



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF GABON
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Monday, 20 April 2015

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

I am pleased to welcome you on the occasion of your Visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. On pilgrimage to the Tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, you have come to draw from their martyrdom — rooted in faithfulness to Christ who died and rose again — new energy to continue your mission with ever greater ardour as Pastors and to strengthen your bonds of communion with the Holy See, thus reinforcing collegiality among you and with the Bishops of the entire world.

In his address on your behalf, Bishop Mathieu Madega Lebouakehan, President of your Bishops' Conference, recalled several important aspects in the life of the Church in Gabon. I sincerely thank him, and I also thank each of you for your sentiments of faithful adherence to the Successor of Peter and for your pastoral zeal. In this Jubilee Year commemorating various important events in the life of the Church in Gabon, in particular the 170th anniversary of her foundation, through you I would like to greet and encourage the priests, men and women religious, and other agents of pastoral care who work with you, as well as the faithful lay people of your dioceses, whom I join in prayer and in the act of thanksgiving.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, the brave missionaries who proclaimed the Gospel in your land, in heroic conditions, as well as the first Christians of Gabon who received the Good News of salvation with generous hearts and witnessed to it often amid much adversity, were the pioneers of your local Church. Their memory, their zeal and their Gospel witness must never stop inspiring you in your pastoral work and constitute for the entire Church in Gabon the source of a renewed commitment to proclaim the Gospel, as a message of peace, joy and salvation, which frees man from the forces of evil in order to lead him toward the Kingdom of God.

The fulfillment of the ministry entrusted to you in each of your dioceses requires that authentic brotherhood be lived within your Episcopal Conference: “that they may all be one... so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (Jn 17:21). This need for unity and communion was bequeathed to us by Jesus himself, as a necessary condition for his Word to be heard and welcomed and therefore for the growth of the Church. Fraternal cooperation should ensure a better response to the needs as well as to the challenges to the Church besides keeping vigil in a spirit of collegiality over the common good of the whole of society. In view of this, you have recently inaugurated a day of prayer for your country. The Church witnesses and thereby shares in the concerns of all the people of Gabon; “there is no question, then, of the Christian message inhibiting men from building up an ever more just and fraternal world: on the contrary it is an incentive to do these very things” (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 34). Moreover, the *Centre d’études pour la doctrine sociale et le dialogue interreligieux* inaugurated in Libreville in 2011, demonstrates your interest in evangelizing the customs and socio-political realities of your country.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, the unity of the presbyterate around its Bishop must be exemplary so as to allow the faithful to feel that the Church represents the family of God. It must be shown by a genuine concern to remain immune to the insidious danger of tribal and ethnic considerations or discrimination which are the very denial of the Gospel. This spirit of communion is expressed in a particular way through the fraternal care that you pay to the life and the mission of your priests, in constant dialogue, however without hesitating to sanction the situations that so require, in fairness and in charity. I would like to emphasize here how important the life of prayer is for the priest, for it is in Christ that priestly life is unified. Thus, the priest will be fully available to God and to his brothers, and he will generously fulfil the office of passing on the Word and celebrating the sacraments fittingly. A sound permanent formation will be instrumental in enhancing apostolic dynamism in order to meet men and women in their culture and in their language. For this reason particular attention must be paid to the preparation of homilies and catecheses. “The homily is the touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness and ability to communicate to his people” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 135).

Candidates to the priesthood rightly deserve a prominent place in your pastor’s heart: these young men whose enthusiasm at times is overcast by doubt, wish to consecrate their life to the Lord in the priesthood. They need to feel their Bishop’s solicitude and encouragement, synonymous with practical guidance in the indispensable and complex process of the discernment of vocations. This discernment and the formation of seminarians must be rooted first and foremost in the Gospel, and then “in the true cultural values of their country, in a sense of honesty, responsibility and integrity” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 95).

Since the very foundation of the Church in Gabon, men and women religious have demonstrated extraordinary apostolic zeal at the service of the Gospel, and they also have the right to privileged attention filled with warmth on your part. In this Year of Consecrated Life, I now repeat to you personally the invitation I addressed in this sense to all my brothers in the Episcopate: “May this

Year be an opportunity to accept consecrated life, readily and joyfully, as a spiritual capital which contributes to the good of the whole body of Christ (...), and not simply that of the individual religious families” (*Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, 21 November 2014, n. 5). This acceptance is manifest through constructive dialogue and constant cooperation on all levels with them, as well as spiritual closeness and the fostering of various charisms in your dioceses.

I also encourage you to continue to seek to awaken in the laity the sense of their Christian vocation, exhorting them to develop their charisms in order to place them at the service of the Church and of society. The Church is entirely missionary by nature. It must be recognized that an important contribution to the vitality of your Churches derives from the zeal of the many faithful lay people who dedicate themselves on various levels to the life of the community. Every Christian community, each Christian, is therefore called to have the courage to approach the men and women who are in need of the light of the Gospel in their area of life. For this reason, human and Christian formation is an important instrument so as to further the work of evangelization and of the peoples’ development, moreover taking care to always “go forth” to the peripheries of society (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 20). One must also take care to present to the young people the true face of Christ, their friend and their guide, so they may find in Him a sure anchor in order to withstand ideologies, sects, as well as the illusions of false modernity and the mirage of material riches.

In this respect, the prestige enjoyed by Catholic educational institutions in your country must be maintained, thanks to a formation increasingly inspired by the spirit of the Gospel. *The Agreement between the Holy See and the Gabonese Republic on the Catholic Teaching Statute* of 2001 offers the local Church valuable support in this regard. “It has to promote the good of every man and of the whole man” (cf. *Populorum Progressio*, n. 14), with a preferential option for the poorest. I therefore encourage you to boldly raise your voice to defend the human person, as well as the sacredness of human life. In this period of preparation for the Synod of Bishops on the Family, I invite you to pray and to call for prayer for its success, for a better service to all families.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, at the end of this meeting, I should like to assure you of my prayer, entrusting myself once again to your prayers and to those of your diocesan communities. With my warm encouragement which I extend in particular to the priests, men and women religious, catechists and to all your co-workers, for the intercession of Our Lady of Gabon, I impart to you the Apostolic Blessing, imploring an abundance of divine graces upon you and upon the entire Church in your country.
