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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DEL SUDAN

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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 del Sudan, 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. "May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways" (2 Th 3:16). At this decisive moment for your country, as two decades of violent conflict and bloodshed seem poised to give way to reconciliation and pacification, I greet you, the members of the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference, with these words of the Apostle Paul, words of comfort and reassurance, words founded on the Word who is "the life and the light of men" (cf. Jn 1:4), Jesus Christ, our hope and our peace.

These days of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum* are privileged moments of grace during which we strengthen the bonds of fraternal communion and solidarity which unite us in the task of bearing witness to the Good News of salvation. As we reflect together on this mission received from the Lord and on its particular implications for you and your local communities, I wish to call to mind the figures of two intrepid witnesses to the faith, two holy individuals whose lives are intimately connected with your land: Saint Josephine Bakhita and Saint Daniel Comboni. I am convinced that the example of steadfast commitment and of Christian charity given by these two devoted servants of the Lord can shed much light on the present realities facing the Church in your country.

2. From her earliest years Saint Josephine Bakhita knew the cruelty and brutality with which man can treat his fellow man. Abducted and sold into slavery as a young child, she was all too familiar with the suffering and victimization that still afflicts countless men and women in her homeland and throughout Africa and the world. Her life inspires the firm resolve to work effectively to free people from oppression and violence, ensuring that their human dignity is respected in the full exercise of their rights. It is this same resolve that must guide the Church in the Sudan today as the nation makes the transition from hostility and conflict to peace and concord.

Saint Bakhita is a shining advocate of authentic emancipation. Her life clearly shows that tribalism and forms of discrimination based on ethnic origin, language and culture do not belong in a civilized society and have absolutely no place in the community of believers.

The Church in your country is acutely aware of the hardships and pain that afflict those fleeing war and violence — especially women and children — and she mobilizes not only her own resources in helping to meet their needs but also draws on the generosity of outside volunteers and benefactors. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the work of Sudanaid, the national relief agency overseen by the Aid and Development Department of your Bishops' Conference, which rightly enjoys widespread esteem for the various charitable projects in which it is engaged. Brothers, I would suggest that a solid basis for seeking Church representation in the process of normalization currently underway can be found precisely in the much-needed assistance that she lends to the many refugees and displaced persons who have been forced from their homes and family lands.

Moreover, the many contributions that the Church makes to your country's social and cultural life can help you to establish closer and more positive relationships with national institutions. A tentative opening on the part of civil leadership can already be seen in the presence of Christians in the current government, and in the reactivation of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue. You should do all that you can to encourage this, even as you insist that religious pluralism, as guaranteed by the Sudanese Constitution, should be respected.

An important corollary in this regard is your duty to address significant issues that touch upon the country's social, economic, political and cultural life (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, No. 110). As you know so well, it belongs to the Church to speak out unambiguously on behalf of those who have no voice and to be a leaven of peace and solidarity, particularly where these ideals are most fragile and threatened. As Bishops, your words and actions are never to be the expression of individual political preferences but must always reflect the attitude of Christ the Good Shepherd.

3. With this image of the Good Shepherd in mind, I turn now to the figure of Saint Daniel Comboni, who, as a missionary priest and Bishop, worked tirelessly to make Christ known and welcomed in Central Africa, including the Sudan. Saint Daniel was keenly concerned that Africans should have a key role in evangelizing the continent, and he was inspired to draft a missionary blueprint for the region — a "plan for the rebirth of Africa" — that enlisted the help of native peoples themselves. In the course of his missionary activity, he did not let the great suffering and many hardships that he endured — privation, exhaustion, illness, mistrust — divert him from the task of preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Comboni was moreover a strong advocate of inculturating the faith. He took great pains to familiarize himself with the cultures and languages of the local peoples he served. In this way, he was able to present the Gospel in a manner and according to the customs that his listeners readily understood. In a very real way, his life is an example for us today, clearly demonstrating that "the evangelization of culture and the inculturation of the Gospel are an integral part of the new evangelization and thus a specific concern of the episcopal office" (*Pastores Gregis*, No. 30).

