



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE Episcopal Conference of Zaire
DURING ITS "Ad limina Apostolorum" VISIT**

Monday, 3 March 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to welcome you to the Vatican during your ad limina visit. Pastors of the Church in Zaire in the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Bukavu, Kisangani and Lubumbashi, through your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles, you have come to renew your commitment to the service of Christ's mission and of his Church, and to reinforce your bond of communion with the Successor of Peter.

You come from a country going through a deep, widespread crisis about which your Episcopal Conference has spoken several times. This crisis is seen in the corruption and insecurity, in the social injustice and ethnic antagonism, in the state of total neglect found in the education and health-care sectors, in hunger and epidemics.... In addition, there is now a war, involving your Dioceses in particular, with all its tragic consequences. What great suffering for Zairians! At this painful time I hope that you will find here the comfort and strength to pursue your episcopal mission with confidence among the people entrusted to you. I warmly thank Bishop Faustin Ngabu, President of the Episcopal Conference of Zaire, for his enlightening words about the life of the Church in your country. They show the hope of your communities despite their trials. I greet the priests, the religious, the catechists and all the faithful of your region with special affection and I encourage them to be, in adversity, true disciples of Christ.

And I would like to recall with deep feeling those among you who have heroically witnessed to the love of God to the very end: Archbishop Christophe Munzehirwa of Bukavu, several of your diocesan priests and religious as well as lay people who gave their lives to save those of their

brothers and sisters. As you yourselves said, it seems the Church “is the particular target in the events of the war and the present violence in Zaire” (*Message des Évêques de Zaire*, 31 January 1997). May these sacrifices be an incentive for the Church’s work in your region and obtain from God the benefits of peace and reconciliation for all the people!

2. You are concerned to be very close to the *priests*, your immediate co-workers. I am aware of the difficult situation which is often their lot. I warmly encourage them in their generous service to Christ and their brothers and sisters. The Church is deeply grateful to them for their ministry, which gives life and growth to the People of God in your country. I urge them to nurture “faithfulness to their vocation in the total gift of self to their mission and in full communion with their Bishop” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 97). May you yourselves be for each of them a father and guide in the priesthood, attentive to their life and their ministry!

Priests must be *models of Gospel life* within the Christian community, showing real consistency between what they proclaim and what they live. In their pastoral ministry they will take care to avoid “all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between the different ethnic groups” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 63). They will find the source of their *apostolic courage and faithfulness to the commitments of their ordination*, especially to deep love of Christ expressed by regular recourse to the sacraments and by prayer that unifies their life. I also invite them to rediscover more and more deeply the dignity and obligations of the priestly vocation, which exclude from the priest’s life activities that are not in harmony with it.

To respond ever more appropriately to the demands of the priestly ministry, *continuing formation* is an urgent necessity and must continue throughout his life, for it “helps the priest to be and act as a priest in the spirit and style of Jesus the Good Shepherd” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 73).

3. It is an essential responsibility of every Bishop to give priority concern to the *formation of future priests* and to seminary life. In fact, “the first representative of Christ in priestly formation is the Bishop” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 65). If seminaries are to be true communities of formation for the priesthood, it is indispensable that candidates be well known, to allow for *serious discernment of their motivation* before they are accepted, realizing that “the interior call of the Spirit needs to be recognized as the authentic call of the Bishop” (*ibid.*). A good level of *human, intellectual and moral formation* will enable the future priest to acquire sufficient maturity to live his priesthood with proven personal balance and to encourage the encounter between Christ and the people to whom he is sent. I invite you to be vigilant over the quality of the spiritual *formation* provided in seminaries. “For every priest his spiritual formation is the ‘core’ which unifies and gives life to his ‘being’ a priest and ‘acting’ as a priest” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 45). Future ministers of the Gospel must resolutely commit themselves to a path of holiness, if they are to become pastors according to the heart of God.

