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**VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLE CONFERENZE EPISCOPALI DI LIBERIA, GAMBIA E SIERRA LEONE**

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli delle Conferenze Episcopali di Liberia, Gambia e Sierra Leone, incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti nei giorni scorsi, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• **DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE**

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. It is with great joy and affection in our Lord Jesus Christ that I welcome you, the Bishops of the Gambia, Liberia and Sierra Leone, on the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit. Through you I extend warm greetings to the clergy, religious and laity in your countries. You have come to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul to bear witness to your faith, and you bring also the devotion of your people to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, founded by Christ and spread to the ends of the earth. Indeed, the faithful of your individual communities, often despite great adversity and trials, have not failed to show the zeal of a people who have truly become "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pet 2:9).

2. Members of the Catholic Church form a very small part of the population in your countries, and at times the social, political and even religious climate makes evangelization and interreligious dialogue difficult. But the Lord himself has spoken words of encouragement in this regard: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Lk 12:32). Drawing comfort and strength from the Lord's promise, your communities effectively proclaim the Gospel's power to transform human hearts and lives. They contribute to the improvement of society through a strong and constructive Catholic presence in the fields of education, health care and assistance to the poor. In fact, the Church's social welfare programmes in your countries are praised by people and government alike. Through your continuing efforts in these areas you give eloquent expression to the missionary vocation, which "belongs to the very nature of Christian life" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 1).

Historically, Christian minorities have found themselves in a unique position to spread Christ's message to their

brothers and sisters who still do not know him. Obedience to the word of God, as it is authentically proclaimed by the Church, must form the basis for your relationship with other Christian communities. As you are aware, this same word of God can also act as a fundamental point of departure for essential dialogue with the followers of African traditional religions and Islam. It is your task to continue to foster an attitude of mutual respect which avoids religious indifference and militant fundamentalism. You must remain vigilant to ensure that the truth is never silenced. This form of social stewardship requires efforts to protect a fundamental religious freedom, but a freedom which must never be exploited for political ends. At no time should anyone be punished or criticized for speaking the truth.

3. I emphasize the need for a renewed commitment to the formation of your youth and laity. The seduction of material things, and the dangerous attraction of cults and secret societies which promise wealth and power can hold great appeal, especially for young people. These worrying trends can only be changed by helping our youth realize that they are truly "a new generation of builders", called to work towards a "civilization of love" marked by freedom and peace (cf. World Youth Day Prayer Vigil at Downside Park, Toronto, Canada, 27 July 2002, 4). You must help young people to reject "the temptation of unlawful short-cuts towards false mirages of success and wealth". In fact, it is only in justice, often achieved through sacrifice, that real peace can be attained (cf. Message for the 1998 World Day of Peace, 7).

With you, I praise our Heavenly Father for the gift of so many men and women committed to the work of catechesis and the fundamental formation of the laity, young and old alike. They are truly the salt of the earth and a guiding light for others. These "irreplaceable evangelizers" have been and will continue to be the backbone of your Christian communities, spreading the Good News in difficult and even dangerous circumstances. As Bishops, you must support your catechists in their efforts to improve their ability to assist you in your work of evangelization. Accordingly, proper formation, both spiritual and intellectual, as well as moral and material support, are required if these dedicated servants of the Word are to be effective (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 91).

4. A fundamental element of African culture and civilization has always been the family. "The faithful and fruitful union of man and woman, blessed by the grace of Christ, is a genuine Gospel of life and hope for humanity" (Closing Remarks to the Fourth World Meeting of Families, 26 January 2003, 1). Unfortunately this Gospel of life, the source of hope and stability, is being threatened in your countries by widespread polygamy, divorce, abortion, prostitution, human trafficking and a contraceptive mentality. These same factors contribute to irresponsible and immoral sexual activity leading to the spread of AIDS, a pandemic which cannot be ignored. Not only is this disease destroying countless lives, but it is threatening the social and economic stability of the African continent.

As the Church in Africa does all within her power to defend the sanctity of the family and its pre-eminent place in African society, she is called above all to proclaim loudly and clearly the liberating message of authentic Christian love. Every educational programme, whether Christian or secular, must emphasize that true love is chaste love, and that chastity provides us with a founded hope for overcoming the forces threatening the institution of the family and at the same time for freeing humanity from the devastation wrought by scourges such as HIV/AIDS. "The companionship, joy, happiness and peace which Christian marriage and fidelity provide, and the safeguard which chastity gives, must be continuously presented to the faithful, particularly the young" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 116). This task not only includes encouraging and educating young people but also requires the Church to be the leader in the sustained effort to promote programmes which foster authentic respect for the dignity and rights of women.

5. Although your countries continue to face humanitarian challenges, I join you in giving thanks to God for the great strides made in restoring peace in Liberia and Sierra Leone. At the same time, however, I am troubled by recent developments in the immediate area which could threaten the continuing efforts to re-establish stability. The path to peace is always a difficult one. Nevertheless, I am certain that the commitment and good will of those involved in the process can help to build once more a culture of respect and dignity. The Church, which has suffered enormously from these conflicts, must maintain her strong stance in order to protect those who have no voice. I call on you, my Brother Bishops, to work tirelessly for reconciliation and to bear authentic witness to unity by gestures of solidarity and support for the victims of decades of violence.

Along these same lines, we cannot fail to note with concern the tragic situation of millions of refuges and displaced persons. Some are victims of national disasters, like the severe drought in the Gambia, while others have been marginalized by power struggles or by inadequate social and economic development. In a special way I commend you and your local Churches for reaching out, despite your very limited resources, to those who have been forced out of their own countries into foreign lands. We must always be mindful that our Lord and his family were refugees as well. I urge you and your people to continue to love and care for these brothers and sisters just as you would for the Holy Family, reminding them always that their condition makes them no less important in God's eyes.

6. Another priority of your ministry is your pastoral attention to the spiritual lives of the consecrated men and women in your Dioceses. This is especially true for the newer foundations, which need your guidance in order to be ever more committed to their apostolates and the pursuit of holiness. The call to "leave everything and thus to risk everything for Christ" (*Vita Consecrata*, 40) has been followed literally by many religious in your countries as they have shared fully in the lot of your people during the war and violence that have devastated the region. Some have been killed, others imprisoned or made refugees. This steadfast presence among their brothers and sisters suffering the same fate bears witness to a God who does not abandon his people.

7. It is edifying to note that even in the midst of turmoil and war men and women have continued to answer God's call with generosity. The already arduous task of proper formation becomes more difficult when the bare necessities for such work are not available. I commend you in your efforts to establish solid formation programmes. Bishops, as those primarily responsible for the Church's life, must ensure that all candidates for the priesthood are carefully selected and formed in a way that prepares them to give themselves totally to their mission in the Church. All those consecrated in this special way to Christ, the Head of the Church, should strive to lead lives of true evangelical poverty. In a world filled with temptations, priests are called to be detached from material things and to devote themselves to the service of others through the complete gift of self in celibacy. Scandalous behaviour must at all times be confronted, investigated and corrected.

Given the severe shortage of priests in your Dioceses, you may feel obliged to place newly ordained men in positions where they must immediately take on heavy pastoral responsibilities. While this may sometimes be unavoidable, great care must always be taken to see that young priests are also given the time necessary to nurture and develop their spiritual lives. All priests must have at their disposal structures of priestly support. Such structures include continuing spiritual and intellectual formation and retreats and days of recollection which bring the brotherhood of priests together in word and sacrament.

"By sacred ordination and by the mission they receive from their Bishops, priests are promoted to the service of Christ, the Teacher, the Priest and the King" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 1). Your clergy are your closest collaborators, as their ministry is a reflection of the love of Christ, the Good Shepherd, for his flock. Engaged at all times in pastoral activities, they need your guidance in order to maintain a proper balance between their work and their spiritual lives. Priestly life must be centred upon the constant renewal of the grace received in Holy Orders. Your own example and leadership can do much to encourage the growth of this grace, especially through consultation and collaboration in matters of administration and pastoral work. This in fact is essential for a truly effective ministry.

8. Dear Brothers, I wish you to know of my constant prayers for you and your people. As we celebrate a special year devoted to the Rosary, it is my sincere hope that you will help your flocks to rediscover this rich yet simple prayer. It is a prayer for peace, a prayer for the family, a prayer for children and a prayer for hope (cf. *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 40-43). May Mary, Queen of the Rosary, assist you as you lead towards salvation God's people in the Gambia, Liberia and Sierra Leone. To each of you and to all the priests, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

