.

My beloved catechists, the Church needs you. She continues to need you. No matter how many priests or religious the Church may have, you remain irreplaceable. You are nearest to your fellow laymen. You give them an idea of the Church at close quarters. You silently offer them models to imitate. You show them that commitment to the faith and the sacrifice needed to spread it are possible for lay people and not only for clerics and religious.

7. I am happy to know that your dioceses have programmes for your in-service training, in such forms as yearly seminars for all catechists, deeper and longer formation courses for some, and even training for periods of years in catechetical institutes with more facilities than one diocese can afford. I thank you for your cooperation in all this. I thank your bishops and priests who make this possible. I also thank the National Directors of Religious Education who make a significant contribution.

Catechists of Nigeria, the Pope loves you. He trusts you, and he will always count on your help in the great work of evangelization. He blesses you in the name of Jesus.

8. I am also very happy to greet you, the leaders of the Catholic Women's Organization of Nigeria. Although I have met leaders of the National Laity Council in which you are also included, my special encounter with you is justified by the unique place which you occupy in the family, in the Church and in society.

You are convinced Catholic women, worthy wives and esteemed mothers. You have learned to love your husbands, care for your children, and spread your love to members of your extended family and to society as a whole. You are diligent in bringing up your children and in helping to prepare them for their vocation in life. In particular you educate them in charity and chastity, in generosity and discipline. These are truly vital roles.

I am informed that you are a well-organized, disciplined and effective group at the various levels. Your officers also take part in the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, the World President of which attended your National Convention at Onitsha last April. You organize leadership training courses, home-keeping seminars and Christian doctrine conferences. For all this I praise you.

9. You are particularly active in your various initiatives in favour of the family. You help to arrange and run marriage training centres for girls. You work in Diocesan Marriage Advisory Councils. You help families in difficulty. And you defend life at every stage, from the first moment of conception. I praise you in particular for your firm stand against abortion. Abortion is the murder of an innocent child. It has to be condemned by society. I also praise your efforts to help unmarried mothers and offer them an acceptable alternative to abortion. In all of this you mirror the human tenderness and the divine love of Jesus Christ.

Your struggle for the Catholic religious education of your own children and other children merits strong support. Religion is central in education. The Church must be involved in the education of the young. To do this, she needs your help.

Respected leaders of the Catholic Women's Organization of Nigeria, through you the Church is able to have a great impact on society. Through the many and varied activities that express "the fullness of true feminine humanity" you are able to work for the transformation of the world – to permeate all creation with the spirit of Christ.

10. All these and other initiatives, dear laity, catechists and Catholic women, depend on Christ for their fruitfulness. He – Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, the Son of the Virgin Mary – is the source of all your strength. The ultimate criterion of your dynamism is not to be found in human ingenuity, or activity, or even organization. It is to be found in union with Jesus Christ, above all in Eucharistic worship. The real test of the Christian vitality of the village, the parish, the diocese and the nation is found in the answer to the question: What place does the Holy Eucharist have in your lives? For it is through sharing in the Paschal Mystery of his Death and Resurrection that Jesus makes us effective collaborators in spreading his Kingdom on earth. It is truly the Mass that matters. It is through the Eucharist that Christ guides our lives and builds our communities of love, understanding and mercy.

Today I ask our Blessed Mother Mary to unfold to all of you the Eucharistic mystery of her Son and to keep you for ever in her love.

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