



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF GABON  
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Tuesday, 5 June 2001*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. I am glad to greet you during your *ad limina* visit, Bishops of the Catholic Church in Gabon. On the day after the celebration of the feast of Pentecost, I hope that the Holy Spirit will lavish his gifts upon you so that you may be more and more faithful in exercising the ministry you have received from the Lord. May your meetings with the Successor of Peter and the dicasteries of the Roman Curia be intense moments of ecclesial communion and apostolic comfort for you!

I extend my cordial thanks to Archbishop Basile Mvé Engone of Libreville, President of your Bishops' Conference, for his kind words on your behalf. Since the last *ad limina* visit of the Gabonese Bishops, the Episcopate has had a considerable number of new members. I warmly encourage you to continue to strengthen the bonds of communion that unite you, so as to carry out your duty fruitfully and to develop true pastoral harmony among your Dioceses. Pass on to your priests, religious, catechists and all the faithful of your Diocese, my affectionate greetings and the assurance of my spiritual closeness.

Through you, I greet all the people of Gabon, asking God to grant them to live in peace and to help them in their efforts to build a supportive society where each one may be completely fulfilled.

2. The Jubilee Year which has just ended has given the whole Church an opportunity for spiritual and missionary renewal. Thus it is now necessary to give a new impetus to evangelization. To do this, as I was able to write in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*, "all pastoral initiatives

must be set in relation to holiness" (n. 30), for if our Baptism is our true entry into the holiness of God, "it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity". To be credible witnesses of the Gospel they proclaim to their brethren, Christians must firmly lift their gaze to Christ the Lord, the Saviour of all humanity.

I therefore ask you to advance enthusiastically on the rough paths of the mission. Of course, I know the limits of your human and material means. But the Lord has assured us of his presence in our midst. Do not be afraid to let yourselves be imbued by the missionary enthusiasm that enlivened the Apostle Paul, reaching out to men and women who have not received the Good News. Indeed, everyone is entitled to know the riches of Christ's mystery.

For some years now, the Church's activity in your country, which we desire to be at the service of all the Gabonese without distinction, can develop within a new juridical framework. I am delighted with the agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Gabon to work to promote the common good, the guarantee of people's spiritual and material well-being. It is to be hoped that, with respect for the independence and autonomy of the two parties, this spirit of collaboration will develop more widely, especially in order to allow Catholic schools to contribute more and more effectively to the human and spiritual education of youth in your country.

3. The formation of evangelizers is of great importance in assuring the Church's future on the African continent. The Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops has emphasized the need to train lay people so that they can play their irreplaceable part in the Church and in society. I would therefore like to extend a special greeting to the catechists of your Dioceses, whose place in the development of Christian communities continues to be crucial. I strongly encourage you to give these precious collaborators of the mission attentive material, moral and spiritual support, and to enable them to benefit from a solid initial and ongoing doctrinal formation.

Your country's faithful must also be able to assume their civic responsibilities and "bring to bear upon the social fabric an influence aimed at changing not only ways of thinking but also the very structures of society, so that they will better reflect God's plan for the human family" (Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 54). It is therefore right to help lay people lead a life in harmony with their faith so that their activities and responsibilities may be an ever more genuine witness to the Gospel in all social classes.

Moreover it is indispensable that Christian families have a lively awareness of their mission in the Church and in society. A family ministry adapted to the great problems that arise today, especially with regard to respect for human life, will help encourage the faithful witness of faith by couples living in conformity with all the aspects of the divine law, as well as through their commitment to giving their children an authentically Christian upbringing. May the Church remain close to families in difficult situations by giving them her disinterested help and always be able to reflect for them the Lord's truth, kindness and understanding.

I hope that the young people of your Dioceses will always be able to find in their encounter with Christ, the secret of true freedom and deep inner joy. In the thick of the problems that beset them, may they never lose trust in the future, but accept to work courageously with their brothers and sisters for the coming of a new world founded on brotherhood and justice.

4. To reunite God's family in brotherhood that is enlivened by love and to lead it to the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit (cf. Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 6), priests are your necessary and irreplaceable collaborators whom you must consider as brothers and friends, showing concern for their material and spiritual situation and spurring them to fraternal collaboration with you and among themselves.

I warmly greet all your priests and urge them to persevere generously, despite obstacles, in the commitments which they made on the day of their ordination. May they always remember that they have received a specific call to holiness and that they are bound to strive for perfection in all the areas of their life, especially by an upright moral life, with their whole selves, consciously, freely and responsibly, deeply involved in the exercise of their ministry! For this, there must be a close connection between the exercise of the ministry and an intense spiritual life. It is therefore of paramount importance that each priest "continually renew and deepen his awareness of being a minister of Jesus Christ by virtue of sacramental consecration and configuration to Christ the Head and Shepherd of the Church" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 25). Only a habitual intimacy with Christ, expressed particularly in prayer and in recourse to the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, will give them the strength and courage to resist when they are put to the test and to accept to return faithfully to the Lord after falling. I also urge the presbyterate in each one of your Dioceses, indigenous priests and missionaries originally from other countries, to show unity and deep communion around the Bishop, to be convinced that they are at the service of the same mission which has been entrusted to them by the Church in Christ's name.

The pastoral care of priestly and religious vocations will require the greatest attention if the building and growth of the local Church is to continue. The irreproachable example of the lives of priests and consecrated persons is a vigorous incentive to the young to help them make a generous response to the Lord's call. In the promotion of vocations, and in discernment and guidance, the Bishop is primarily responsible, and must personally assume this responsibility, while assuring himself of the indispensable collaboration of his presbyterate and reminding Christian families, catechists and all the faithful of their specific responsibility in this context.

Setting up teams of formation teachers and spiritual directors for major seminaries must be a priority for Bishops. I therefore charge you to join forces and to seek collaboration, so that the national major seminary may accept the young men of your dioceses who have received the Lord's call to the priesthood and give them a solid formation that will prepare them to exercise their priestly ministry with the qualities required of representatives of Christ, as true servants and

leaders of the Christian communities. It is indispensable that this human, intellectual, pastoral and spiritual formation also enable them to test and to develop their affective maturity, and to be deeply convinced that for the priest, celibacy is inseparable from chastity (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 95).

5. I would also like to testify to the Church's gratitude for missionary congregations' work in ecclesial life in Gabon. Through their disinterested and at times heroic apostolic work, their members, but also lay Christians, have passed on the torch of faith to your people and have enabled the Church to put down roots and to grow in your country.

Men religious today, whether from Gabon or from other countries, play an important part in the pastoral life of your dioceses in a spirit of communion and collaboration, with you and with the diocesan clergy. Women religious, with their parish, educational or hospital activities, work generously at the service of the people without distinction of origins or religion, and thus attract everyone's esteem.

I deeply hope that the consecrated life will develop in your Dioceses so as to contribute to building up the local Church in charity in accordance with the charism proper to each institute. Accept it as a gift of God "a precious and necessary gift for the present and future of the People of God, since it is an intimate part of her life, her holiness and her mission" (Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, n. 3)! By your support, you will encourage the different institutes to give all their members a sound formation, which will enable them to respond to the spiritual and human needs of their vocation.

6. Among the urgent needs for the Catholic Church at the beginning of the new millennium, is the quest for Christian unity. Of course, a lot of ground must still be covered. We should not be discouraged but confidently develop increasingly calm and fraternal relations with the members of other Churches and ecclesial communities. Likewise, encounters with the believers of Islam and of the Traditional African Religion, in a spirit of openness and dialogue, are very important. I therefore encourage you to preserve friendly relations with the religious communities that make up society, to guarantee the conditions for a harmonious existence in mutual respect to all the Gabonese.

However, as I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*, "dialogue cannot be based on religious indifferentism, and we Christians are in duty bound, while engaging in dialogue, to bear clear witness to the hope that is within us" (n. 56).

7. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, with these sentiments, at the end of our meeting, I ask you to continue with courage and daring to announce joyfully the gift that the Lord is offering to all men and women. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3,16). The mission's priority task is to proclaim to everyone that it is in Christ that people find salvation. Strengthened by his

active presence, the Church cannot shirk the urgent need of the missionary mandate which sends her to all nations and all peoples. May the experience of the Jubilee Year that we have just celebrated give you fresh enthusiasm to go ahead with hope!

I entrust all your Dioceses to the motherly intercession of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Africa, and I wholeheartedly impart to you an affectionate Apostolic Blessing, which I willingly extend to your priests, to the men and women religious, to the catechists and to all the lay faithful of Gabon.