It is often very difficult to set up teams of *teachers and spiritual directors*. I fervently hope, despite the consequent sacrifices for other pastoral areas, that you will be able to make use of the worthiest priests who are the best suited to this ministry, so important for the Church's life and future. For this work it is necessary to train capable priests who are aware of the Church's real needs. Collaboration between Dioceses in the same region can help to deal more effectively with this issue.

4. As you pointed out in your reports, *religious life* has put down firm roots in your country, and more and more young people are responding to God's call. I rejoice with you in this grace which the Lord has granted his Church in Zaire. In this difficult period for your nation, the witness of consecrated persons must be especially emphasized: "A particular duty of the consecrated life is to remind the baptized of the *fundamental values* of the Gospel, by bearing 'splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the Beatitudes'" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 33).

I greet with special affection all the religious who with great self-sacrifice are dedicated to serving their poor, sick, displaced or exiled brothers and sisters, or those who in various ways and in difficult situations are working to establish greater justice and brotherhood, sometimes at the risk of their lives. With all my heart I encourage them to continue their work in a spirit of total self-sacrifice. "Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 110). The world today needs their prophetic witness of service to God and of love for mankind, where the Lord's presence is revealed among people who suffer. This prophetic witness, which is expressed through *community life* as a sign of ecclesial communion, must be extended by true *brotherhood* lived in the diocesan presbyterate between religious and members of the secular clergy.

In your country, several institutes of diocesan right have arisen in recent years, expressing the vitality of your local Churches. I hope that the progress of these communities is closely followed, especially with regard to the *adequate formation of their members*, so that they may develop according to the norms of consecrated life prescribed by the Church. The Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* will be a valuable aid for reflecting on the meaning and mission of religious life in the world today.

5. Society's economic and social problems have a negative impact on many *young people*. In your reports, you have often stressed the injuries which scar them and their painful consequences for the future. *The pastoral care of young people* is one of your main concerns. The Catholic Church's schools and universities make an important contribution to the human and spiritual formation of the younger generations, in view of your country's enormous needs. You also want to show attention to those who do not have access to education or have dropped out of school, and to those who are out of work, left to their own devices and without hope for the future. So many obstacles to their development have yet to be overcome! As I encourage you to be ever closer to

them and to listen to their questions, together with the Fathers of the African Synod I would again like to make a heartfelt plea on their behalf: “It is urgently necessary to find a solution for their impatience to take part in the life of the nation and of the Church” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 115); and I renew to Zaire’s young people the appeal made by that Synod to all the young people of Africa: take in hand the development of your country, love the culture of your people, and work for its renewal with fidelity to your cultural heritage, through a sharpening of your scientific and technical expertise, and above all through the witness of your Christian faith (cf. *ibid.*)! *I invite them not to lose heart*, but to face the challenges in their life with the strength Christ gives them, striving to establish true human solidarity in order to build the future. In this world they are called to live fraternally, not as a utopia, but as a real possibility. In this society, they are called as true missionaries of Christ to build the civilization of love (cf. *Message for the 12th World Youth Day*, n. 8).

6. In your Dioceses, the faithful must be guided to live and co-operate with their *brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations*. “United to Jesus Christ by their witness in Africa, Catholics are invited to develop an ecumenical dialogue with all their baptized brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations, in order that the unity for which Christ prayed may be achieved, and in order that their service to the peoples of the continent may make the Gospel more credible in the eyes of those who are searching for God” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 65). However, so that they may truly lead Christ’s faithful on the paths of unity, it is appropriate that their fraternal relations with other Christians be built up in sincere, reciprocal knowledge and with respect of what constitutes the community to which each belongs.

7. *The sects* and new religious movements are a challenge today which the Church in your region must resolutely face. In order to permit Catholics to make the necessary discernment and to answer the questions posed by the activity of these groups, it is of the utmost importance to guide the faithful to a renewed awareness of their Christian identity by deepening their faith in Christ, the one Saviour of mankind. By simply and clearly presenting to them the Gospel message centred on the person of Jesus Christ living and acting in his Church, they will be helped to achieve true conversion of heart. A good knowledge of the word of God, rooted in Tradition, will lead them to acquire an authentic spirituality and to discover the riches of personal and community prayer, with the inculturation which enables each person to feel he is fully participating. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is an excellent aid in this task of formation. Lastly, an effort must be made to reinforce the unity of the People of God in the ecclesial communities, where the accent will be put on “care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 63).

