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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DI NIGERIA (I GRUPPO)

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale di Nigeria (I gruppo), incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti in questi giorni, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

● **DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE**

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. With affection in the Risen Lord I greet you, the Bishops of Nigeria, on the occasion of your pilgrimage to Rome for your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. It is truly a great joy for me to welcome you and through you to embrace all the faithful of your local communities, whom I remember with affection in the Lord and who remain ever in my prayers. Indeed, your presence rekindles the vivid memories of my visit to your country four years ago, when Almighty God granted me the privilege of beatifying Father Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi in his homeland. Commending your local communities to the intercession of Blessed Cyprian Michael, I pray for you, the Shepherds of God's holy people, and for the priests, Religious and laity entrusted to your pastoral care. My prayer for you is that "God may make you worthy of his call, and may fulfil every good resolve and work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in him" (2 Th 1:11-12).

2. Your country boasts one of the largest Catholic populations in the whole of Africa and there is a steady increase in the numbers of those added day by day to the Lord. "This is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes" (Ps 118:23). You are moreover blessed with many vocations to the priesthood and religious life, which also allow you to send missionaries to other African nations. Your generosity in this regard is to be commended and encouraged: indeed, God will "multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness . . . For the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God" (2 Cor 9:10,12).

Through your leadership, the Church is also actively involved in Nigerian national life, constantly urging

solidarity, the exercise of civic responsibility and the overcoming of tensions and conflict through dialogue and reconciliation. Such efforts are all the more important as Nigeria continues along the path of transition from military rule to democratic government, and more particularly in light of the recent incidents of violence that have erupted in different parts of the country. In all of this, as well as in the other circumstances — both ordinary and extraordinary — of daily life, the Church must remain free to pursue her spiritual mission, which includes her undertakings in the areas of pastoral ministry, education, health care and human and social development. In this same regard, your 1997 National Pastoral Plan for Nigeria, with the necessary modifications and updating, remains an excellent framework for the continuing work of the Church.

3. As many of you have pointed out in your reports, the persistence of widespread poverty, often extreme, and the spread of moral and ethical indifference, from which arise crime, corruption and attacks on the sanctity of human life itself, form the context in which the Church fulfils her mission. For this reason, there is a particular need to intensify efforts to provide the faithful with serious programmes of formation which will help them to deepen their Christian faith and understanding and thus enable them to take their rightful place both in the Church of Christ and in society.

Catechesis complements and perfects the announcement of the Good News, helping faith to grow to maturity and educating Christ's disciples in a thorough and systematic knowledge of the person and message of the Lord himself (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 19). Bible study, that is, direct contact with the sacred text of God's word, accompanied by devout prayer (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 25) and supported by a clear exposition of doctrine as found in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, will further ensure that lay men and women are secure in their faith and prepared to fulfil its demands in all the circumstances of their lives and activities. Many of your lay faithful are already responding positively to the challenge of playing an active role in public life, including the political sphere. Your untiring efforts in this regard should enable them to be truly "led by the spirit of the Gospel" and to "contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven" (*Lumen Gentium*, 31).

4. As the members of your local Churches are strengthened and confirmed in the revealed truth, they will be strengthened in their own Catholic identity. They will also be enabled to respond to the objections raised with increasing frequency by sects and new religious movements, of which there are many in your country. Catechesis is especially important for young people, for whom an enlightened faith is a lamp to guide their path into the future. It will likewise be their source of strength as they face the uncertainties of the constantly evolving economic situation. For this reason, it is of the utmost importance that pastoral programmes aimed specifically at children and youth should be a principal part of all your pastoral planning.

In this way too, the family will be strengthened, threatened as it is in its fundamental aspects of unity and stability by practices such as polygamy, divorce, abortion and prostitution, by the spread of a contraceptive mentality and by irresponsible sexual activity that also increases the incidence of AIDS. Therefore, working to help families to live their Christian lives faithfully and generously as true "domestic churches" (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11) remains a priority, for there is still a need to reconcile traditional practices with Church teaching regarding marriage and family life. Likewise, your support of programmes for women — placing the Church at the forefront of the movement to foster greater respect for their dignity and rights — takes on ever greater significance. I would also urge you to investigate ways of making the Church's participation in the battle against AIDS ever more active and visible.

5. Firm and humble submission to the word of Christ, as authentically proclaimed in the Church, also forms the basis for your relationship with other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and for the necessary dialogue with the followers of African traditional religion and with Islam. I am pleased to note from your reports that, despite difficulties, progress is being made in various areas of ecumenical and interreligious dialogues. Indeed, the cultural heritage of the numerous ethnic groups present in Nigeria must be seen as a source of enrichment for the Nation, not a cause of conflict and division. I am aware that, in view of the general elections scheduled for the coming year, you are seeking to intensify ecumenical and interreligious cooperation in order to help politicians, traditional rulers and religious leaders to work together in order to ensure a free, proper and peaceful electoral process.

Here I must also raise an important issue which I know is a source of grave concern to you and your people. There are certain parts of the country where proponents of Islam are acting with ever greater militancy, even to the point of imposing their understanding of Islamic law on entire States within the Nigerian Federation and denying other believers the freedom of religious expression. I strongly encourage and support your every effort to speak out courageously and forcefully in this regard: government leaders, both local and federal, as well as people of good will of all persuasions, must be reminded of the obligation of every government to ensure that the equality of all citizens before the law is never violated for religious reasons, whether openly or covertly. Accordingly, even in cases where a special juridical position is granted to a particular religion, there always remains the duty to ensure that the right to freedom of conscience is legally recognized and effectively respected for all citizens, and also for foreigners residing in the country (cf. *Message for the 1998 World Day of Peace*, 1).

6. Turning to those who work with you most closely in the pastoral ministry, I wish to encourage your efforts to ensure an ever more complete and permanent formation for your priests. Your relations with them should always be characterized by unity, fraternity and appreciation. All who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders have been configured to Christ the Head and Shepherd of the Church. They must therefore imitate his complete self-giving for the sake of the flock and the advancement of the Kingdom. Commitment to unceasing personal conversion is an essential component of priestly life and ministry. We must always rekindle the gift that is ours, the gift of our sacramental configuration to Christ.

The Priesthood must never be seen as a means for improving one's lot in life or in terms of gaining prestige. Priests and candidates to the priesthood often live at a level both materially and educationally superior to that of their families and the members of their own age group; it is therefore very easy for them to succumb to the temptation of thinking of themselves as better than others. When this happens, the ideal of priestly service and self-giving dedication can fade, leaving the priest dissatisfied and disheartened.

For this reason, your lives and those of your priests should reflect an authentic evangelical poverty and detachment from the things and attitudes of the world, and the value of celibacy as a complete gift of self to the Lord and his Church must be carefully safeguarded. Behaviour which might give scandal must be carefully avoided, and you yourselves must diligently investigate accusations of any such behaviour, taking firm steps to correct it where it is found to exist. Here too, seminary formation is very important, for the convictions and practical training imparted to future priests are essential for the success of the Church's mission. As true fathers, then, the spiritual renewal and growth of your priests must be among your top priorities (cf. *Optatam Totius*, 22). Furthermore, with many of your priests being sent abroad for studies, it is advisable that reasonable time frames should be set within which they are to complete their studies and return to the Diocese. The same holds true for men and women Religious living or studying abroad: every encouragement and support which you can give to Superiors of Religious Communities in this regard is likewise very important.

7. Indeed, your pastoral concern and solicitude also includes the men and women Religious in your Dioceses. They have received a special consecration which needs to be ever deepened. Through the profession of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, they bear witness to the Kingdom and build up the Body of Christ by leading others to conversion and a life of holiness. They must remain firmly rooted in Christ, so that the high ideals of their vocation will continue undimmed in their own hearts and in the eyes of the people to whom they are a special sign of God's loving care. Your role, while respecting and defending the proper autonomy and internal governance of the religious communities within your territory, is to maintain close contacts with them, giving them every possible support so that they may remain faithful to the charism of their Institutes as they work with you, the Pastors of the Church, in carrying out their apostolate (cf. *Mutuae Relationes*, 8).

The life of chastity, poverty and obedience willingly embraced and faithfully lived confutes the conventional wisdom of the world and challenges the commonly accepted vision of life. The witness offered by consecrated women and men can transform a community's way of thinking and acting precisely through the love which Religious show for everyone, through their focus on spiritual matters rather than on material things, and through their self-giving service and solidarity with those in need. In this context, it is most fitting for you to show your appreciation and gratitude to the men and women Religious in your Dioceses for all the good that they do through their prayer and through their activity in the different areas of local pastoral life.

8. Dear Brothers, Shepherds of God's Holy People, it is of the utmost importance that openness, honesty and transparency should always be the hallmark of everything that the Church does, in all her spiritual, educational and social undertakings, as well as in every aspect of her administration. In a true spirit of love and service of the Church and the brethren, you have the task of leading, challenging and uniting all those who work in the Lord's vineyard. At the beginning of the Third Christian Millennium we do well to remember the Lord's words about the abundance of the harvest to be reaped through our service of the Gospel (cf. *Mt 9:37*). Let us dedicate ourselves with fresh vigour to the work of sharing the light of truth with all men and women.

I pray that through your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul the Holy Spirit of God will give you fresh strength for the work of the new evangelization. With affection in the Lord, I commend you, your priests, Religious and lay faithful to the intercession of Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi and to the protection of Mary, Mother of the Church and our Mother. As a pledge of grace and peace in the Risen Saviour I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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