



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS FROM NIGERIA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Thursday, 21 January 1982

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Jesus himself has said: "I must proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God... because this is what I was sent to do". For us these words are like a key. They unlock the deepest meaning of our episcopal ministry because they sum up the whole mission of the Saviour. Jesus hereby indicates the supreme priority that is ours as Bishops acting in his name and sent by him. We are called to proclaim the Gospel, to evangelize our people. This proclamation of the Good News – this evangelization – is done by word and sacrament. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council looks upon the Eucharist as the most effective proclamation of the Gospel, "the source and summit of all evangelization".

2. Last week when I spoke to the first group of Bishops from your country, I told them how much I want my whole pastoral visit to Nigeria to be seen in the context of evangelization.

I told them that the great desire of my heart is "to proclaim to your people the life-giving message of truth, the Gospel of Jesus Christ". The whole programme of my visit is related to this central theme. And it is my hope that the individual events will help to focus attention on the Good News of salvation – indeed, on the very person of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, the Redeemer of man – and that they will make his Gospel more widely known, respected and loved. I also pray that, with God's grace, my visit may initiate a new era of evangelization, one that follows upon a century of zealous preaching of the Gospel and generous service rendered in the name of the same Jesus "who went about doing good".

I look forward to proclaiming Jesus Christ to all those who will freely listen to my voice. Hence my meetings with the various groups that make up the Church in Nigeria. To all these groups I hope to present the Good News of the Kingdom of God, in relation to the concrete circumstances of daily life, as it is lived within the context of Nigerian culture. The different events will give me ample opportunities to endeavour to speak to your people, heart to heart.

3. But meanwhile, a reflection at this time on the very aim and scope of evangelization is a source of encouragement for us as Bishops. By means of this reflection we can clearly see the specific service that, together with our priests, we are called to render to the community. It is always a question of transmitting the Good News – a liberating, uplifting, satisfying Gospel. In the expression of Paul VI, our role as evangelizers is to speak about “the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God”.

What a privilege it is for us to proclaim “the name which is above every name” – the only name in which there is salvation. Our teaching is truly the teaching of Jesus, a teaching about life, about the fullness of life, about eternal life. We preach and make known a Jesus who says: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly”. On the authority of Jesus we are able to hold out promises that will not deceive, promises such as: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God”. In all of this we preach a merciful Lord, a loving Jesus who came not to condemn, but to save and to establish a Kingdom, gathering into one the dispersed children of God. At the core of our message is the proclamation of God’s gift of salvation – the gift of God’s merciful love bestowed through the death and Resurrection of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, through Christ the Son, we have received the grace of divine adoption and “in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace”.

4. As we explicitly proclaim the mystery of a God who saves and gathers his people into one family, we perceive the need for exemplary witness – this too being a requirement of evangelization.

The lesson of history confirms that by the action of the Holy Spirit evangelization takes place above all through the witness of charity, the witness of holiness. The ministers of Christ are effective evangelizers to the extent that they are united with Christ, to the extent that they love their brethren and experience the need and urgency of proclaiming the Gospel. For us the words of Jesus are a whole programme of life and ministry. We can never forget them: “I must proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God... because this is what I was sent to do”.

5. This is the pastoral ideal that sustains us in our ministry, day after day, year after year. This is the pastoral vision that we must offer to our priests, who are personally called by Christ to be our co-workers in this vital task. This is the pastoral viewpoint that we want all seminary training to inculcate and the whole lay apostolate to share. In fact, it was this ideal, this vision, this viewpoint, this consciousness of being sent, in accordance with what Jesus said – “because for this I was sent” – that encouraged the missionaries to bring the word of God to your people. And it is this consciousness of being sent, this consciousness of the need to communicate Christ, that will animate, in the last years of this twentieth century and beyond, the continuing in-depth evangelization of Nigeria and all Africa. This, then, is the meaning of all evangelization, and the meaning of my visit: being sent to communicate Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, being sent to preach the Good News of the Kingdom, being sent to proclaim Christ’s saving love until he comes again in glory.

Beloved Brothers, we are ready to go forward together, and to summon the local Churches, in their entirety, to this task. And we shall do it, relying on the prayers and intercession of our Blessed Mother Mary, for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity: the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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