



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 25 March 1998

Reflection on the Pastoral Visit to Nigeria

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I give thanks to the Lord who a few days ago allowed me to return to the beloved African continent for a brief but eventful visit to Nigeria. In the Church Africa is taking more and more initiative for her own history and is becoming co-responsible for the progress of the whole People of God.

In Nigeria I met a vibrant Church which recently celebrated the 100th anniversary of her first evangelization and is advancing with determination towards the Year 2000, inspired and guided by the directives of the recent African Synod. New diocesan and parish communities have grown up there in recent years. The number of vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life is increasing: three new seminaries have been opened, in addition to the eight which already exist. All this is the work of the Holy Spirit, who has given life to the Church in Nigeria during the past 100 years and continues to support her as she faces the future.

2. I thank the Head of State and the other civil authorities for their welcome. I hope that this exceptional spiritual event will help further the process of reconciliation in justice and of full respect for the human rights of every member of the Nigerian people.

I express my fraternal gratitude to the country's Bishops for the witness of communion and affection which they and the priests, religious, catechists and all the lay faithful offered to the Successor of Peter. To each one I renew my "thank you" and my embrace of peace.

I respectfully greet the followers of other religions, especially the Muslims, who have a prominent place in this country. I extend my heartfelt greetings to the entire Nigerian people.

3. During my stay in Nigeria, in addition to visiting the country's officials, I was able to meet *the Bishops*, hard-working Pastors of the Christian people. I also cherish memories of my meeting with *the most important representatives of Islam*, with whom I wanted to stress the importance of the spiritual bonds linking Christians and Muslims: faith in the one merciful God, the commitment to seeking and doing his will, the value of every person as created by God with a special destiny, religious freedom and the ethic of solidarity. I pray the Lord that Christians and Muslims, both of whom are numerous in Nigeria, may work together in defending life as well as in promoting the effective recognition of each individual's human rights.

4. Another important moment in my Pastoral Visit was the *Holy Mass in Abuja*, the country's new federal capital. In the heart of the black continent, with the Bishops, the clergy and the faithful, I raised a great prayer for Africa, that it may experience justice, peace and development; that it may preserve its most genuine values, its love for life and the family, for solidarity and community life. I prayed that Africa, inhabited by countless ethnic groups, may become a family of peoples, as the Lord wants the whole world to be: a family of nations. The Gospel is the leaven of authentic peace and unity.

The Church proclaims this "good news" of salvation to the ends of the earth and encourages the commitment to justice, peace, the integral development of society and respect for the basic rights of the person.

It was for this reason that the missionaries, the first evangelizers of the African continent, gave their lives; for this same cause many Nigerians have devoted their lives, like Fr Tansi, and many others after him have answered the Lord's call and now co-operate in the new evangelization in their homeland and in other parts of the world. The Church never ceases to give thanks to God for this mysterious exchange of gifts, the fruit of the Holy Spirit's effective and universal action.

5. The culminating moment of my apostolic pilgrimage was the solemn *Eucharistic celebration for the beatification of Fr Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi*, which took place in Onitsha, his native city.

This event communicated a lofty message of holiness, reconciliation and hope, wonderfully combined in Fr Tansi's witness. His whole apostolate drew strength from the Eucharist: he celebrated Holy Mass with visible fervour of faith and love and adored the Blessed Sacrament for hours and hours, absorbed in contemplation.

During these extended times of prayer, the Lord drew him ever closer, letting him perceive more and more clearly his call to the contemplative life. At the age of 47 he left for England, where he entered the Cistercian Abbey of Mount St Bernard. He was unable to return to his homeland and

establish a monastic community there, as was his desire and plan. Death prevented him from doing so, but his witness, made fruitful by prayer and sacrifice, is the precious and vital seed which has not failed to yield abundant fruit.

6. Fr Tansi is the *first witness* to the Christian faith in Nigeria to have been raised to the honours of the altar. For this reason it is natural to think of him as the "protomartyr" of that nation: not because he was martyred, but in the sense that he offered an unswerving witness of love, spending his whole life in the service of God and of his brothers and sisters.

In the history of the Church, the protomartyrs are significant for the growth of the community of believers and for evangelization. We think, for example, of the first martyrs of Rome and of those in many other countries where the faith sprang from their heroic witness. The beatification of Fr Tansi is not only a recognition of his holiness and the spiritual climate in which he matured to the point of reaching the perfection of union with God and his brethren; it is also a harbinger and sign of hope for the future development of the Church in Nigeria and Africa.

7. May the new blessed intercede so that *a just and sincere spirit of reconciliation* may grow in Nigerian society and in all African countries, and that the Gospel message may be more and more widely spread. May there be an increase in mutual understanding, the source of peace, joy and unity in families. May solidarity in justice be strengthened, because this is the way to achieve the harmonious development of every nation.

We entrust these wishes to the Blessed Virgin, whom the liturgy today has us contemplate in the mystery of the Annunciation. The Holy Spirit prompted her to say her "*fiat*" to God and formed the incarnate Word in her womb. The same Spirit has made fruitful the tireless missionary work of Christ's Apostles and witnesses down the ages in every corner of the earth.

In contemplating Mary, the image of fidelity and obedience, we are all invited today generously to accept the divine call and to give our faithful and definitive "yes" to the Lord's will, so that everywhere his saving plan may be fulfilled.

May Our Lady of the Annunciation, whom we celebrate today, make us docile and courageous servants of the Word who took flesh in her for the salvation of every human being.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I extend a cordial welcome to the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims, especially to the members of the Society of Missionaries of Africa. Thank you for your commitment to that dearly beloved continent. Upon the visitors from England, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and the United

States I invoke the grace and peace of the Lord.

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana