



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF CONGO
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

Saturday 9 June 2001

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I welcome you with joy during your *ad limina* visit. Your meetings with the Successor of Peter and those who work with him are an important opportunity to show the communion with the universal Church of yourselves and of your Congolese Dioceses. I hope that you will find here the encouragement and comfort you need to carry out your episcopal ministry in your country.

I thank the President of your Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Anatole Milandou of Brazzaville for presenting to me on your behalf the great problems facing the Congolese Church and people today.

When you return to your Dioceses, take back to your priests, religious, catechists and all the faithful the affectionate greeting of the Pope who is close to each one in spirit and in prayer. Convey to all your compatriots my cordial wishes for a future of peace and reconciliation, so that they may all live in rediscovered security and brotherhood.

2. After having lived through a tragic period which claimed many victims, forcing a large number of your compatriots into exile and causing widespread material destruction, your country has made great efforts to enable all the Congolese to live in safety and achieve national harmony once and for all. During this period of troubles you made your voice heard, appealing for peace and reconciliation. Very recently too, you addressed a stirring message to your faithful and to all people of goodwill on dialogue, truth and justice as ways to peace. I thank you and your communities for your dedication to your people in their distress and disarray. Throughout these tragic events, the Church and her apostolic workers had a wonderful approach to helping the peoples in their common trial. However, we cannot but regret the excessive number of priests and

men and women religious who left the country during this turbulent period. I warmly hope that they may soon be able to resume their places in your Dioceses and courageously accept a pastoral mission among their fellow citizens.

Today, at a stage in your country's life that is crucial to its future, I encourage you to be more and more daring in opening up ways of reconciliation to all the nation's children and in encouraging Catholics and all people of goodwill to be tireless peacemakers.

Continue to proclaim the Gospel the Lord left us with enthusiasm. Be insistent in inviting the faithful of your Dioceses to return to Christ, teach them to fix their eyes on his face which reveals the Father's love for all men and women! The tragic experience of the Congolese must incite Catholics to look ahead with determination and embark on courageous apostolic initiatives, firmly rooted in contemplation and prayer.

3. To express the deep communion that unites you in this apostolic task, it is indispensable to continue developing true loyalty among Pastors, especially by giving due importance to the Bishops' Conference, a place for the brotherly comparison of ideas and for collaboration with a view to the common good of your particular Churches. By being ever closer to your priests and faithful and present and active in your Dioceses, you will be able to rebuild communities torn apart by war, to care for wounded hearts and to help all those entrusted to your care to progress on the paths of the Gospel.

As the Second Vatican Council forcefully emphasized, "As spiritual guides of their flocks, Bishops should be zealous in promoting the sanctity of their clergy, their religious and their laity according to the vocation of the individual, remembering that they are under an obligation to give an example of holiness in charity, humility and simplicity of life" (Decree *Christus Dominus*, n. 15). Indeed, the responsibility for sanctification that is entrusted to Bishops is of primary importance for the existence of the Church and all her members. In this context, I invite you to pay special attention to your priests who cooperate with you in the mission to help the People of God progress in holiness.

Be attentive to the human and spiritual difficulties they encounter in their daily lives! Their example of spiritual and moral life must be a clear sign to everyone of the Gospel and its requirements. Bring them the comfort and support of your friendship, especially in the most trying periods for their ministry. May whoever sins find in you a father who faces problems charitably but who can also be firm at the right moment!

4. In the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte* which I addressed to the entire Church at the end of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I expressed the hope that Catholic communities might rediscover the same enthusiasm as the earliest Christians in announcing Christ's Gospel and in witnessing to it with the whole of their lives. In fact, it is urgently necessary to give evangelization a breath of fresh air. In the particular period your country is living through, it needs a vigorous

pastoral ministry: "Christian families show convincingly that it is possible to live marriage fully in keeping with God's plan and with the true good of the human person - of the spouses, and of the children who are more fragile. Families themselves must become increasingly conscious of the care due to children, and play an active role in the Church and in society in safeguarding their rights" (n. 47). Violence and the dispersion of families in recent years have had serious effects on the unity of the nuclear family and on respect for human dignity. Thus Christians need to be more and more aware of their responsibility to safeguard and develop the essential values of the family and of Christian marriage. Special attention must be paid to the formation of consciences so that the whole of society respects, defends and promotes the dignity of every human person, at every moment and at every stage of his life (cf. Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, n. 81). Indeed, Catholics must witness more powerfully than ever that all human life has a sacred and inviolable character from its very beginning. To encourage this awareness, it is essential to develop broad educational action and to take practical steps, especially with the young generations. This will enable everyone to understand and accept the Gospel requirements of respect for human life and its dignity, which will guide each person and be the precious means for him to make his life a complete success.

