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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DELLA NIGERIA (II 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 della Nigeria, (II gruppo), incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti in questi giorni, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brothers in the Episcopacy,

1. It is a great joy for me to welcome you, the second group of Nigerian Bishops, on the occasion of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (*Rom 1:7*). The ancient practice of "coming to see Peter" is reminiscent of the Apostle Paul's visit to Jerusalem, to spend time with Cephas (cf. *Gal 1:18*) whom the Lord had constituted the "rock" upon which he would build his Church. In the fraternal embrace of Peter and Paul the early Christian community recognized Paul's Gentile converts as true brothers and sisters in the faith, and in Paul's account of the abundant outpouring of grace upon these new believers the entire community found ever greater reason to praise God's boundless mercy (cf. *Acts 15:16ff*). In like manner, our coming together today reaffirms the communion of your vibrant and growing particular Churches with the Successor of Peter and with the Church Universal, and together we give thanks for the life and witness of the priests, religious and laity of your land, who serve the Lord with faithfulness and gladness.

I have already shared with the first group of Nigerian Bishops certain thoughts and concerns that your Reports prompted, regarding the specific situation of the Church in your country. Now, I offer some further points of reflection for you who exercise in your local communities "the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing" (*Christus Dominus*, 11).

2. I share your pastoral concern for the peaceful development of your peoples, not only in terms of material advancement, but especially in genuine political freedom, ethnic harmony and respect for the rights of all citizens. The question before you at this time is: how can the Gospel be incarnated in these emerging

circumstances? How can the Church and individual Christians best deal with the pressing issues which they must face if they are to build a better future for themselves and their children?

An answer to these questions can be found in the very goals which, five years ago, you set for yourselves in the National Pastoral Plan for Nigeria. In this far-reaching programme drafted by your Episcopal Commission on Mission, two broad areas summarize the thrust of what you see as the pastoral mission of the Church in Nigeria in the Third Christian Millennium: the new evangelization and the Church's responsibilities in civil society. It is within this twofold context that you were able to place virtually all of your pastoral objectives aimed at transforming humanity from within, at renewing the innocence of people's hearts and, as recommended by the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, at building up the Church as family. It is this latter element which holds a vital key to the first two: as the Synod Fathers acknowledged, the Church as God's family "is an expression of the Church's nature particularly appropriate for Africa. For this image emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 63). In fact, when proclamation and catechesis succeed in building up the Church as family, the whole of society benefits: harmony between different ethnic groups is given a stronger foundation, ethnocentrism is avoided and reconciliation encouraged, greater solidarity and a sharing of resources among people, and life in society becomes ever more imbued with an awareness of the obligations which flow from respect for the God-given dignity of every human being.

3. The Church's mission in Nigeria, as everywhere, stems from her very nature as the sacrament of union with God and of the unity of all the members of the human family (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). Just as in a family peace and harmony must be constantly built up, so too in the Church differences are not to be seen as a reason for conflict or tension, but as a source of strength and unity in legitimate diversity. Are not peace, harmony, unity, generosity and cooperation hallmarks of a strong, healthy family? These then must be the distinguishing characteristics of all relationships within the Church. "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father" (*Mt* 5:16).

In like manner, honesty and openness to dialogue is a necessary Christian attitude both inside the community as well as outside, with other believers and with men and women of good will. An erroneous or incomplete understanding of inculturation or ecumenism, however, must not compromise the duty to evangelize, which is an essential element of the Catholic identity. The Church, while showing great respect and esteem for the non-Christian religions professed by many Africans, cannot fail to sense the urgency of bringing the Good News to millions who have not yet heard Christ's saving message. As Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "The Church holds that these multitudes have the right to know the riches of the mystery of Christ (cf. *Eph* 3:8) — riches in which we believe that the whole of humanity can find, in unsuspected fulness, everything that it is gropingly searching for concerning God, man and his destiny, life and death, and truth" (No. 53).

4. Moreover, evangelization and integral human development — the development of every person and of the whole person — are intimately linked. The Second Vatican Council, in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, put it well: "Pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church not only communicates divine life to people but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth, most of all by its healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which it strengthens the seams of human society and imbues everyday activity with a deeper meaning and importance. Thus through her individual members and her whole community, the Church believes she can contribute greatly towards making the family of man and its history more human" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 40). In fact, it is in the Incarnation of the Word of God that human history finds its true meaning; it is Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of mankind, who is the foundation of restored human dignity. For this reason, to proclaim Jesus Christ means to reveal to people their inalienable dignity: "Since it has been entrusted to the Church to reveal the mystery of God, who is the ultimate goal of man, she opens up to man at the same time the meaning of his own existence, that is, the innermost truth about himself" (*ibid.*, 41).

Precisely because people have been endowed with this extraordinary dignity they should not be reduced to living in sub-human social, economic, cultural or political conditions. This is the theological basis of the struggle for the defence of justice and social peace, for the promotion, liberation and integral human development of all people and of every individual. Thus, the Fathers of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops

rightly observed that "integral development implies respect for human dignity and this can only be achieved in justice and peace" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 69).

5. This connection between evangelization and human development explains the Church's presence in the social sphere, in the arena of public and social life. Following the example of her Lord, she exercises her prophetic role on behalf of all people, especially the poor, the suffering, the defenceless; she becomes the voice of the voiceless, insisting that the dignity of the human person should always be at the centre of local, national and international programmes. She "challenges the consciences of Heads of State and those responsible for the public domain to guarantee ever more the liberation and development of their peoples" (*ibid.*, 70).

Proclamation of the Good News, therefore, involves the promotion of initiatives that contribute to the development and ennoblement of people in their spiritual and material existence. It also denounces and combats all that degrades or destroys the human person. "The condemnation of evils and injustices is also part of that ministry of evangelization in the social field which is an aspect of the Church's prophetic role. But it should be made clear that proclamation is always more important than condemnation" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41). Therefore, as Shepherds and Pastors of souls we are charged with preaching the Gospel in a positive way, always, in season and out of season (cf. *2 Tim* 4:2), in order to build up the Family of God which is the Church, in charity and in truth, and to serve the whole family of man as it aspires to greater justice, freedom and peace.

6. Brothers, these are some reflections which your visit to the tombs of the Apostles brings to mind and which I wanted to add to the comments already made to the first group of Nigerian Bishops. I am confident that your pilgrimage will give you renewed strength for your ministry, that you may never grow weary of preaching God's word, celebrating the sacraments, guiding the flock given over to your care, and seeking out those who have strayed or who have not yet heard the Lord's voice. The Church in Nigeria remains ever close to my heart: I pray that the joy of the Lord's Resurrection and the Spirit's gifts of wisdom and courage will become ever more visible in the lives of your people, that they may truly be "generous sons and daughters of the Church which is the Family of the Father, the Brotherhood of the Son and the Image of the Trinity" (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 144). Commending you, and the priests, religious and laity to the loving protection of Mary, Queen of Africa, and to the intercession of your own Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of grace and communion in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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