



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO NIGERIA (MARCH 21-23, 1997)

FAREWELL CEREMONY

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

*Nnamdi Azikiwe Airport
Monday, 23 March 1998*

*Your Excellency, General Sani Abacha,
My Brother Bishops,
All Officials of Church and State,
Dear People of Nigeria,*

1. More than sixteen years ago I stood on the tarmac of Murtala Mohammed Airport in Lagos, making my farewell to President Shehu Shagari and leaders of Church and State after an unforgettable Pastoral Visit to your country. I asked: "Shall I be able some time in the future to visit Nigeria again? Will the Providence of the Almighty and Merciful God dispose that I come back again to kiss your soil, embrace your children, encourage your youth and walk once more amidst the love and affection of the noble people of this land?"

I repeated that prayer and wish many times in recent years. Now I can thank God that my prayer has been answered and that I have been able to make this brief but ever so fruitful return visit to your beloved country. I assure you that, just as I still treasure the memories of my earlier visit, these past few days will also have their own special place in my heart.

2. And now, the time has again come for me to say farewell. I thank His Excellency the Head of State and his willing team of Government officials and workers for their cordial reception and sincere welcome. I thank you, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, and all the priests, Religious and

lay faithful who have participated so joyfully in the Beatification of Father Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi and in the other moments of my brief stay among you. I am grateful to the pilots and the drivers, the security men and guardians of the peace, the men and women of the media, who have given their time and expertise to make this Visit a success.

I renew my esteem and gratitude to the representatives of other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities who took part in the events of these days. As we approach the threshold of the Third Millennium, our ecumenical friendship and cooperation must ever become more intense; an attitude of trust and respect must distinguish all the followers of Christ as we travel along the path of ever greater understanding and mutual support!

I also express my thanks to the members of the Muslim community for their presence and participation. I pray that the commitment of Christians and Muslims to establish bonds of mutual knowledge and respect will increase and bear fruit, so that all who believe in the One God may work together for the good of society here in Nigeria and throughout the world.

Likewise, I offer a special word of appreciation to the followers of African Traditional Religion, and I assure them that the Catholic Church, by her efforts aimed at inculturating the Gospel, seeks to highlight and build on the positive elements of Africa's religious and cultural heritage.

3. Dear Catholic Brothers and Sisters, I know and have experienced anew your desire to work with all your fellow citizens for greater justice and a better life for yourselves and your children. The time is ripe for your nation to gather its material riches and spiritual energies so that everything that causes division may be left behind and replaced by unity, solidarity and peace. There are still many difficulties to face and the hard work that lies ahead cannot be underestimated. You are not alone in this important undertaking: the Pope is with you, the Catholic Church stands by you, and God himself will give you the strength and courage to build a bright and enduring future based on respect for the dignity and rights of everyone.

As I took my leave of you sixteen years ago, I addressed my final words to the children of Nigeria, reminding them that they are loved by God and that they reflect the love of God. Those children are now grown up, and many of them have children of their own; but the message I leave today is the same as I left then. The children and young people of Africa must be protected from the terrible hardships visited upon the thousands of innocent victims who are forced to become refugees, who are left hungry, or who are mercilessly abducted, abused, enslaved or killed. We must all work for a world in which no child will be deprived of peace and security, of a stable family life, of the right to grow up without fear and anxiety.

4. I want you to know that Nigeria and all Nigerians remain in my prayers. Almighty God, the Lord of history, will give you the wisdom and perseverance to move forward courageously in the work of development and peace. Your country has the resources to remove the obstacles that stand in the

way of progress, and to build a society of justice and harmony. I also wish to renew the appeal which I have made many times to the international community not to ignore Africa's needs, but to work with you and, in a spirit of ever greater collaboration, to lend support to all efforts aimed at ensuring the continent's peaceful development and growth. All Nigerians must be made to feel proud of their nation; all must play a part in constructing the future. This is my prayer to Almighty God for you!

God bless Nigeria and all Nigerians! God sustain all the peoples of Africa!