



# The Holy See

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## **ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF TOGO ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Friday, 2 July 1999*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. I am particularly happy to welcome you, Bishops of the Catholic Church in Togo, as you make your *ad limina* visit. Your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles is a privileged occasion offered for you to strengthen within you the gifts received from the Lord so that you can fulfil the charge you have received to teach, sanctify and govern the People of God (cf. Decree *Christus Dominus*, n. 2). May your meetings with the Bishop of Rome and his assistants be important moments of ecclesial communion that will help you in your mission at the service of the people of Togo!

I warmly thank the President of your Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Philippe Kpodzro of Lomé, for his kind words to me in your name. They express the devotion of your communities to the Successor of Peter. When you return to your Dioceses, please convey my affectionate greeting to the priests, religious, catechists and laity whose Pastors you are. May God give everyone the strength to express fervently the faith received in Baptism. Through your faithful I address all the people of Togo, ardently hoping that they will advance with courage and hope on the paths of true human and spiritual progress.

2. In recent years three Dioceses have been established in your country. I cordially greet their new Bishops and rejoice in the vitality of the Church in Togo, of which these sees are a sign. I thank God with you for the gift of faith which he never ceases to pour out upon your people. For you and for all Catholics it is a summons to holiness of life and to bear an even more active witness to Christ, in order to pursue with renewed zeal a profound evangelization of society. By relying on the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, you will be able to find new ways, so that with the Holy Spirit's help you can contribute to the building and growth of the Church as God's Family, the community of Christ's disciples, united, warm and open to all.

To fulfil this heavy responsibility, Pastors are called resolutely to follow Christ, who carried out his Father's plan of love for mankind by serving the lowliest of his brethren. Through their deep mutual communion the members of the Episcopal Conference bear an outstanding witness to the unity of the Church's mission and find effective help in fulfilling their pastoral ministry. I also hope that the Dioceses will show true solidarity to each other through an appropriate division of apostolic personnel, which will enable them to aid those with the least resources. By giving priority to your spiritual mission of service to the faithful and to people of good will, you must lead them on the paths of holiness, so that everyone can fulfil the vocation he has received from his Creator!

Moreover, as I wrote in the Encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, carrying out the ministry of evangelization in the social field is part of the Church's prophetic role (cf. n. 41). Indeed, the proclamation of the Gospel message to the men and women of our time calls for attention to the realities of their daily life. It is the Church's duty to contribute to the common good, together with all people of good will, so that the dignity and legitimate rights of every person may be more and more respected. I therefore strongly urge your communities to bear witness always and everywhere to the Gospel values which the Lord has bequeathed to us. May they remember that Christ sent us "the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father" (Jn 15:26), thus reminding us of the essential importance of truth in building their personal lives and the life of society! Without it nothing can survive for long, and man cannot find true freedom. In fact, "in a world without truth, freedom loses its foundation and man is exposed to the violence of passion and to manipulation, both open and hidden" (Encyclical *Centesimus annus*, n. 46).

3. Over a century ago the Good News of Christ was proclaimed in your land. I thank God with you for the devotion, at times heroic, of all the men and women missionaries who made it possible for the Church in Togo to be planted and to grow. I once again express the esteem and encouragement of Peter's Successor to the men and women who are continuing the work of those Gospel pioneers.

I extend my cordial greetings to your priests who, with you, are responsible for a large part of the work of evangelization today. May they too take as their model of apostolic life Christ, who came to serve and not to be served! May their ministry, whose joys and hopes, as well as its efforts and difficulties are known to me, be a generous and disinterested service to the Church's mission among all people! I strongly invite them to unify and enliven their priestly life and work by remaining attached to Christ as his friends in the intimacy of their whole being. In this way they will offer an experience of Christian and spiritual life to others. I therefore invite them to deepen their encounter with Christ by "faithful meditation on the word of God, active participation in the Church's holy mysteries and the service of charity to the 'little ones'" (Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 46). In times of temptation and discouragement, it is through a solid spiritual life, based on this personal and daily encounter with the Lord, that they will find the strength to live generously the commitments they made on their day of ordination. I also hope that they will revive the gift they have received from God by giving a proper place to continuing

formation. In fact, it is indispensable for discerning and following the Lord's will faithfully. It is also an act of love and justice to the People of God whose servants they are (cf. *ibid.*, n. 70).

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, it is your particular task to be concerned with priestly vocations, so that the Gospel may be proclaimed everywhere. This is an essential dimension of the pastoral care of your Dioceses. The formation and spiritual guidance of candidates for the priesthood often calls for great sacrifices to be made. Be assured that with God's grace they will bear fruit! The current situation demands serious discernment, so that seminarians will be sufficiently aware that the way to which they are committing themselves requires the total renunciation of self and of the search for all personal advancement, so that they can become "convinced and fervent ministers of the "new evangelization", faithful and generous servants of Jesus Christ and of the human family" (*ibid.*, n. 10).

I also greet the men and women religious who are involved in the Church's mission in your country. By leading a life of complete devotion to the Father, held fast by Christ and enlivened by the Spirit, they make a particularly profound contribution to the world's renewal (cf. Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita consecrata*, n. 25). To give their charism solid roots and to develop it in ecclesial life, they must show clearly the specific nature of the gift they have received from God for the good of the entire Church. It is through their entire being, more than their way of acting, that men and women religious must foster in the baptized a constant awareness of their need to respond with holiness of life to the love which God never ceases to offer them. Thus by living their commitments to the full they will meet their contemporaries' aspirations by showing them the ways of genuinely seeking God.

4. In your quinquennial reports, you stressed the importance of catechists in establishing and enlivening Christian communities, in close relationship with their Bishops and priests. Please convey the Pope's gratitude to them all for their generous work at the service of the Gospel and his encouragement that through an exemplary personal and family life, they will be true witnesses of the message they proclaim. Be fathers to them, attentive to their needs, and give them the necessary moral and material support. Their spiritual and doctrinal formation is a primary requirement so that they can competently and responsibly provide the service asked of them in the community.

5. The Church's vitality depends on each Christian's response to God's call to grow and bear fruit. For this reason, it is necessary that the laity receive a solid formation whose "fundamental objective ... is an ever-clearer discovery of one's vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfil one's mission" (Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, n. 58). This formation must enable each one to unify his own life, to live and proclaim his faith genuinely. In fact, ignorance in the area of religion is all too often exploited by esoteric groups or sects to attract believers who are not firmly rooted in their faith.

The integral formation given to lay people must also help them be citizens who fulfil their responsibilities in social life. Actually it must "aim to provide Christians not only with technical expertise in passing on more clearly the content of the faith but also with a profound personal conviction enabling them to bear effective witness to it in daily life" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 77). In society lay people must engage in many forms of action to promote the common good. This also involves the difficult commitment to defending and promoting justice, and to reinforcing an authentic democracy which allows everyone to feel he is in effective control of his own future in the nation.

6. The serious issues concerning Christian marriage and family life are challenges which the Church in your region is facing. It is therefore an important task for you to teach the faithful the fundamental values of marriage and the family. The unity of the couple is a requirement of life which respects God's plan as it was revealed from the beginning. It is also an expression of the equal personal dignity of man and woman, who "in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive" (Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 19). The Church must offer constant spiritual assistance to those who have already chosen to enter the community of Christ's disciples, but are living in marital situations that do not permit them to receive the sacrament of Baptism. I strongly encourage you to welcome these people with great pastoral care and to be attentive to their needs, to enable them to advance on the difficult path of the complete acceptance of the Gospel message, with justice and charity for all concerned. I hope that the faithful will become deeply aware of the dignity of Christian marriage and recognize its indissolubility as "a fruit, a sign and a requirement of the absolutely faithful love that God has for man and that the Lord Jesus has for the Church" (*ibid.*, n. 20). May Christian families be models of unity and shared love in the eyes of all! May they not be discouraged by difficulties, but find in their communion with Christ and in mutual help within the Church the strength to remain faithful!

7. For the Gospel to be fully incarnated in your land, true inculturation is necessary. It is in fact indispensable to give everyone the opportunity to accept Christ with the whole of his being and his culture, to reach full union with God. I therefore encourage you in your efforts to help transform your people's authentic values by integrating them into Christianity and by thus firmly rooting the Christian faith in your culture. The Church's mission among the nations also calls for developing fraternal relations with all people. In your country relations with Muslims and the followers of the Traditional Religion are generally good. I therefore urge you to pursue the dialogue of life which is so necessary for maintaining a climate of harmony and solidarity between the different communities and for working together to improve the living conditions of the nation's people.

Moreover, the numerous forms of poverty which affect the people of your region have prompted you to develop social programmes to serve the most underprivileged, without distinction of origin or religion. I offer my warm encouragement to those who are working selflessly to alleviate the sufferings of their brothers and sisters, as well as those who help educate the young. Through their commitment the Church seeks to be the effective sign among all people of God's boundless

love for them.

8. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, as this fraternal meeting comes to an end, I would like to encourage you to look to the future with trust, in renewed fidelity to Christ who "fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling" (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 22). I invite the young people of Togo in particular to follow the way that the Lord Jesus shows them. There they will find the light and strength to advance on the paths of life and to build generously the civilization of love, where everyone will recognize one another as brothers and sisters called to the same destiny. There are only a few months left before the opening of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. For the Church in Togo may this time of grace be an occasion of deep spiritual renewal and intense awareness of her responsibility to proclaim the Good News of salvation, especially through a fervent witness of Gospel life! I entrust all your communities to the motherly protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, asking her to guide their steps to meeting her Son. I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and extend it to the priests, religious, catechists and all the faithful of your Dioceses.