5. The problems experienced by young people which, due are above all to conditions of great poverty or to the consequences of violence which often scar them even more deeply, must spur Pastors to develop a youth ministry adapted to their situations and the problems that beset them. I hope that the Church will help them overcome every temptation of violence, so that their inner desire to change their lives may become a genuine commitment to building a new society without division, opposition, or discrimination, a commitment that is based on brotherhood and solidarity.

May they boldly demonstrate that all people are brothers and sisters, because they have the same Father who passionately loves them! Tell the young people of the Congo that, in his heart and in his prayers, the Pope is close to them and their daily anxieties and asks them never to despair of life!

Through her involvement in schools and in education in general, the Church makes an important contribution to the human, moral and spiritual formation of young people. To cooperate more and more effectively in the entire society's search for the common good and for the reduction of the differences that all too often still divide it, young people must be taught mutual respect between individuals, between human groups and between religious communities, and to foster the spirit of acceptance and dialogue. I hope that through a fervent witness to Christian life teachers may pass on really strong convictions to the young, to help them put up a brave front in difficulties and to play their proper part in national and ecclesial life.

6. Through you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I would like to tell your priests of my esteem for them and of my most cordial encouragement in their priestly commitment in conditions that are often very trying. I invite them to develop an apostolic spirit that will prompt them to respond generously to the demands of the mission, particularly in the most humble places that require self-

detachment and daily fidelity to the Lord who has called them to follow him. I keenly hope that they may all, without forgetting those who live outside their own country, be constantly and deeply aware of the great pastoral needs of their brothers and sisters who are waiting in their Dioceses to hear the Gospel proclamation and receive the sacraments of the Church.

Celibacy, which priests have freely chosen, is a remarkable expression of their generous and unconditional attachment to Christ. In respecting this canonical obligation, may they live it in a joyful and transparent way, making it a prophetic witness of the boundless love that unites them to Christ!

An intense spiritual life accompanied by a continuously rigorous formation will enable them to respond serenely and without reticence to this evangelical requirement which the Church asks of them.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, you know how important the formation of future priests is for the future of the Church. I encourage you to give your seminaries a preferential place in your pastoral priorities, so that young people may serenely discern their vocation and receive a solid human, spiritual, moral, intellectual and pastoral formation. A substantial part of the effectiveness of formation depends on the quality of the formation teams, appreciated for their competence and their example of priestly life. This is why I invite you to make the necessary sacrifices to choose with care the priests most suited to this office.

7. I am grateful to the congregations and institutes of consecrated life for their constant and courageous commitment to the service of the Church in Congo, especially through the generous work of their members to further education, formation, health care or other forms of social assistance. I urge religious leaders to give a new impetus to the diocesan and national structures for dialogue. In fact, it is important that in close relation with the Bishops and with respect for their own charisms, that all may work fraternally for the Church's one mission and thus make their own contribution to ecclesial communion.

In a society which has known so many ruptures and misunderstandings, consecrated people have a special vocation to proclaiming "by the witness of their lives, the value of Christian fraternity and the transforming power of the Good News, which makes it possible to see all people as sons and daughters of God, and inspires a self-giving love towards everyone, especially the least of our brothers and sisters" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 51). May all the communities of consecrated people, motivated by a fervent spirit of prayer and openness to all, truly be places of acceptance, communion and hope!

8. I know the Church is present and active, especially through her national and international charitable agencies, among people afflicted with serious diseases such as AIDS, refugees from neighbouring countries and, in general, all who are suffering the consequences of poverty. I thank

and warmly encourage all those who, so generously and selflessly, put themselves at the service of their brethren. In this way they are witnesses, on the Church's behalf, of Christ's charity to society's weakest and neediest members.

I want to address a special message of peace and hope to all the faithful of your Dioceses and to all the Congolese. To overcome the consequences of war, violence and hatred and achieve true reconciliation, the only path to take together is that of brotherhood and solidarity. May all men or women be able to live, in unity, the rich diversity of their origins, cultures, languages, traditions and mentalities. May brothers never again rise up against one another! Trusting to the full, go ahead with hope! God is faithful, he never deserts his children.