



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO NIGERIA, BENIN

GABON AND EQUATORIAL GUINEA

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE RELIGIOUS MEN AND WOMEN**

Ibadan (Nigeria)

Monday, 15 February 1982

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. I am overjoyed to have this meeting with you, men and women of the different dioceses in Nigeria, who are living the religious life of consecration to Jesus Christ. Through your commitment of perfect charity you express the hope of the Church and become her crown and glory. You are a comfort for her. You are ambassadors for her. This encounter could not be omitted.

Having been already consecrated to God by Baptism, you give special witness to Christ in the Church and in the world by your renunciation – for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven – of marriage, earthly possessions and the doing of your own will. Through your vows you make this sacrifice freely, out of love for God and your fellowman, in a spirit of dedication and service.

Consecrated chastity has great witness value in a world rampant with selfishness and the misuse of sex. In addition, in Nigeria and throughout Africa the sacrifice of fatherhood or motherhood is no small matter. Poverty calls people to give up attachment to money and what money can buy. And obedience swims against the world current of revolt, pride, vanity and oppression. As the Second Vatican Council says, the religious state is a proof that the Kingdom of Christ and its overmastering necessities are superior to all earthly considerations.

Even more important than the various works which you carry out is the life which you live: in other words, what you are. You are consecrated persons striving to follow Christ with great intensity of love.

2. Your love of God and union with him in prayer expresses itself in the activities of the apostolate.

In many ways you are called to collaborate in the cause of evangelization. Through a multiplicity of works you strive to communicate Christ and to offer service in his name. Through a whole network of ecclesial initiatives you pursue the definitive aim of catechesis: “to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ”. Wherever a child is in need, wherever someone is suffering, wherever a brother or sister feels alone or rejected, the religious has the opportunity to work for the Kingdom of God. But prayer and union with God always remain the soul of your apostolate. Without Jesus we can do nothing.

3. I appreciate your efforts for the continuing theological and spiritual formation of your members, your initiative of post-novitiate training centres, the regular meetings of your major superiors, and the area meetings which involve every religious. Through such activities you are able to reflect more deeply on religious life, grow in an understanding of charity and the meaning of your mission, consolidate unity among yourselves and coordinate your apostolate. Having been refreshed and renewed in faith and love, you will be in a position to give yourselves with ever greater availability to the service of the local and the universal Church.

4. I wish to make a particular mention of religious brothers and to praise them and to encourage them. Your vocation, my dear brothers, is not an easy one, especially because the spirit of the world does not appreciate evangelical poverty and humble service. You are called to follow Christ in a life of total self-giving which does not generally bring public acclaim.

Many people cannot understand your vocation because they cannot grasp how Christ's invitation, when accepted, can truly bring joy and deep fulfilment: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”. The Christ who emptied himself is your model and your strength. You yourselves, then, must never begin to doubt your own identity. Your understanding of your vocation, your transparent happiness and infectious peace, and your zealous commitment to your apostolate and to the good of the people whom you serve are an eloquent witness to the power of Christ's grace and to the primacy of his love.

5. All religious, both brothers and sisters, must be aware that temptations will not spare them. Your three vows will sooner or later be tested in the crucible of problems, crises and dangers. Your intense love of Christ and his Church will teach you how to remain faithful. In particular, you will have to seek ever more authentic ways to live lives of evangelical poverty in a country in which the gap between the rich and the poor is widening all the time. In the Nigeria of today you are also expected to be a leaven in society through a spirit of humble service, exercised particularly among the poor. This type of consecrated service is the opposite of complacency, arrogance and privileged position.

In planning your apostolate and the professional training of your members, each congregation should take full account of the local Church or diocese. The diocese is a spiritual family of which the bishop is the father and head, and religious must avoid the temptation of running programmes parallel to those of the diocese. Rather the entire diocese – priests, religious and laity – should coordinate its apostolic plans and strategy and give corporate witness to Christ.

6. I wish to add a special word to the monks and cloistered nuns of Nigeria, because of the specific contribution which their way of life makes to the Church and the nation. You rightly place particular emphasis on divine worship, on prayer and contemplation. The Church herself ratifies your vocation because of her conviction that apostolic fruitfulness is a gift of God. By assiduous prayer you are associated with Jesus, who is “living for ever to intercede for all who come to God

through him". United with Jesus in his intercession, you are thus able to obtain graces for the active apostolate and for the whole world. I personally rely on your help.

You live lives of real self-sacrifice. You thereby give to all Christians, and indeed to all people, a silent but eloquent testimony of God's sovereignty and of Christ's primacy in your lives. By the work of your hands and by your intellectual endeavours, you show the close relationship between work and prayer. At the same time you express your solidarity in work with all your brothers and sisters throughout the world.

Through monastic silence you help create an atmosphere for enabling people to listen to God and to receive his inspirations. It is no wonder that priests, religious and laity flock to your monasteries and convents for the sacred liturgy, prayer, spiritual retreats, recollection days, advice and even simply rest. In such ways you can help promote the maturity of your people in the Paschal Mystery of Christ's Death and Resurrection.

7. And to all of you, beloved religious of Nigeria, I wish to express my deep affection in Christ Jesus. I am very grateful to you for your lives of consecration and for all your generous service to the Church. I ask your continuing prayers for the intentions of the Apostolic See and for the needs of the universal Church. May our Blessed Mother Mary, our model of love for Jesus and of dedication to him, help you to live out faithfully your vocation of love and faith, of joy and hope.

For in the words of Saint Peter, without having seen Jesus "you love him; though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy". Dear brothers and sisters, "set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ".

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