



The Holy See

PIUS PP. XII

***LETTERA ALL'EPISCOPATO E AI FEDELI DEL LIBANO
PER IL CONGRESSO MARIANO NAZIONALE A BEIRUT****

It is with a full heart, Venerable Brothers, that We send Our affectionate paternal greetings to you, the Hierarchy and Missionaries of Nigeria, and to all Our beloved sons and daughters under your care, as you gather together at Lagos to celebrate your Marian Congress on this the great Feast-day of Mary the Immaculate Mother of God. Fittingly, indeed, does Nigeria kneel today to do honour to its Queen and Mother, for the first benign rays of the Gospel of love penetrated the harsh darkness of paganism under the special auspices of Mary Conceived without Sin; and it has been Our wish to add solemnity to the occasion by appointing Our Beloved Son, the Cardinal Archbishop of Los Angeles, as Our worthy Legate to preside over the Congress in Our Name.

The Fathers who were to plant the seed of the word of God so firmly at Lagos itself and in Western Nigeria were consecrated in a special way to the Immaculate Virgin. Indeed, on this very Feast-day well nigh a hundred years ago, the Society to which they belonged was founded and dedicated to Mary Immaculate at the Shrine of Our Lady of Gouvrière in Lyons—the Society of the African Missions, destined in 1860 to embrace in its spiritual care the vast territory between the Volta and the Niger.

Dedicated, too, in a special way, to the Immaculate Mother of God were the Holy Ghost Fathers who courageously ventured up the Niger in 1865 to plant the Church of God at Onitsha, for their Congregation was named after the Heavenly Spouse of Our lady and after Her Immaculate Heart. It was, -in fact, on the eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception that they were welcomed by the local King and enabled to establish their first mission, which was to become in time the Metropolitan See of Onitsha, and from which the frontiers of the Church were to be pushed eastwards towards the Cross River, beyond Ogoja towards the North and Calabar in the South.

And so, Venerable Brothers and beloved sons and daughters, the evangelization of Nigeria has

from its very beginning been under the special patronage of the Immaculate Mother of God.

One cannot but be deeply moved on recalling the zeal, the sufferings and the sacrifices of those early missionaries. Many of them sealed their heroic apostolate with the supreme sacrifice of their young lives within months, nay even weeks, of their arrival, but the standard of Christ was still carried aloft to new and unchartered areas.

The intrepid faith and undaunted courage of those pioneers are worthy of admiration and emulation. Faced with difficulties that seemed unsurmountable, they were often denied the consolation of hopeful results. The conversions they made, being mostly confined to the dying and the outcasts, offered little hope for the achievement of the primary object of missionary endeavour, namely, the foundation of the Church of God among native peoples. They died, those brave missionaries, failures in the eyes of the world; but their failure was merely that of the seed falling on the ground and dying to bring forth fruit (Cfr. *Io.* 12, 24).

They sowed in tears, and the fruit of their sowing we see today in consoling abundance. The work heroically begun by the early Fathers was no less heroically continued by steadily increasing numbers of their confreres. In time, other Religious Orders and Missionary Societies of men and women came to labour in that portion of the Lord's vineyard, and so great was the progress achieved that We were able, in 1950, to establish the Hierarchy of Nigeria. Today, in the fifteen ecclesiastical territories of the country, there are over five hundred missionary priests and over two hundred and fifty missionary sisters ministering to almost a million of the Church's fold and to over three hundred thousand Catechumens.

The cherished hope of the Church in mission lands — the native priesthood — is, thanks be to God, being firmly established. Already there are many Nigerian priests ministering to their own people in the various territories, while in the Major Seminary at Enugu and in the Minor Seminaries numerous other aspirants are being prepared to share in the priesthood of Christ. And it is not without significance that this Year dedicated to Our Lady, saw the consecration of the first Nigerian Bishop.

The fabric of Christian society is being consolidated and expanded, and as the nucleus of that Society, the Christian family, increases and multiplies throughout the country, We see an encouraging growth in the numbers of Nigeria's young men and women who choose to dedicate themselves to the undivided love of God in the Religious life. Nor must We omit to mention that valiant army of native lay teachers and catechists who cooperate so closely in the apostolate of the clergy and on whose valuable collaboration the success of the missionary effort so vitally depends. Catholic education, too, has kept pace with the development of the Church, and We have noted with pleasure that Our Venerable Brothers the Archbishops and Bishops of Nigeria, vigilantly alert to the supreme importance of this matter, have given opportune instruction to their flocks regarding the rights and duties of parents in the education of their children.

Verily, Our Lady's all-powerful protection has enabled the Church in Nigeria to make admirable progress, and in this Marian Year you have testified your filial devotion to Her in a series of ceremonies, culminating in the present Congress. We have learned with satisfaction, Venerable Brothers and beloved sons and daughters, of the special retreats, novenas, Eucharistic vigils and processions which attracted unprecedented crowds of devout worshippers, not only in the bigger centres but even in outlying mission stations.

As you assemble for this Marian Congress, you will pour forth your souls in prayers of dutiful thanksgiving to Mary and to Her Divine Son. We cherish the ardent hope that your gratitude for the special favour of Providence will continue to find expression in your daily lives, in an ever more intense practice of Christian virtue.

We exhort you, Venerable Brothers, and all of you, beloved missionaries of Nigeria, to carry on your praiseworthy apostolate with renewed vigour and zeal, under Mary's patronage. For even though you labour amongst a people that are lovable, courteous, hospitable, kind and grateful, We are well aware that you have to put up with many difficulties and inconveniences. But always keep before your eyes the nobility of the Cause which you serve, and go forward in the confidence that you « can do all things in Him Who strengthens » you (*Phil. 4, 13*).

To You, Our beloved sons and daughters of Nigeria, We earnestly recommend that you always cherish a deep devotion to Mary the Immaculate Mother of God and Our Mother. Consecrate yourselves, your labours, your homes, your families and your country to Her Immaculate Heart. Let Her be the Queen of your hearts, Queen of Nigeria. By thus confiding yourselves to Her care you will be securing Her all-efficacious advocacy in heaven and rendering to Her that tribute of gratitude which you owe. Above all, do not fail to invoke Her intercession on behalf of those of your brethren who still « sit in darkness and in the shadow of death » (*Luc. 1, 79*).

We earnestly beseech Our Immaculate Mother Mary, Who so lovingly watched over the first beginnings of the evangelization of Nigeria, to continue to foster that land of promise with especial care and to protect it from the pernicious influences so widespread in the world of today. That is Our fervent prayer to Our Lady as you honour Her in this Marian Congress; and from a heart overflowing with fatherly affection and benevolence, We impart Our particular Apostolic Benediction to Our Beloved Son Our Cardinal Legate, to Our Venerable Brothers the Archbishops and Bishops, to the Prefects Apostolic and to all the heroic missionaries, and to all Our dearly beloved faithful of Nigeria.

From the Vatican, November II, 1954.

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