



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE BISHOPS OF ZAMBIA IN THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

3 September 1999

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. It is a great joy for me to welcome you, *the Bishops of Zambia*, as you gather in Rome for your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. Your presence expresses and reaffirms the bond of communion which ties you and your local communities to the Successor of Peter, who is called to strengthen his brothers in the faith (cf. *Lk 22:32*). With fraternal affection, I greet you with the words of the Apostle: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (*Rom 1:7*). Through you, I address this same greeting to the priests, religious and lay faithful of the particular Churches over which you preside in love.

In our meetings in these days, I have seen the selfless zeal with which you give yourselves to your pastoral ministry, and I have shared the hopes and yearnings, the difficulties and concerns, the joys and successes of your service to the People of God in Zambia. Your visit has also reminded me of my Pastoral Visit to your country 10 years ago, when I was blessed to experience at first hand "the warmth of your human relations and the depth of your aspirations to live in a society based on respect for the dignity of every human person" (*Address at Departure Ceremony, Lusaka, 4 May 1989, n. 1*). It was my special joy then to witness "the steadfastness and vigour of the Catholic Church in Zambia" (*ibid.*, n. 2), and that is something I have never forgotten.

2. In the 10 years since my visit, the situation on the African continent, including Zambia, has grown more dramatic. This is at times forgotten by the world at large, but it never ceases to weigh heavily upon the heart of the Church and of the Pope. The age-old human scourges of war, famine, poverty and disease continue to strike at Africa's peoples, and Zambia has not been spared their force. The wars in neighbouring lands have wounded Zambia, not least because of so many displaced persons seeking refuge in your country. The shadow of AIDS spreads across the continent and is reaping a fearful harvest of death. The capacity to deal with these problems is further restricted by the crushing burden of foreign debt. In such a situation, people can easily fall victim to anxiety and even despair, grasping at false promises and solutions which sometimes make things worse.

Yet it is clear from your quinquennial reports that, in the midst of this suffering, the Church in Zambia has remained steadfast, and grows with new life and vigour. This is surely a source of hope, and for that I give thanks to almighty God. Now, more than ever, Zambia needs *the Church's witness to the crucified Christ*, who alone is the light which no darkness can dispel (cf. *Jn 1:5*). Your country has recently celebrated the centenary of its evangelization; and, after a hundred years of growth, the Church is increasingly present, fulfilling her religious mission and serving in the areas of education and health care, as well as working for the integral human development of the people. These involvements are vital, and they will continue to challenge your pastoral leadership. But as wise shepherds of the Church you are also well aware that beneath them there lies the still more fundamental task of strengthening *the natural family in its sacred task as "ecclesia domestica"* and *the spiritual family of the Church in its sacred task as "ecclesia publica"*. Upon the successful accomplishment of that dual task which is really only one will depend the fate of the Church's mission in Zambia.

3. Rightly, then, *the family* has been the object of your special pastoral concern. In Zambia, as elsewhere, families are now facing an array of pressures, the roots of which are political, social, economic and even cultural. Unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, external cultural influences and traditional practices such as polygamy are a threat to the unity and stability of Zambian families. This must also be said of divorce, abortion, a growing contraceptive mentality and the kind of irresponsible sexual activity which is aggravating the AIDS crisis. All these factors demean human dignity in a way that makes the commitment of marriage increasingly difficult, since it is the nature of marriage to be grounded upon a deep sense of the value of human life and human dignity. That is why your recent pastoral letter on the *sanctity of human life* was so timely. I trust that it will strengthen Christian witness in Zambia and raise national awareness on this most crucial of issues.

Because no society can flourish unless the family flourishes, all the Church's resources and institutions must be mobilized to help Zambian families live faithfully and generously as true "domestic churches" (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 11). This applies to Catholic schools, which from beginning to end must teach the values which give meaning to Christian sexuality. It applies to youth programmes which must consolidate and build upon that foundation, emphasizing especially the role and dignity of women. It applies to marriage preparation programmes, which must set before engaged couples the Christian significance and beauty of married love. It also means that pastoral help must always be available to families who are in difficulty. *The future of Zambia is the future of Zambia's families.*

More broadly, the support of the family as the fundamental unit of society calls for resolute efforts to respond to the difficulties which married couples face, including the cultural pressures and policies which work against the family. The energies of the whole Church must be galvanized now to ensure that Zambian families are as strong as God wants them to be so that the nation's future will be as rich as God wants it to be.

4. As Pastors, your ministry is principally directed to strengthening *the spiritual family of the Church* so that the "power of the Gospel to save" (cf. *Rom 1:16*) will permeate every aspect of the life of the faithful and enlighten the path of society towards greater truth, justice and harmony. In many ways the Church will be *a sign of contradiction* in a situation where the powers of alienation are unmistakable, and this will demand that you yourselves have a deeply spiritual vision of things, and live "holy and blameless and irreproachable" lives before the Lord (cf. *Col 1:22*). The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* reminds Bishops of the admonition of Pope St Gregory the Great, according to whom "the Pastor is the light of his faithful above all through an exemplary moral conduct marked by holiness" (n. 98).

5. Since in the family of the Church so much depends upon *the quality of leadership offered by priests*, it is essential that they be the prime concern of your ministry. Your relations with them should always be marked by unity, fraternity and encouragement. In Holy Orders they have been configured to Christ the Head and Shepherd of the Church. They must therefore share his complete self-giving for the sake of the flock and the coming of the kingdom. As you well know, the faithful and fruitful living of the priestly vocation requires *permanent formation*. It is for this reason that you have devised special programmes for priests, especially those recently ordained, in order to help them to continue their intellectual, pastoral and spiritual development. A good number of your clergy are already taking advantage of these, and I support you fully in this initiative, encouraging you to do all that you can to involve as many of your priests as possible in the process.

Unceasing personal conversion is an essential component of all Christian life, and for priests this involves a definite spirit of detachment from the things and attitudes of the world. This is most clearly signaled by priestly celibacy, the value of which as a complete gift of self to the Lord and his Church must be carefully safeguarded. This means that any behaviour which might give scandal must be carefully avoided or corrected where necessary. In all of this, *seminary formation is of utmost importance*, for if weak foundations are laid at that stage Zambia will not have the zealous and self-sacrificing priests that it now needs. Yet even before seminary training begins, good priestly vocations are born and grow in truly Christian families, which is yet another reason for you to spare no effort in your pastoral care of the family.

6. Another positive sign in the Church in Zambia is *the growing number of vocations to the religious life*. To ensure that here too there is leadership of the kind required by the family of the Church, I would also urge that great care be exercised in the selection of candidates and in their formation. Once again, family life is a key here: many of the young women and men discerning a call to consecrated life come from families with only a brief familiarity with Christian life or with little Christian training. Religious life, like the priesthood, runs the risk of becoming a means for social advancement or a source of prestige. Candidates must not succumb to the temptation of thinking of themselves as better than others, or of wanting to rise to a higher level of material welfare. When this happens, the genuine character of religious or priestly service is accepted only externally but is not assimilated at a deeply personal level. Programmes of formation should

uphold the highest ideals and be entrusted to truly exemplary priests and women and men religious.

7. As the spiritual family of the Church grows stronger, you will be better equipped to enter into the *ecumenical dialogue and cooperation* which are needed so that the various Christian Churches and ecclesial communities can grow in mutual understanding and respect, and in order that Christians may move beyond the divisions that have impaired their mission in the millennium now drawing to a close (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 34). You will also be better equipped to enter into *dialogue with Islam*, which although a minority in your country, is growing in influence and is active in the building of mosques, schools and clinics in different parts of the country. In these circumstances there is need for a twofold response from the Church on the one hand, strong and continuing *evangelization and catechesis* of the Catholic people, and on the other hand a sincere openness to *interreligious dialogue*.

An important pastoral challenge of quite a different kind is the confusion and, in some cases, the loss of true Christian identity caused by the proliferation of *fundamentalist sects*. They tend to flourish in times of social dislocation and cultural alienation when anxiety and the temptation to hopelessness take hold; *they are also strongest when the experience of the Church as family is weakest*. To counteract their illusory promises and false solutions, the Church in Zambia needs programmes offering the faithful *clear and correct catechesis* which will give them a deeper grasp of the saving truths of the faith and of the true promises of Christ, which alone are trustworthy. In such programmes, a more extensive use of audiovisual religious materials and radio broadcasts by your Conference and individual Dioceses may prove helpful. A great effort of this kind will also ensure that lay people in Zambia give ever more visible *public witness to their Catholic faith*, becoming the true evangelizers in their families and communities.

Your efforts to create small Christian communities at the local level has done much to increase *the active involvement of the laity in parish and diocesan life*. In fact, such communities have become a characteristic trait of the Church's dynamic presence in your country. I cannot fail to mention two important associations working to foster the various lay movements of the apostolate now active in Zambia: the *National Council for Laity* and the *National Council for Catholic Women*. These are also signs of the continued growth of the Church in your country, and they show that you yourselves, dear Brothers, have taken to heart the words of the Rite of Episcopal Ordination: "As a father and a brother, love all those whom God places in your care.... Encourage the faithful to work with you in your apostolic task; listen willingly to what they have to say".

Dear Brothers, these are the brief thoughts that I share with you today, seeking to offer every encouragement in the Lord and to strengthen you in your ministry to his people. As your country moves into its second century of Christian faith and prepares to embark upon the third millennium, the challenge for Zambia is to show itself a Christian nation, not just by virtue of an official proclamation, but because yours is a country where the Christian faith is lived in word and deed,

where the law of love holds sway, and where the Lord's command to "let your light shine before all, so that seeing your good works they may give glory to God" (cf. *Mt* 5:16) is faithfully observed by all who bear his name. I commend you and the Catholic people of Zambia to the loving intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church. As you invoke her holy name, may you be led to ever greater service of Christ her Son.

To you and to the priests, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing.