



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF THE IVORY COAST
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Thursday, 18 September 2014

Dear Brother Bishops,

I am very happy to meet with you on the occasion of your visit *ad limina*. I extend my fraternal greeting to Cardinal Jean-Pierre Kutwa and to each one of you, and I thank Bishop Alexis Touabli Youlo, President of your Bishops' Conference, for the words which he has just addressed to me. I would like to also remember Cardinal Bernard Agré who the Father recently called home. I hope that you find in Saints Peter and Paul the help that you need in order to carry out your pastoral ministry, both through the example they gave of fervent love of Christ, and through their powerful intercession to God. The pilgrimage to the Tombs of the Apostles is always a beautiful occasion to reinforce the bonds of communion with Peter's Successor and with the whole of the College of Bishops. This unity is indispensable to the Church's mission: "that they may all be one... so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21), Jesus tells us. In the same way, the fraternal communion which unites around Christ the Bishops of a single nation is imperative for the growth of the Church, as it is for the progress of society as a whole. This is even truer in a country which has undergone serious division and which is in need of your witness and your strong commitment in order to rebuild fraternity. "Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love!" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 101). It is by demonstrating your true fraternity, your openness to dialogue in mutual confidence, listening to everyone — even in diversity and in contradiction — and by respecting each one's place, especially that of the youngest among you, that you will instill new enthusiasm for evangelizing and truly transform society, in order to conform it more to the evangelical ideal. I am very happy to know that you are already firmly committed to this path, and I encourage you with all my heart.

Therefore, I cannot but request you to fulfil your proper role in the work of national reconciliation,

rejecting all personal involvement in political disputes to the detriment of the common good. However, it is important that you maintain constructive relations with the Authorities of your respective regions, as well as with the various members of society, in order to spread a true Gospel spirit of dialogue and cooperation. The role of the Church — which is appreciated and heeded — can be decisive. Here, I would like to recall Archbishop Ambrose Madtha, a zealous Apostolic Nuncio, who worked very hard for the reconciliation of the society of Côte d'Ivoire. In that same spirit, I encourage you to continue the dialogue with Muslims, in order to discourage any violent aberration and any religious misinterpretation of the conflict that you have experienced.

Naturally, you are not alone in the immense task of evangelization and of conversion of the hearts which open before you, but you are aided by a generous and motivated clergy that is consistently growing in number. I ask you to convey my deep affection to the priests in your dioceses. They are working courageously in the Lord's field, often in very difficult conditions. In order to prevent the difficulties and lapses of some of them, the best tools are definitely the quality of their initial and permanent formation, the encouragement of a priestly brotherhood which transcends ethnic belonging, and above all the closeness and attention which, as loving and attentive fathers, you must address to each one of them. May you — if possible — be more kindly, persuasive and encouraging than hasty and severe in inflicting punishment in order to reawaken pastoral zeal. I request that you visit your priests often to listen to them, in order to know them ever better. It is by forming a fraternal presbyteriate united around its Bishop that priests will feel bonded to their own diocese and keen to serve it as a priority, whereas too many are tempted to leave for faraway places, to the detriment of the People of God in need of their ministry.

Indeed, it is not only the priests who benefit from the Bishop's assiduous presence in their diocese, but all the members of the Christian communities also need to be supported and to have a personal and regular bond with the Bishop. I am also thinking of the Religious Institutes to which you must be attentive. They are a "necessary and precious aid to the Church's pastoral activity but also a manifestation of the deepest nature of our Christian vocation" (*Africae Munus*, n. 118). May the men and women religious be warmly thanked for the considerable work they do, with their lay associates, in the spheres of education, health and development. Their work is appreciated by everyone; moreover it is absolutely irreplaceable, because there is a profound connection between evangelization and human advancement (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 178). I invite you to do everything possible to foster the establishment of constructive relationships and to resolve misunderstandings, in order that men and women religious may work in harmony with other agents of pastoral care. In addition, many new communities and associations are being formed which are in need of your careful and prudent discernment — but you already do this — to guarantee their members a sound formation as well as accompanying their progress.

You are called to let your pastoral closeness be felt by all the lay faithful, families in particular. These latter have been weakened today, both by the process of secularization affecting society in Côte d'Ivoire today, and by the population displacement and division caused by the conflicts, as

well as by less exacting moral standards from every side. I encourage you to persevere in the formation programmes for marriage, which many among you have already started, without forgetting your essential commitment to young people, with a view to their spiritual and emotional development. Finally, the elderly should not lack your attention. Today, in spite of the traditional mentality in Africa which holds the elderly “in particular veneration” (*Africae Munus*, n. 47), many of them are alone or abandoned because the “throw away” culture has now appeared in your societies. Now, their participation is essential to the balance of a people and to the education of youth (cf. *Africae Munus*, n. 48).

Dear Brother Bishops, I want to express to you my joy and my recognition of the great work of evangelization that you are doing in Côte d'Ivoire. Your local Churches are experiencing true dynamism and they manifest joy and enthusiasm in the proclamation of Christ who died and is risen. However, one perceives that faith is fragile and a headwind is blowing. Very often — as recent conflicts have unfortunately demonstrated — ethnic particularism has gained the upper hand over Gospel brotherhood, many baptized people, weary or disappointed, are moving away from the light of truth and adhering to easier propositions, others do not put the faith's tenets into practice in life. On the one hand, the key to the future certainly lies in the Word of God being more deeply rooted in the heart. And, on the other, it is also necessary to deepen the dialogue with the traditional cultural and religious situation in order to reach a genuine inculturation of our Faith, unambiguously rejecting what is contrary to it, but accepting and bringing to fulfillment the good aspects. I therefore encourage you to persevere ceaselessly in the work of evangelization. The formation of the laity at all levels, and especially of the catechists whose indispensable work is enormous — and they are to be thanked for this — must open them to the “encounter with an event, a Person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 1). It is in this way that the Church in Côte d'Ivoire will be able to face the challenges of the future serenely.

Entrusting all of you, as well as the priests, consecrated people, catechists and all the faithful lay people of your dioceses, to the intercession of St John Paul II and to the protection of Our Lady of Peace, I wholeheartedly impart to you the Apostolic Blessing.