



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE NEW AMBASSADOR
OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA
TO THE HOLY SEE***

Thursday, 14 December 2000

Mr Ambassador,

As you present the Letters of Credence by which you are appointed Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the Holy See I offer you good wishes and welcome you to the Vatican. This occasion, as well as the cordial meeting which I had three months ago with your President, His Excellency Olusegun Obasanjo, rekindle the memories of my Pastoral Visit to your country in 1998: the people of Nigeria remain dear to me and ever close to my heart. I ask you to convey to President Obasanjo my greetings and the assurance of my prayers for the nation, especially at this time when there have been tensions and fresh outbreaks of violence in different parts of the country.

Indeed, the Federal Republic of Nigeria is facing a very delicate and even critical moment in its history. The transition from military rule to a democratically elected government was made more than a year ago, yet, as Your Excellency has observed, the challenges remain daunting. The individual peoples and States continue to struggle with various problems, both old and new: ethnic rivalries and religious antagonism, erupting in violent clashes which have already claimed many lives, represent a major obstacle to the continuing development and well-being of Nigeria; corruption, sometimes rampant, at various levels of public administration further compounds the difficulties of an already preoccupying situation. These difficulties pose serious threats to progress along the path of national unity and solidarity, and the country's social equilibrium itself is placed at risk.

The present moment therefore presents an urgent call to all Nigerians to work together to rid society of everything that offends the dignity of the human person or violates human rights. This means reconciling differences, overcoming ethnic strife, and injecting honesty, efficiency and competence into all aspects of life in society. In the Nigeria of the new millennium, there should be no place for intimidation and domination of the poor and the weak, for arbitrary exclusion of

individuals and groups from political life, for the misuse of authority or the abuse of power. In fact, the key to resolving economic, political, cultural and ideological conflicts — whether in Nigeria or in Africa as a whole — is justice; and justice is not complete without commitment to a real and effective solidarity, without an attitude of humble, generous service to the common good.

It is precisely to foster such attitudes and to help peoples, states and nations to build a world ever more united in the bonds of friendship, brotherhood and solidarity that the Holy See is actively present in the international community. The Catholic Church, in fact, is a ready and eager partner with all Nigerians as they strive to bring about the conditions necessary for a more just and peaceful society. In fact, both the Church and the political community, though independent and self-governing, work for the personal and social well-being of the same human beings. For her part, the Church "contributes to the wider application of justice and charity within and between nations. By preaching the truth of the Gospel and shedding light on all areas of human activity through her teaching and the example of the faithful, she shows respect for the political freedom and responsibility of citizens and fosters these values" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 76).

Chief among these freedoms and responsibilities, and the cornerstone of all human rights, is freedom of religion. For this freedom is an irreplaceable component of the good of individuals and of society as a whole. I am pleased, therefore, to hear you reconfirm your Government's commitment to work for tolerance, peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among the different religious traditions present in Nigeria. Indeed, the freedom of individuals in their quest for truth and in the corresponding profession of their religious faith must be specifically guaranteed within the juridical structure of society. That is to say, religious freedom must be recognized and confirmed by civil law as a personal and inalienable right and must be safeguarded from any kind of coercion by individuals, social groups or any human power (cf. *Message for the 1988 World Day of Peace*, 1). This right to freedom of religion is not just one human right among many others but is rather a most fundamental right. Its observance is a true measure of a society's commitment to uphold and defend the dignity and rights of all its members.

It is this context of religious freedom which will enable the Catholic faithful in Nigeria to continue to cooperate with their fellow citizens in building the nation's well-being, progress and peace. Not only does an environment of religious tolerance enable all citizens to be actively involved in national life, but it also allows the Church to continue her mission of service to all Nigerians, regardless of religious affiliation, especially in the areas of education, health care and social services.

Mr Ambassador, as you begin your mission I assure you of every cooperation and assistance as you fulfill your duties. I am confident that your efforts will serve to further strengthen the friendly relations which already exist between the Holy See and the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Upon Your Excellency and all the people of your country I invoke the abundant blessing of Almighty God.

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