



The Holy See

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

Saturday, 20 September 2003

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brother Bishops,*

1. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction" (2 Cor 1:3-4). With these words of Saint Paul I greet you, *the Bishops of Uganda*, as you come on pilgrimage to the Tombs of the Apostles. Your presence here today fills me with joy and brings back memories of my visit ten years ago to Uganda. Vividly etched in my mind are the various encounters with you and the faithful of your local communities, especially our gathering at the Shrine of the Ugandan Martyrs to celebrate the holy mysteries of our faith on "the very ground made sacred by their deaths" (Meeting with Ugandan Bishops, Kampala, 7 February 1993, 9).

Our meetings over these days are moments of grace for all of us as we rejoice in and strengthen the *bonds of fraternal communion* that unite us in the task of bearing witness to the Lord and spreading the Good News of salvation. To those among your number who are making their first *ad limina* visit to Rome I offer a special word of greeting. The last time the Ugandan Bishops were here as a body, there was but one ecclesiastical province in your country; now there are four metropolitan sees counting a total of 19 dioceses. This is a very positive sign of the work being done for Christ, *the building up of his Church* in your country, and is yet another cause for praising the holy name of Jesus (cf. Phil 2:10-11).

2. Sadly, parts of your country are currently embroiled in situations of *armed conflict and anarchy*. In the north especially, the bane of warfare is bringing untold misery, suffering and death, striking out even at the Church and targeting her ministers and her children. In the west and the northeast too episodes of violence and hostility afflict the land, draining the life and energies of your people. Assuring you and your people of my spiritual closeness in these dire circumstances, I join you in *condemning every act of bloodshed and destruction*. I make an urgent appeal to the parties

involved to reject aggression and to commit themselves to working with their fellow citizens, courageously and in truth, to build a future of hope, justice and peace for all Ugandans.

The present political and social climate is a clarion call for concrete and far-reaching expressions of the *collegial responsibility and communion* that unite you in the service of the one "household of God" (Eph 2:19). I urge you to do all that you can to foster among yourselves a true *spirit of solidarity and fraternal concern*, especially by *sharing resources*, both material and spiritual, with other local Churches that are in need.

3. As Bishops, you have a serious duty to address issues of particular importance for the social, economic, political and cultural life of your country, to *make the Church ever more effectively present* in those areas. Working out the implications of the Gospel for Christian life in the world and applying it to new situations is crucial to your ecclesial leadership: this is the time for Catholics – together with other Christians – to bring the freshness of the Gospel to the struggle to *defend and promote the fundamental values upon which a society truly worthy of man is built*.

In this regard, I wish to encourage the efforts of your Conference in the spheres of health care, education, and development; these serve to show clearly the *Church's commitment to the integral well-being of her sons and daughters and of all Ugandans* regardless of religious creed. Worthy of particular mention are the various HIV/AIDS initiatives that, in complete harmony with the Church's teaching, seek to assist those affected by this disease and to keep the public duly informed about it.

4. If the Church is to assume her proper place in Ugandan society, suitable *formation of the laity* must be a priority in your mission as preachers and teachers. This spiritual and doctrinal formation should aim at helping laymen and women to carry out their prophetic role in a society that does not always recognize or accept the truth and values of the Gospel. The laity are also to be effectively *involved in the life of the parish and diocese, in pastoral and administrative structures* (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 90). Your priests in particular should be prepared to welcome this more active role of the laity and to assist them in carrying it out. Especially important in this same context are efforts aimed at *overcoming tribal conflicts and ethnic tensions*; for such rivalries have no place in the Church of Christ and serve only to weaken the overall fabric of society.

It is in fact the local Churches that "have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29). This is the "pastoral revitalization" that I wrote about in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (*ibid.*), and it involves a *renewal of the Christian community and of society that passes by way of the family*. The strengthening of the *communion of persons in the family* is the great antidote to the self-indulgence and sense of isolation so prevalent today. All the more reason, then, to take to heart once more the urgent invitation that my predecessor Pope Paul VI addressed to every Bishop: "Work ardently and incessantly for the safeguarding and the holiness of marriage, so that it will always be lived in its

entire human and Christian fullness" (*Humanae Vitae*, 30).

5. In seeking to meet the challenges of the future, attention to *young people* remains of paramount importance. "The future of the world and the Church belongs to the younger generation . . . Christ expects great things from young people" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 58). As the celebrations of World Youth Day clearly confirm, *young people have a keen capacity 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 that will be theirs, and which in some ways already are theirs.

A strong commitment to *Catholic schools* is a particularly effective way of ensuring the proper formation of Ugandan youth. These schools should seek to provide the kind of educational environment where children and adolescents can grow to maturity imbued with love of Christ and the Church. The specific *identity of Catholic schools* should be reflected throughout the curriculum and in every area of school life, in order that they may be communities in which the *faith is nourished* and pupils are prepared for their *mission in the Church and in society*. It is important also to continue to seek ways to bring *sound moral and religious teaching* to the public schools as well, and to promote in public opinion a consensus regarding the importance of such training. This service, which can result from *closer cooperation with the government*, is a significant form of active Catholic participation in the social life of your country, especially as it is provided without religious or ethnic discrimination and with respect for the rights of all.

6. As your local Churches seek to fulfil the missionary mandate received from the Lord himself (cf. Mt 28:19), we cannot fail to *give thanks for the 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 *pastoral and theological formation* that firmly roots them in a solid spiritual tradition and prepares them to meet the complex problems that the modernization of society presents. I encourage you to continue your efforts to provide *qualified personnel* to staff your formation centres, especially your five Major Seminaries.

Turning to those who are your closest co-workers in the Lord's vineyard, I remind you to help your *priests* to grow always in appreciation of the unique privilege of acting *in persona Christi*. As they come to devote themselves ever more completely to their mission in *chastity and simplicity of life*, their work will increasingly become a source of immeasurable joy and peace. With regard to the loneliness that can sometimes accompany the pastoral ministry, your priests should be encouraged, as much as the local situation permits, to live in common and direct their efforts entirely towards the sacred ministry. They should come together as often as possible – both among themselves and with you, their spiritual father – for a fraternal exchange of ideas, counsel and fellowship (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 74).

The communities of *men and women religious* in Uganda also look to you for support and guidance: they too must be the object of your pastoral care and concern as shepherds of the flock that Christ has entrusted to you (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 45; *Christus Dominus*, 15; 35). Nor can we fail to mention the *catechists* who *play an essential part in meeting the spiritual needs* of your communities, especially in those areas where there are simply not enough priests to preach the Gospel and exercise the pastoral ministry. They therefore need to have a deep awareness of their role and should be helped in every possible way to meet their responsibilities and obligations towards their own families.

7. *Beloved Brothers in the Episcopacy*, I pray that our time together will confirm you in the faith and encourage you to persevere in the work of Christ, the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls (cf. 1 Pet 2:25). Walk always with those entrusted to your pastoral care, showing them a *father's love*, especially those suffering the scourge of violence, the pain of AIDS, the affliction of any other of a host of situations bringing hardship and difficulty. Make it your aim always to bring your people to an ever *deeper knowledge of their Christian faith and identity*. For it is thus that the Church will be ever better equipped to make the saving truth of the Gospel effectively present in Ugandan society.

Our hope and confidence – like that of the Holy Martyrs who, both in the south and in the north of the country, bore the ultimate witness to Christ – are founded on the power of the Risen Lord, whose saving grace "does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5). Invoking upon you and the faithful of your local communities the heavenly assistance of the Ugandan Martyrs, and commending you to the intercession of Mary, the Mother of the Church, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.