8. Dear Brother Bishops, as your country experiences a time of great trial and is at a turning point for its future, I strongly encourage the Catholics of Zaire to help *build a harmonious society* with their compatriots, where the dignity of all citizens will be equally recognized and respected. I hope that *the elections planned for the coming months* will be able to take place and that they will allow

your country to establish a true constitutional State. The Christian communities must be particularly sensitized with regard to their responsibility in promoting justice and in the defence of the basic human rights.

For many years and again recently, you have addressed all Zairians, speaking on behalf of those who have no voice, to recall the demands of justice and peace, as well as to encourage and form the people entrusted to your care. I know the courageous role played by Catholics in the slow process of democratization which your country has undertaken, as well as in seeking dialogue for a better society. Through this involvement *the Church in no way wishes to serve partisan politics*. She hopes to encourage the search for the authentic good of man and of his life in society.

Thus I invite you to persevere in proclaiming the Gospel message of hope, encouraging the faithful to a knowledge of the *Church's social doctrine*, in order to work effectively at achieving justice and solidarity. The Christian communities must also engage with ever greater determination *in working for reconciliation among all*, rejecting every form of discrimination and violence that destroys man and the community. "In a certain sense every baptized person must consider himself a 'minister of reconciliation' since, having been reconciled with God and the brethren, he is called to build peace with the power of truth and justice" (*Message for the World of Peace Day 1997*, n. 7; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 18/25 December 1996, p. 8). The present season of preparation for Easter reminds us of the urgent need for a return to God and for conversion of heart as the way to peace.

9. In my thoughts and prayers I am close to the victims of the war which is spreading in the eastern part of your country. *I urgently renew my call for the fighting to cease*. I keenly hope that the parties affected by the crisis in the Great Lakes region will lose no time in initiating *dialogue and negotiation* to find a peaceful solution to the tragic problems that exist, while respecting the principles of the inviolability of internationally recognized boundaries and of each State's sovereignty and territorial integrity. As you wrote recently, "national unity remains to be preserved, supported and reinforced" (*Message des Évêques de Zaïre*, 31 January 1997). To this end, the international community — including the regional African organizations — must "increase [their] political activity" (*Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, 13 January, n. 3; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 15 January 1997, p. 7), at the same time finding rapid solutions to the tragic human and moral problem of the massive number of Rwandan refugees living in Zaïre, in camps or scattered in the forest, as well as of the multitudes of displaced Zairians. No person of goodwill can ignore the fate of these people, who, in the regions affected by the conflict, are living in conditions which are an affront to human dignity, and whose lives are constantly in danger. No one can remain indifferent!

I forcefully deplore the attacks on individuals as well as *the pillaging and destruction* of which Church property and institutions in many of your Dioceses have been victims, when, in many cases they were the only social structures still functioning. I invite you courageously to begin

repairing the institutions that permit the Church to carry out her mission effectively, and to be an expression of Christ's love for the poorest and most abandoned. For real social assistance, as has been done on several occasions, I hope that the particular Churches in Zaire, as well as the universal Church, will agree to pool their resources generously in *solidarity with your communities*.

10. At the end of our meeting, dear Brother Bishops, I urge you to confidently continue your struggle for peace and your commitment to establishing brotherhood. As we prepare for the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, meditating this year, with the whole Church in Zaire, on the person of Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of the world, be *fervent witnesses of the hope* he brings to our humanity, for "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5)! Turning to the Immaculate Virgin and to those who, like Bl. Anuarite and Bl. Isidore Bakanja, are courageous models of faith and love for the Church in your land, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to each of you and to all the members of your Dioceses, as I pray the Lord of peace to lavish an abundance of his gifts on the whole Zairian people.

© Copyright 1997 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana