



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO NIGERIA, BENIN

GABON AND EQUATORIAL GUINEA

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF NIGERIA**

Lagos

Monday, 15 February 1982

My dear brother Bishops,

“Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord”.

I am overjoyed to be with you today. Last month you were my guests at the Vatican, and during these days I am your guest. We understand each other. We love each other. We communicate freely. My brief tour of your vast country fills me with joy and hope I regret that I am not able to visit more centres, but you know the reasons why the programme had to be limited. Everywhere you made excellent preparations. Your people are enthusiastic, hospitable, full of faith. They understand the immense treasury of grace that is theirs in our Lord Jesus Christ. I praise his Father, who has given to your people deep insights of faith into things that have been hidden “from the learned and the clever”.

1. I praise you and express my fraternal solidarity with you in your day-to-day ministry, in the ecclesial reality in which you are pastors of the flock. You have done honour to the missionaries who began this good work a century ago.

Your seminaries are full, your religious congregations have a steady flow of candidates, and your lay apostolate organizations are dynamic. You love the one who presides in charity over the universal Church, as well as those who collaborate with him in the work of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. You promote orthodox doctrine and approved liturgical practices, and you encourage priestly discipline. Clerical dress and the religious habit are held in honour in your country. You zealously exercise your teaching office by means of homilies, pastoral letters and other statements.

I am happy to know that your pastoral zeal is also expressed through the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, the National Missionary Seminary, the Catholic Institute of West Africa, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, and your collaboration with the Roman Curia and the World Synod of Bishops. For these and all the other manifestations of apostolic and pastoral love, I thank you in the name of Jesus Christ, the one whom all of us, with Peter, acknowledge as the “Chief Shepherd of the flock”.

In a big Bishops’ Conference such as yours, it is never superfluous to emphasize the importance of unity and concerted action. There are many needs of the apostolate in your nation which you cannot meet adequately unless you stand together and act together. Examples are the common projects which I have just mentioned. Added to these are your regional and interdiocesan seminaries, both junior and senior, your relationship with national and regional civil authorities, your pastoral planning and so forth. Problems too demand well-considered and united action: whatever lack of discipline may exist among some priests, the problem of tribalism or ethnicism, and such national problems as bribery and corruption, dishonesty and violence.

I am aware that the school apostolate has yielded very good results for evangelization in Nigeria, but that the situation of church schools has also created big problems, especially in the past fifteen years. The religious education of children, in school and out of school, is of the greatest importance.

In the various states of your vast Federation you are striving to fulfil your responsibility as bishops in providing for the rights and needs of so many Catholic children. Acting as spiritual leaders and vigilant pastors, and relying on the full support of your priests, religious and laity, you are trying to show the aims of Christian education and help parents to fulfil their God-given role as the primary educators of their children.

In this regard I would draw attention to what I wrote in my recent apostolic exhortation: “The right of parents to choose an education in conformity with their religious faith must be absolutely guaranteed. The State and Church. have the obligation to give families all possible aid to enable them to perform their educational role properly. Therefore both the Church and State must create and foster the institutions and activities that families justly demand, and the aid must be in proportion to the families’ needs. However, those in society who are in charge of schools must never forget that the parents have been appointed by God himself as the first and principal educators of their children and that their right is completely inalienable”. Yes, dear brothers in Christ, in all your pastoral zeal towards the laity and clergy I am close to you in the love of Jesus Christ.

I thank you for your missionary consciousness and for your initiative in sending Nigerian priests, brothers and sisters to a number of other countries in Africa and to the West Indies. I am grateful for the fraternity you show to your brother priests; it is indeed a wonderful practice to do annual

spiritual exercises and monthly days of recollection with them. In all of this you show the oneness of the priesthood in the oneness of Christ's Church.

2. When the first group of you were in Rome last month I already had occasion to speak of my visit to Nigeria as an experience of our unity in Christ and in the Church. The unity that you live in your local Churches we are now experiencing together. This unity is a unity of faith based on the word of God, on the Gospel – a Gospel to be believed, to be lived, to be spread. For this reason I proposed unity and evangelization as the double setting of this pastoral visit of mine to the beloved Church in Nigeria.

Today in Lagos we are truly celebrating the word of God that unites us; we are celebrating the Incarnate Word of God, who died in order “to gather in unity the scattered children of God”. We are celebrating the Gospel as “the power of God saving all who have faith”. We recall how, through the grace of Christ and the merits of his precious blood, the word of God has taken root in your people's lives, has united them in communities of faith, and has continually brought forth fruits of justice unto salvation.

3. As we meditate on the dynamic process of evangelization that took place we realize that it must go on unceasingly. We realize that people will not believe in Christ “unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher, and they will not have a preacher unless one is sent”. And so today, dear brothers in Christ, we reflect on the words of Jesus: “As the Father sent me, even so I send you”.

I have been sent by Christ and you have been sent by Christ. And together with the rest of the College of Bishops throughout the world we are sent to announce Christ, to proclaim Christ, to communicate Christ and his Gospel to the world. This is why, in anticipation of this pastoral visit, I expressed the hope that it would initiate “a new era of evangelization”. This is my repeated prayer: that zeal for evangelization will envelop the Church here in Nigeria. And why? Because evangelization constitutes the essential mission of the Church, it is her vocation, it is her deepest identity. In this, the Church, which is Christ's fullness, faithfully reflects the mission of Jesus, who says of himself: “I must proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God... because this is what I was sent to do”.

In practice, the Church's vocation to evangelize means above all living the Gospel ever more deeply. It means accepting Christ's call to conversion and accepting the demands inherent in the faith preached by Jesus. The call to conversion was the theme of John the Baptist's preaching. It was the explicit proclamation of Jesus: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is close at hand”. It was Peter's message for Pentecost: “You must repent”.

Understood in this way, evangelization involves a process of purification and interior change that affects our local Churches. It means conversion unto salvation: the ecclesial community becoming

ever more a community of living faith, a communion of prayer, a centre of charity radiating concern for the poor and the sick, the lonely, the abandoned, the handicapped, those with leprosy, those who are weak in faith, those who need support and are looking for someone to show them the love of Christ.

Having herself embraced the Gospel, the Church is called to communicate it by word and action.

The Catholic people, under your pastoral leadership, have the opportunity, the privilege and the duty to give a corporate witness to the Gospel of Jesus in the culture in which they live. They have the power to bring the Gospel into the very heart of their culture, into the fabric of their everyday lives. It is above all when the Christian families have been truly evangelized and are aware of their evangelizing role that there can be an effective evangelization of culture – an effective encounter between the Gospel and culture. The need is great, for as my predecessor Paul VI pointed out: “The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time”.

An important aspect of your own evangelizing role is the whole dimension of the enculturation of the Gospel into the lives of your people. Here, you and your priest co-workers offer to your people a perennial message of divine revelation – “the unsearchable riches of Christ” – but at the same time, on the basis of this “eternal Gospel”, you help them “to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought”.

The Church truly respects the culture of each people. In offering the Gospel message, the Church does not intend to destroy or to abolish what is good and beautiful. In fact she recognizes many cultural values and through the power of the Gospel purifies and takes into Christian worship certain elements of a people’s customs. The Church comes to bring Christ; she does not come to bring the culture of another race. Evangelization aims at penetrating and elevating culture by the power of the Gospel.

On the other hand, we know that God’s revelation exceeds the insights of any culture and of all the cultures of the world put together. With Saint Paul we ought to praise the divine plain: “O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”. The profundity of the divine revelation is manifested in the mystery of the Incarnation, which in turn unveils the life of the Most Holy Trinity: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

And therefore it is clear, as I have stated before, that “the power of the Gospel everywhere transforms and regenerates. When that power enters into a culture, it is no surprise that it rectifies many of its elements”. At the same time, it is through the providence of God that the divine message is made incarnate and is communicated through the culture of each people. It is for ever true that the path of culture is the path of man, and it is on this path that man encounters the One who embodies the values of all cultures and fully reveals the man of each culture to himself. The

Gospel of Christ the Incarnate Word finds its home along the path of culture and from this path it continues to offer its message of salvation and eternal life.

Because of these important considerations, dear brothers in Christ, I wish to implore again from the Holy Spirit that “new era of evangelization” of which I spoke to you in Rome. It will, of course, be a gift of God – a gift added to the interminable list of favours bestowed upon your people through the merciful and loving kindness of our God. On our part, it is necessary to have the profound conviction that our own ministry as bishops is indeed a ministry of evangelization, including the evangelization of culture. As I mentioned in Rome, Jesus himself is indicating to us that evangelization is our “supreme priority”.

4. Before concluding, I wish to add a word about two important aspects of our Gospel ministry.

As we explicitly proclaim God’s gift of salvation, his call to conversion, his merciful forgiveness and his redemptive love, we do so in the context of the Sacrament of Penance and the Holy Eucharist.

In Nigeria your people have been faithful to the mystery of reconciliation and mercy as evidenced in their practice of going to confession. This fidelity is itself a gift of God. In so many areas in the Church throughout the world, the Sacrament of Penance, for various reasons, has been used less than before. The Second Vatican Council and its implementation by the Apostolic See aimed at giving renewed emphasis to certain aspects of the sacrament. These included, for example: the ministry of the Church in the forgiveness of sins; the effect of sin on the whole body of Christ; and the role of the community in the celebration of penance and in the work of reconciliation. But the Second Vatican Council and the Apostolic See in no way willed to initiate a process in which large sectors of the Catholic people would abandon use of the sacrament, or so neglect it in practice as to deny its importance in Christian living. The forthcoming Synod of Bishops will be an excellent opportunity for the Magisterium of the Church to reiterate collegially the vital role of this sacrament and its proper use according to the approved norms of the Church. These norms conform to the divine law and express the authentic renewal willed by the Second Vatican Council and the Apostolic See.

Meanwhile, I ask you to do all you can, dear brothers, to emphasize the importance of the ecclesial nature of the Sacrament of Penance, which is not only in harmony with individual confession and absolution, but which actually requires them, except in those very exceptional cases in which the Church authorizes general absolution.

In calling your people to constant conversion, in preaching the mercy and forgiveness of the Saviour, in emphasizing the community aspect of reconciliation and in promoting the proper use of individual confession and absolution among your people, you are rendering a service of immense value not only to your local Churches but to the universal Church as well. You are extolling the mystery of Redemption and defending one of the most sacred rights of your people. As I stated in

my first encyclical: “In faithfully observing the centuries-old practice of the Sacrament of Penance – the practice of individual confession with a personal act of sorrow and the intention to amend and make satisfaction – the Church is therefore defending the human soul’s individual right: man’s right to a more personal encounter with the crucified forgiving Christ... As is evident, this is also a right on Christ’s part with regard to every human being redeemed by him: his right to meet each one of us in that key moment in the soul’s life constituted by the moment of conversion and forgiveness”.

5. Your evangelizing ministry finally reaches its summit, which is at the same time the centre of all sacramental life, in the Eucharist. Here the Gospel is fully proclaimed; here perfect, union with Jesus is offered to the faithful. Here each Christian can receive the saving power of Redemption in its fullness. And here, in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, your own pastoral mission is brought to fulfilment.

Here you are truly one with Christ the Good Shepherd, the Chief Pastor of the flock. All conversion leads up to that union which is fully possible only in the Eucharist. All evangelization points to this centre, which is both its source and summit.

It is also in the Eucharist that we ourselves, bishops of the Church of God, find pastoral strength and joy to lead God’s people in the way of salvation and eternal life. Here we assemble, in Christ’s name, his pilgrim Church on their journey to the Father, “the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort”. Here we show Jesus to our people and advance with him, in holiness and truth, towards the eternal embrace of the Father’s love, towards the full communion of life with the Most Holy Trinity.

This, my brother bishops, is my ministry and yours – our evangelizing ministry – at the service of God’s people in Nigeria and wherever his blessed providence directs your missionary zeal. Praised be Jesus Christ, praised be his redemptive love, praised be his Gospel of salvation!

I want to open my heart with a gift I brought to you for this occasion to your Conference: it is an image of-my heart, of my origin; and also of my hope in the future of the Church, of humanity and of every human family in all mother-nations (especially my own mother-nation) in the world. Thank you very much for your participation; thank you from the depths of my heart for your preparation. I expressed my gratefulness to your collaborators before, and to the whole Committee; now I repeat the same to every one of you, and to the entire Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria. If the whole visit is proceeding so well, it is of course the fruit of Divine Grace, of the blessing of our Lord; but it is also a fruit of your ministry, of your apostolic fraternal desire and of the spirit of unity among you and with the Bishop of Rome. I am deeply grateful to all of you for that and for all sorts of spiritual preparation: it isn’t perhaps as visible as an external preparation, but basically all external preparation is just a mirror in which the spiritual reflects its image. Thank you for the spiritual preparation of your Church, of your people, for this special mission: your country, Nigeria, had many missionaries, especially from Ireland We can now bless that land, having given so many of

its sons to the missions of the whole Church, and particularly in your own land. Now, the Pope's visit is a special missionary experience: and I wish to thank all former generations of bishops, priests and missionaries who prepared this special experience, and together with you I thank our Lord through his Mother.

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