



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF ETHIOPIA  
ON THEIR AD "LIMINA APOSTOLORUM VISIT"**

*Friday, 12 September 1997*

*Your Eminence,  
Dear Brother Bishops,*

1. It is a great joy for me to welcome you, *the Bishops of the Church in Ethiopia and Eritrea*, on the occasion of your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:7). The ancient practice of "coming to see Peter" is reminiscent of the Apostle Paul's visit to Jerusalem, to spend time with Cephas (cf. Gal. 1:18) whom the Lord had constituted the "rock" upon which he would build his Church. In the fraternal embrace of Peter and Paul the early Christian community recognized Paul's Gentile converts as true brothers and sisters in the faith, and in Paul's account of the abundant outpouring of grace upon these new believers the entire community found ever greater reason to praise God's boundless mercy (cf. Acts 15:16ff.). In like manner, our coming together today reaffirms the communion of your particular Churches with the Successor of Peter and with the Church universal, and in intimate union of heart our voices join in the song of the psalmist: "Let Ethiopia stretch out her hands to God. Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth; sing praises to the Lord" (Ps 68:31-32).

2. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, both of your countries have undergone vast political and cultural changes in recent years, the most notable being the emergence of democratic forms of government and the attempts being made to bring economic growth and technological progress to your traditional societies. I share your pastoral concern for the peaceful development of your peoples, not only in terms of material progress, but especially in genuine political freedom, ethnic harmony and respect for the rights of all citizens, with particular attention to the situation of minorities and the needs of the poor. The question before you at this time, and the situation which you yourselves addressed in your pastoral letter *Thy Kingdom Come* published earlier this year, is: how can the Gospel be incarnated in these emerging circumstances? How can the Church and

individual Christians best deal with the important issues which they must face if they are to build a better future for themselves?

An answer to these questions can be found in the very goals which, as Pastors of the local Churches of Ethiopia and Eritrea, you have set for yourselves: to transform humanity from within, to renew the innocence of men's hearts, and, as recommended by the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, to build up the Church as family (cf. *Thy Kingdom Come*, Pastoral Letter of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Catholic Bishops, n. 6). It is this latter element which holds an important key to the first two: for, as the Synod Fathers acknowledged, *the Church as God's family* "is an expression of the Church's nature particularly appropriate for Africa. For this image emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 63). In fact, when evangelization succeeds in building up the Church as family, authentic harmony between different ethnic groups is made possible, ethnocentrism is avoided and reconciliation encouraged, greater solidarity and a sharing of resources among people and between the particular Churches becomes a reality.

3. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, which forms a kind of general pastoral plan for your continent, emphasizes the importance of *effectively involving the laity in the life of the parish and Diocese, in pastoral and administrative structures* (cf. n. 90). In fact, "because of their baptismal state and their specific vocation, in the measure proper to each person, the lay faithful participate in the priestly, prophetic and kingly mission of Christ" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 23). It is necessary, then, that the laity receive adequate formation in order to be able to meet effectively the enormous challenges facing them as followers of Christ and as citizens of countries striving for development.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a most precious instrument for this formation and for evangelization in general. Now that you have seen to its translation into Amharic, and even as you continue to work on the Tigrinya translation, I encourage you to ensure that as many people as possible have access to it, and that copies be made available especially to the small Christian communities which contribute so much to the strength of ecclesial life. Indeed, the Synod Fathers recognized that "the Church as family cannot reach her full potential as Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationships" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 89). In the Ethiopic tradition, the "Mehaber" associations are a most valid expression of such communities and, as you yourselves acknowledged in your pastoral letter, the value and dynamism of these groups "can have a very positive influence on the evangelization of ... families, villages and parish communities" (n. 32).

4. In the context of meeting the challenges of the future, *attention to young people* remains of paramount importance and must continue to occupy a pre-eminent place in your pastoral ministry. "The future of the world and the Church belongs to the younger generation.... *Christ expects great things from young people*" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 58). The recent celebration of the

Twelfth World Youth Day in Paris was a clear confirmation of the capacity of young people to commit their energies and their zeal to the demands of solidarity with others and to the search for Christian holiness. The whole Catholic community must work to ensure that the younger generations are properly trained and adequately prepared to fulfil the responsibilities which will be theirs, and which in some ways already are theirs. This you are already doing through *a strong commitment to the formation of youth*, particularly in the noteworthy efforts of your Catholic schools and in other forms of social service and health care. Your support of schools involves great sacrifice on your part. But it is a task which is essential to the life of the Church, and of capital benefit to families and to society itself. It is important to continue to seek ways to bring the benefit of sound moral and religious teaching also to the public schools, as is already being done in Eritrea, and to promote in public opinion a consensus regarding the importance of such training. This service, which can result from closer co-operation with your respective governments, is a significant form of active Catholic participation in the social life of your countries, especially as it is provided without religious or ethnic discrimination and with respect for the rights of all.

In fact, the universality which is an essential sign of the Church (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 811 and 830 ff.) and which prompts a sharing of goods, both material and spiritual, is a condition of the effectiveness of your ministry. This universality and sharing can be seen very clearly in the *exchange of religious personnel*: Ethiopian and Eritrean priests and religious lending pastoral assistance to their brothers and sisters in foreign lands, and priests and religious from foreign lands bringing their talents and solidarity to Ethiopia and Eritrea adapting themselves to a Church which is justly proud of its ancient traditions and culture. The Constitutions of both countries recognize the fundamental right to freedom of religion and of religious practice. I am confident that further dialogue with the civil authorities to clarify the juridical basis of the Church's presence and activity will greatly benefit everyone, and I dare to hope that the co-operation of missionaries, who contribute so effectively to the welfare and advancement of your peoples, will be made easier.

5. The Catholic communities which you shepherd live side-by-side and in a very close relationship with their brothers and sisters of the majority *Ethiopian Orthodox community*. Both communities share common roots and a common spirituality deriving from the very ancient and rich Christian tradition present in your lands. The prospect of the 2,000th anniversary of the Birth of the Saviour should serve as an invitation to all to make this common Christian patrimony, which should be a source of mutual respect and understanding, the subject of more extensive dialogue and wider co-operation. As brothers and sisters in the one Lord, you must constantly seek to build communion in order to bear *united witness* to the mystery of Christ and his Church. A wise and ordered inculturation "should be carried out so that the faithful can better understand and live liturgical celebrations" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 64). Efforts to gain a deeper understanding of the history and development of the Alexandrian rite should continue, so that the common Christian tradition of the region can contribute to the journey to unity, both within the Catholic community and with the other Churches.

At the same time, *the missionary aspect of the Church, which is not a question of rite but is rooted in the Gospel*, must be renewed in the dynamism of proclaiming Christ to those who do not yet know him. The duty to evangelize is part and parcel of the Catholic identity and ought not to be compromised by an incomplete understanding of inculturation or ecumenism. The Synod recognized the urgency of bringing the Good News to the millions of Africans who have not yet been evangelized. The Church certainly respects and esteems the non-Christian religions professed by many Africans, but, in the words of my Predecessor Pope Paul VI: "The Church holds that these multitudes have the right to know the riches of the mystery of Christ (cf. Eph 3:8) — riches in which we believe that the whole of humanity can find, in unsuspected fullness, everything that it is gropingly searching for concerning God, man and his destiny, life and death, and truth" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 53).

6. As your local Churches seek to fulfil this missionary mandate given by the Lord himself (cf. Mt 28:19), we cannot fail to give thanks for *the many vocations with which you are blessed*. I exhort you to ensure that your vocational programmes zealously foster and protect this gift of God. Young candidates must receive a proper spiritual and theological formation which firmly roots them in the Ethiopian spiritual tradition and prepares them to meet the complex pastoral, social and ethical problems which the modernization of society presents. I encourage you to continue your efforts to provide qualified personnel to staff the three major seminaries. In this way they will truly be centres of theological study and research capable of illuminating the pastoral and evangelizing mission of the Church in both your countries. The communities of men and women religious among you have also developed systematic courses of formation. They look to you for support and guidance, for religious too are the object of your pastoral care and concern as shepherds of the flock which Christ has entrusted to you (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 45; *Christus Dominus*, nn. 15; 35).

You well know that among the many demands on your episcopal ministry, the continuing formation — human, spiritual and intellectual — of your priests is one of your principal tasks. In order to carry out their sublime mission as teachers and doctors of the human soul your priests must have your fatherly and fraternal support (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 16); they rely on your friendship and on that of their brother priests (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 28). As they grow in appreciation of the unique privilege of acting *in persona Christi*, they will come to devote themselves ever more completely, in chastity and simplicity of life, to their ministry, and their work will be a source of immeasurable joy and peace.

7. I am pleased to note further that, prompted by the recommendation of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, your Conference has established a *Peace and Justice Commission* to deal with fundamental questions facing your developing democracies, including human rights, honesty in public administration and the role of women in society. Indeed, the Church has a special role to play in this area and can lend support to the process of building a society in which all citizens, independent of their ethnic, cultural and religious affiliation, can feel at home and be justly treated. Thus, the Church in Ethiopia and Eritrea is called to exercise courage

and far-sighted wisdom in carrying out a great mission, a mission stemming from her very nature as sacrament of union with God and of the unity of all the members of the human family (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 1). The search for peace and harmony must also be pursued within the Church, where differences are not seen as a reason for conflict or tension, but as a source of strength and unity in legitimate diversity. Harmony and generous co-operation among the faithful, and especially among the priests and among you, the Bishops, will be a powerful incentive in fostering corresponding goodwill and solidarity in society as a whole. "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father" (Mt 5:16).

8. Dear Brothers, these are some of the thoughts which your visit to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul have brought to mind. I pray that your pilgrimage will give you renewed strength for your ministry, so that you may never grow weary of preaching God's word, celebrating the sacraments, guiding the flock given over to your care and seeking out the lost sheep who has strayed. I invite you to set your faces resolutely towards the Great Jubilee which, because of the sublime mystery which it commemorates, involves *a clarion call to Christian joy* (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 142). May this joy become a reality for your peoples as a result of the strengthening of faith and holiness of life. I join you in interceding for the Church in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and I commend you, your clergy, religious and laity to the loving protection of Mary, Star of Evangelization and Queen of Africa. As a pledge of grace and communion in her divine Son I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.