



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO NIGERIA (MARCH 21-23, 1997)

ARRIVAL AT NNAMDI AZIKIWE AIRPORT

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II

Saturday, 21 March 1998

Your Excellency the Head of State, General Sani Abacha,

Government Leaders,

My Brother Bishops,

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

*Beloved People of Nigeria,*1. With profound gratitude I praise Divine Providence for granting me the grace of returning to you and of setting foot once more on this blessed land! To you who have gathered to welcome me, and to all the sons and daughters of Nigeria, I offer heartfelt greetings of love and peace. I address a special word of gratitude to my Brother Bishops for their invitation, and to the Head of State, as well as to the other Government leaders and authorities, for making this Visit possible. I see the presence of all of you here today as a sign of friendship and a manifestation of your desire to work together to serve the well-being of the entire nation.2. I come to Nigeria as a friend, as one who is deeply concerned for the destiny of your country and of Africa as a whole. The main purpose of my Visit is to celebrate with the Catholic community the Beatification of Father Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, the first Nigerian in the Church's history to be officially proclaimed "Blessed". This Beatification in the very land where Father Tansi was born and exercised his priestly ministry honours the whole nation of Nigeria. It gives to all Nigerians an opportunity to reflect on the direction and insight which the life of Father Tansi provides for today's society. In him, and in all who dedicate their lives completely to the service of others, is revealed the path along which Nigerians should travel towards a brighter future for their country. The testimony borne by Father Tansi is important at this moment in Nigeria's history, a moment that requires concerted and honest efforts to foster harmony and national unity, to guarantee respect for human life and human rights, to promote justice and development, to combat unemployment, to give hope to the poor and the suffering, to resolve conflicts through dialogue and to establish a true and lasting solidarity between all sectors of society.3. Violence has not ceased to bring great pain and torment to certain peoples of Africa. Arriving in West Africa, my thoughts turn to the people of Sierra

Leone, who have suffered so much in recent times. We must all hope that, with the continuing help of those responsible for peace in Africa, the return to constitutional order and democratic freedom will open the way to a new period of reconstruction and development. In this respect I duly recognize the contributions made by Nigeria and other countries to help in this difficult situation. In particular I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all those who cooperated in the successful rescue operation at the Catholic Pastoral Centre in Makeni. I wish also to encourage the people of Liberia as they come out of a situation of tragic conflict and work to rebuild their nation. Justice and peace are the path of development and progress. May God strengthen those who walk this path in the service of the human community.⁴ Dear Nigerian Friends, in your own country you are all called to muster your wisdom and expertise in the difficult and urgent task of building a society that respects all its members in their dignity, their rights and their freedoms. This requires an attitude of reconciliation and calls for the Government and citizens of this land to be firmly committed to giving the best of themselves for the good of all. The challenge before you is great, but greater still are your capacity and determination to meet it. The life and witness of Father Tansi remind us of the Gospel saying: "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt 5:9). Blessed are all who, in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, work for genuine peace. Blessed in the eyes of God are those working to lead the continent of Africa to a new phase of stability, reconciliation, development and progress. Ultimate success in this venture will come from the Almighty, the Lord of life and of human history. Certain that he will sustain you in the work now before you, I make my own the words of the Psalmist: "May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!" (Ps 29:11). As I begin my Visit, I express my deep esteem and affection for every Nigerian. I would willingly meet you all! May God be close to every son and daughter of this beloved land. God bless Nigeria! © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana