



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BURKINA FASO AND NIGER
ON THEIR AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM VISIT**

Tuesday, 17 June 2003

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. With great joy I welcome you who are entrusted with the pastoral care of the Catholic Church in Burkina Faso and Niger, at the time when you are experiencing this important moment in your episcopal ministry, the *ad limina* visit. You have come to pray at the tomb of the Apostles Peter and Paul, to increase within you the apostolic zeal that motivated them and brought them here as witnesses of the Gospel of Christ, to the point of the total gift of their lives. You have come to meet the Successor of Peter and those who work with him, to find in them the support you need for your pastoral mission.

I thank Bishop Philippe Ouédraogo of Ouahigouya, President of your Bishops' Conference, for the kind words he has just addressed to me. I greet in particular those of you who have been appointed bishops since the last *ad limina* visit. I also express my affection for your diocesan communities, whose generosity and Gospel dynamism I know. I ask the Holy Spirit, poured out upon the Apostles, to help you put out into the deep and to support you in your service to the people entrusted to your care, so that the Church-Family in Burkina Faso and in Niger may increasingly become the leaven of the new world that Christ came to establish for all humanity!

I am concerned about the lasting and integral development of the peoples of your countries, so dear to my heart, and I do not forget their daily struggle for survival. The difficult climatic conditions of the Sahel and the spreading desertification in the region confine the populations to an endemic poverty that gives rise to precariousness and despair and, in addition, makes them feel that they have been left out of the international scene. I would like to launch a solemn new appeal to the international community to manifest concrete and permanent support to the sorely tried

populations of the Sahel, in the hope that solidarity combined with justice and charity may know no bounds or limits, and that generosity will enable them to view the future with greater serenity.

2. Despite the difficulties linked to the precariousness of the life of the local peoples, the missionary vitality of your diocesan Churches has been expressed in many ways. I give thanks with you for the celebrations that marked the centenary of the evangelization of Burkina Faso. On that happy occasion, you were able to experience the presence of the Spirit at work in the hearts of believers since the beginning of the evangelization. I know of the enthusiasm with which you involved the local communities, especially by diocesan Synods, in the preparation and celebration of this important time for the Church, which coincided with the universal event of the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation.

The pastoral guidelines of the first National Synod of Burkina Faso thus clearly invited Christian communities to spare no effort to build the Church-Family of God, called to walk towards holiness, and "which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mould communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 29). In thanking God with you for the patient and courageous work of the first missionaries, helped by valiant catechists, I encourage both Pastors and faithful to show themselves worthy to succeed them, and to give birth and life to Christian communities that are more and more joyful and appealing signs of communion and brotherhood. May disciples of Christ, wherever they live, make the signs of God's love for men visible!

3. Evangelization is an essential mission of the Church. The Gospel cannot be properly proclaimed without the contribution of believers at all levels in the particular Church. Your quinquennial reports express in several places your *pastoral concern to make Christians, in the name of their Baptism, play a more and more active part in the work of evangelization*. In fact, "the evangelizing activity of the Christian community, first in its own locality, and then elsewhere as part of the Church's universal mission, is the clearest sign of a mature faith" (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 49). Developing this mission awareness in the heart of each believer continues to be a true challenge which you do not underestimate.

In order that the Church incarnate the Gospel in the different cultures, assimilating all that is good and renewing them from within, I recalled in my Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* that *inculturation is an urgent priority in the life of the particular Churches*, a step towards full evangelization so that every person can "receive Jesus Christ in an integral manner. It touches them on the personal, cultural, economic and political levels so that they can live a holy life in total union with God the Father, through the action of the Holy Spirit" (n. 62). The pastoral work of inculturation which you have started in your dioceses is bearing fruit, particularly in the *life and witness of the basic Christian communities*, which are leaven of Christian life and concrete signs of missionary communion that the Church-Family is called to become.

In your quinquennial reports you express gratitude for the vitality and witness of these small local communities. However, you estimate the long way they have yet to go before the Gospel transforms the spirit and heart of believers from within, so that they recognize one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. The return to ancient practices that have not yet been purified by the Spirit of Christ, the difficulty they have in considering one another members of the same family saved by the Blood of Christ and the dangers of the modern, so-called progressive, civilization which weakens family bonds and relationships between human groups: all these situations invite you not to slacken your efforts to ensure that disciples of Christ fully assimilate the Gospel message and shape their life according to it, but without giving up their authentic African values.

Christians need to find new energy to surmount the obstacles to Gospel proclamation and work effectively at its inculturation: it is essential that *their faith be increasingly well-founded and educated*. You are keenly aware that this responsibility is incumbent on you, and you jointly shoulder it in your Episcopal Conference through a sharing of experiences and the deepening of theological and pastoral knowledge. It is a question of enabling pastors and faithful alike to let themselves be seized by Christ, to accept to be radically dependent on him, to want to live his life and learn to do his will, to walk in his footsteps in true holiness (cf. I Thes 4: 3). I therefore encourage you to *work without respite to help the lay faithful of your dioceses to become ever more aware of their role in the Church* and thereby to honour their mission as baptized and confirmed persons. The ministry of the sacraments, the liturgy, biblical and theological formation, but also the various forms of artistic and musical expression as well as the media, must enable Christians to discover the riches of Christian faith with the means within their reach, and to be rooted in Christ to take an ever more active part in the life of the local communities, but without preventing them from fulfilling their vocation *in the social, economic and political life of the nation*.

4. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, I stressed that the Christian family, as a "domestic church" that is "built on the solid cultural pillars and noble values of the African tradition of the family, *is called upon to be a powerful nucleus of Christian witness* in a society undergoing rapid and profound changes" (n. 92). Your quinquennial reports mention the witness given by many families, who live fidelity to the sacrament of Christian marriage heroically in a context of civil legislation or traditional customs which do not favour monogamous marriage. Today, when the African family and its foundations are threatened, I urge you to promote the dignity of Christian marriage, a reflection of Christ's love for his Church, by recalling in particular that the mutual love of spouses is unique and indissoluble, that marriage, thanks to its stability, contributes to the fulfilment of their human and Christian vocation, and that such a family is the place where children thrive and the values are passed on to them. Christian communities, united to their pastors, should also seek to help families in the education of the young. Likewise, they will be careful to help engaged couples prepare for the sacrament of Marriage, and then later, in their conjugal and family life, so that they may put themselves at the service of the Church and of society.

5. Please convey the Pope's affectionate greetings to the priests in your dioceses. I am aware of

the difficult conditions in which they often have to carry out their ministry. The distance between parishes, a poor road network and the small number of apostolic workers often hinder the follow-up and formation of Christian communities. I thank these priests for their generosity in serving Christ and his Church. I know of the care you take to procure with the means at your disposal all that they require for their spiritual health and material needs. In deep communion with their Bishops, may they lead a more and more dignified and holy life as befits their vocation and the witness they must bear as men of God, set apart to serve the Gospel! Ready to conform to Christ the Servant, they will be able to become models for the people entrusted to them, especially youth, whom they should invite to follow Christ joyfully and radically as priests or as consecrated persons. I give thanks on this occasion for the expansion of religious life in your countries and I encourage you to support and nurture this development, remembering that without the concrete sign of consecrated life, "there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the salvific paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the 'salt' of faith would lose its savour in a world undergoing secularization" (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 105).

After the example of your predecessors in the faith, I also encourage you to express ever more generously, as you already do, the solidarity of your local Churches with the neighbouring countries which often lack pastors, by sending them priests and lay missionaries, remembering that "all Bishops, as members of the body of bishops which succeeds the college of the apostles, are consecrated not for one diocese alone, but for the salvation of the whole world" (Second Vatican Council, Decree on Church's Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes*, n. 38). I hope that the spirit of communion thus created and through which each Church cares for all the others will give a new missionary impulse to your diocesan communities and foster their burning desire to make the Kingdom of God spring to life.

6. The formation of candidates to the priesthood is a serious responsibility for Bishops. Some of you have made it a pastoral priority. It is essential to pay special attention to organizing this formation and to take great pains in choosing suitable formation teachers. It is also necessary to make diocesan communities aware of their responsibility in the formation of future priests and to involve them in it. "*The Church as such is the communal subject* which has the grace and responsibility to accompany those whom the Lord calls to become his ministers in the priesthood" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 65.). Moreover, a serious spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation, indispensable for the exercise of the priestly ministry, must be combined with a solid human and cultural formation. It will be particularly important to insist on the candidates' affective maturity, necessary for those who are called to celibacy, which means "[offering] with the grace of the Spirit and the free response of one's will the whole of one's love and care to Jesus Christ and to his Church" (*ibid.*, n. 44).

7. In your countries, the *Christian* communities live in the heart of societies marked by the predominance of Islam and its values. I am delighted at your news that the relations of Catholics with the believers of Islam are generally marked by respect, esteem and friendliness. Christians

and Muslims are in effect "called to commit themselves to promoting a dialogue free from the risks of false irenicism or militant fundamentalism, and to raising their voices against unfair policies and practices, as well as against the lack of reciprocity in matters of religious freedom" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 66). I encourage you to cultivate this dialogue, equipping yourselves with the structures and means to guarantee it, in order to overcome the fear of others, which often stems from a deep misunderstanding of the religious values that motivate it, without ever giving up visibly accounting for the hope that is in you. May Christians and Muslims find in the genuine patrimony of their religious traditions the strength they need to collaborate in the supportive development of their country!

8. Dear Brothers in the episcopate, now that you are about to return home, I ask you to take back to the priests, deacons, men and women Religious, catechists and lay faithful of your communities, the affectionate greeting of the Pope who commends their Christian life and their apostolic commitment to the Lord. Indeed, "the structure of the apostolic community rests upon both" (*Constitutions Apostoliques*, III). Please transmit to all your fellow citizens my cordial good wishes for peace and prosperity. In the face of the scandal of poverty and injustice, it is my special hope that the Church will continue to exercise her prophetic role and to be the voice of the voiceless, so that everywhere the human dignity of every human being will be acknowledged, and all initiatives will be promoted which contribute to developing and ennobling individuals in their spiritual and material existence (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 70). May the Spirit of Pentecost help you grow constantly in hope and guide the Church-Family in Burkina Faso and in Niger into "all the truth" (Jn 16: 13), so that she may keep alive in the midst of his people the presence of Christ the Saviour through an ardent witness to evangelical life! I entrust to the intercession of the Virgin Mary the future of your dioceses and that of the nations in which you live. Most particularly, I ask her to help you in your episcopal ministry. I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to all the faithful of your dioceses.