



The Holy See

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

Monday, 27 April 2015

[Multimedia]

Dear Brother Bishops,

I am very happy to welcome you on the occasion of your pilgrimage to the Tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul. I cordially greet Archbishop Antoine Ganyé, President of your Conference, and I thank him for his words. I hope that your visit to Rome may be for you a time of deep reflection and a peaceful return to the spiritual sources, may it give you the opportunity to give thanks for the fine work carried out in your dioceses to proclaim the Gospel, and may it offer you the necessary help to persevere in your mission as pastors.

Our meeting manifests the fraternal communion which exists among all bishops, and with the one who presides over this communion: the Successor of Peter.

I formulate the vow that, once you have returned to your dioceses, you may keep in mind this profound and supernatural reality: you are never alone. We are all united at the service of one Lord.

First of all I should like to thank the Lord for the progress which, through the exercise of your ministry, the Church in Benin is able to make. You bear a witness of beautiful enthusiasm by the visible expression of the faith of the People of God. Parish life is lively, large numbers of faithful attend the celebrations, conversions to Christ are numerous, as well as priestly and religious vocations. Nevertheless you are right to emphasize in your reports that this faith, although increasingly widespread, is sometimes superficial and lacks soundness. It is therefore important that the desire for a profound knowledge of the Christian mystery may not be the exclusive right of the elite, but that it enliven all the faithful, for all are called to holiness. This is essential so that the

Church in Benin may withstand and conquer the headwinds that are rising throughout the world and which will not fail to blow in your land too. I know that you are vigilant regarding the numerous ideological and media attacks. The spirit of secularism is at work in your country too, although not clearly seen yet. Only a faith deeply rooted in the hearts of the faithful, and lived concretely, will enable you to confront all of this.

I am thinking in particular of the main challenges to the family to which the next Synod in Rome will seek to respond. I thank you for your prayers in this respect, and for your prayers for me; I also thank you for the programme you have planned with your dioceses, in order to take part in this most important reflection. I cannot but encourage you to continue with determination the efforts undertaken to support families, in their faith as well as in their daily life. I know that the pastoral care of marriage is still difficult, bearing in mind the actual, social and cultural situation of your people. One must never become discouraged, however, but persevere without pausing, so that the family the Catholic Church defends is a reality wanted by God; it is a gift of God that brings to people as well as to societies: joy, peace, stability, happiness. What is at stake is important, since, the family is the basic cell both of society and of the Church, it is within it that the human and authentic Gospel values are passed on: “the educational mission of the Christian family [is] a true ministry through which the Gospel is transmitted and radiated, so that family life itself becomes an itinerary of faith and ... a school of following Christ” (*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 39).

Another important challenge that you are carefully addressing regards young people and education. In your dioceses you have opened many Catholic schools, and the young people are well integrated in the movements. This effort must be followed without pause, for the integral formation, both human and spiritual, of the young generations is important for the future of the society to which they can then make their precious contribution, especially in terms of solidarity, justice and respect for others. It is necessary in fact to foster in your country — naturally without compromising the truth revealed by the Lord — the encounter between cultures, as well as dialogue between religions, particularly with Islam. It is well known that Benin is an example of harmony among the religions present on its territory. It is important to remain vigilant, bearing in mind the current world climate, in order to preserve this fragile legacy. I am particularly pleased about the recent international conference on interreligious dialogue, held recently under Cardinal Tauran’s presidency, which was appreciated by all.

By fostering accord and justice, dear brothers, your local Churches thus have a leading role to play in the advancement of your country. But this role is also fulfilled through works of health care and of human advancement. How much work has been accomplished in the name of the Gospel in your dioceses! While the worldwide economic crisis strikes a great number of countries, it is important to swim courageously against the tide, fighting against the widespread “throw-away” culture (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 53) and spreading the Gospel values of welcome and of encounter. “The service of charity is also a constituent element of the Church’s mission and an indispensable expression of her very being” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 179). It is necessary, however,

to be well aware that the works carried out by the Church have a finality which must be clearly identified: it is never simply a matter of social assistance, but of showing the tenderness and mercy of Jesus himself, who bends over the wounds and weaknesses of his own brothers and sisters. Thus, the joy of the Gospel is announced in the most efficient way to people. Warm gratitude goes to those who work with you, be they priests, lay faithful, or men and women religious. I invite the latter to live the *Year of Consecrated Life* intensely so that their life and their actions may be even more deeply rooted in Christ Jesus. In this way we “will be empowered to love, in truth and mercy, every person who crosses our path. For we will have learned from Jesus the meaning and practice of love. We will be able to love because we have his own heart (cf. *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, 28 November 2014*).

I also wish to pay homage to the generous commitment of priests to the service of the Good News. The Lord blesses your communities with the flowering of many priestly vocations. Formation in the seminary is decisive for the future, and I urge pastors to ensure its balance, which must always be human, spiritual and communitary, as well as intellectual. The Bishop must be a father to his priests, favour communion and brotherhood in the heart of the priestly family. He must take care of those who are in difficulty, of the most fragile, especially the young, who need to be accompanied more closely. Moreover, since there is no shortage of vocations, you are willing to share your resources generously with the Churches of other regions who are without. It is necessary however, when you send priests to study or on foreign mission, to do so with discernment, never forgetting the needs of your own Churches.

Dear Brother Bishops, the Church in Benin is on good terms with the civil authorities. The voice of the Church is listened to and her work is appreciated. I invite you to continue to fill your role in the public life of the country, especially in these times. I know you are engaged in an on-going endeavour to encourage relations among the different members of society. I invite you to persevere on this path, being careful not to enter directly into politics nor party disputes. The management of public affairs lies with the laity while your important, constant duty is to form and encourage.

May the Virgin Mary sustain you and enlighten you in your ministry, and lead you, as well as your priests, consecrated people, catechists and all the lay people of your dioceses, to her Son Jesus. To all I wholeheartedly impart the Apostolic Blessing.