



The Holy See

***LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE ASSOCIATION
OF CENTRAL AFRICAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCES***

To Bishop Frédéric Rubwejanga of Kibungo
President of the Association of Central African Bishops' Conferences

1. At the time when an Extraordinary Assembly of the Association of Bishops' Conferences of Central Africa is meeting in Kigali, I cordially greet all the participants and offer them my best wishes for the success of this week of reflection and prayer, focused on formulating directives and pastoral approaches that aim at bringing peace to the region of the Great Lakes. Through you, I also greet all the people entrusted to your pastoral care who look forward to the establishment of a just and lasting peace in Central Africa.

We cannot forget the long drawn-out tragedy that has continued for so many years to afflict the Great Lakes region of Africa. The continued violence does not just contradict God's plan to gather his dispersed children together in unity. It also denies the vocation of the human person, to whom the Creator entrusted the responsibility for collaborating with his work, by his ongoing action on behalf of unconditional respect for life and for the dignity of every human being. Your countries have paid a heavy price for this spiral of violence and exclusion that engenders great poverty and instability, forcing the migration of entire populations. This logic of hatred and contempt of one's brother has corroded the roots of the human values necessary to build a world of solidarity and establish peaceful and fraternal relations. Today I would like to say again: No more war that destroys the desire to live in peace and fraternal acceptance! May courageous witnesses of new hope for the whole region be raised up in the region of the Great Lakes!

For the present, I invite pastors and faithful to open their hearts to the risen Christ, so that he may help them begin to look with greater hope at the immense challenges the region of the Great Lakes has to face in order to create the conditions for a lasting peace based on justice and forgiveness. In setting out with fresh zeal on the path of real individual and community conversion,

may they ever contribute to and encourage dialogue between individuals and cultures! The Church must become for all a place of real reconciliation, through the witness given by her own sons and daughters. Thus, forgiven and mutually reconciled, they will be able to bring to the world the forgiveness and reconciliation that Christ our Peace (cf. *Eph 2,14*), offers to humanity through his Church (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 79).

2. In the past years, major events have left their mark on the life of the Church in Africa and enabled her to gain a deeper knowledge of the nature and meaning of her mission to serve the human and spiritual development of those who live in Africa. By giving thanks for the gift of the Gospel, by growing in faith and by being open to continuous conversion, the People of God truly gives its mission a firm rooting in a dialogue of love with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, to renew its service of God and of the brethren. Through the work of evangelization it is invited to continue promoting the dialogue between God and humanity, to gather all believers into the one Family of God. With this vision, it cannot shrink from the challenge of dialogue that is "fundamentally the challenge of transforming relationships between individuals, nations and peoples in religious, political, economic, social and cultural life. It is the challenge of Christ's love for all people, a love that the disciple must reproduce in his own life" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 79).

3. To enable new relationships to be established between persons and institutions and to fulfil the just aspirations to peace, justice and solidarity, it is extremely important for the Church in your region to ask herself truthfully, about the credibility of your presentation of her message, and about the credibility of those who bear it: the witness of life is an essential condition for the real effectiveness of our preaching. Thus the credibility of the Church in Africa depends on the witness borne by her members, motivated by a profound evangelical and moral sense. By never failing to set an example to the Christian people, you will help the faithful in their constant struggle against the seeds of division and ethnic strife that weaken the Church's witness and stir up hatred of their brethren.

4. To foster respect for the fundamental rights of individuals and human groups to their integral development, the Catholic Church is called to commit herself alongside all people of good will to usher in a new epoch of peace, justice, and effective solidarity in the Great Lakes region. Since she is an expert in humanity, she must continue to watch over the developments under way, inviting Catholic communities with their pastors, to present boldly the moral and spiritual values necessary for a true change of mentality and heart. I encourage you to find the means to give Christians an appropriate formation in the human and Christian values, especially, by supporting families in their mission to educate youth. I urge you through your words and deeds to announce the Good News unflinchingly and to implant it in the cultures so that in the hearts of Christians and of their fellow countrymen this Word of life may give birth to the generous desire to collaborate in developing societies that are increasingly respectful of the common good of peoples.

5. Coming together in one hope with my Brothers in the Central African Episcopate and with all

those entrusted to their care, I speak again of my confidence in the Resurrection of Christ: the Saviour will never abandon you. He invites you each day to pass with him from death to life. Be custodians of the peace your peoples need! I also pray for everyone who may feel tempted to succumb to despair today, because of all the divisions that nourish sentiments of hatred and vengeance. Nor have I forgotten the silent victims of AIDS or malnutrition, or those who were struck by the tragic eruption of the Nyiragongo Volcano. I therefore invite the international community to continue without pause their efforts at concerted action and collaboration for the harshly tested peoples of Africa of the Great Lakes.

In this month of Mary, I entrust you and all the members of the Association of Central African Bishops' Conferences and the faithful of their dioceses to the maternal care of the Mother of the Saviour who was courageous in trial, and I cordially impart to you an affectionate Apostolic Blessing.

Vatican City, 2 May 2002.

JOHN PAUL II