Brothers, it is this same apostolic fervour, missionary zeal and deep concern for the salvation of souls that must be a hallmark of your own ministry as Bishops. Make it your first and foremost duty to care for the flock entrusted to you, looking after its spiritual and physical well-being, spending time with the faithful, in particular with your priests and the religious in your Dioceses. The pastoral ministry of the Bishop, in fact, "finds expression in his 'being for' the other members of the faithful while not detracting from his 'being with' them" (*Pastores Gregis*, No. 10).

In all this, yours must be an invitation, gentle yet insistent, to conversion, the conversion of hearts and minds. Faith grows to maturity as Christ's disciples are educated and formed in a thorough and systematic knowledge of his person and message (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, No. 19). Thus, the continuing formation of the laity is a priority in your mission as preachers and teachers. Spiritual and doctrinal formation should aim at helping the lay faithful to carry out their prophetic role in a society which does not always recognize or accept the truth and values of the Gospel. This is especially the case for your catechists: these dedicated servants of the Word

require proper formation, both spiritual and intellectual, as well as moral and material support (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, No. 91).

It would also prove helpful if a simple catechism in the language of the people were prepared and made available. Similarly, suitable texts in local languages could be prepared and distributed as a means of presenting Jesus to those who are unfamiliar with the Christian message and as a tool for interreligious dialogue. This could be especially helpful in those areas exempt from *Shari'ah* law, particularly in the Federal Capital of Khartoum. Here too I would like to encourage you to rekindle your efforts to establish a Catholic University in Khartoum. Such an institution would allow the priceless contribution that the Church makes in elementary and secondary education to be brought to bear also in the area of higher education. A Catholic University would also be of great assistance in helping you to fulfil your duty of seeing that properly trained teachers are available to impart Christian instruction in the public schools.

4. Turning to those who assist you most closely in your pastoral ministry, I urge you always to cherish your priests with a special love and to regard them as precious co-workers and friends (cf. *Christus Dominus*, No. 16). Their formation must be such that they are ready to put aside all earthly ambition in order to act in the person of Christ. They 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 investigated, confronted and corrected. With your friendship and fraternal support, as well as that of their brother priests, it will be easier for your clergy to be wholly devoted, in chastity and simplicity, to their ministry of service.

Of course, the attitudes and dispositions of a true shepherd must be nurtured in the hearts of future priests long before their ordination. This is the purpose of the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation provided in the seminary. The guidelines contained in my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* will prove invaluable for evaluating candidates and improving their training. At the same time, steps should be taken to ensure that proper priestly formation continues after ordination, especially during the early years of ministry.

In the faith life of your communities Religious and Missionary Institutes continue to play a decisive role. While respecting the legitimate internal autonomy established for religious communities, the Bishop is to help them fulfil — within the local Church — their obligation to bear witness to the reality of God's love for his people. As Pastors of Christ's flock, you should urge careful discernment of the suitability of candidates to the religious life and help superiors to provide a solid spiritual and intellectual formation, both before and after profession.

5. In the fulfilment of your many duties, you and your priests must always be attentive to the human and spiritual needs of your people. Time and resources should never be spent on diocesan or parochial structures or on development projects at the expense of people; nor should such structures or projects impede personal contact with those whom God has called us to serve. Equity and transparency must be the indispensable traits characterizing all financial matters, with every effort being made to see that contributions are truly used for the purposes intended. The Church's pastoral mission and the duty of her ministers "not to be served but to serve" (*Mt 20:28*) must always be the overriding concern.

The concepts of service and solidarity can also do much to foster greater ecumenical and interreligious cooperation. A specific initiative that could help to spur progress in this area is the establishment of an agency for coordinating the various programmes aimed at lending assistance and humanitarian aid throughout the various regions of the country. Such coordination would undoubtedly serve to increase the effectiveness of these programmes and could even prove helpful in making contacts for the issue of the government permits necessary for travel to certain areas. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Sudan could actively sponsor and promote such a coordinating agency. On the model of the understanding already present in Southern Sudan with members of the Anglican Communion, the agency would be open to representatives of other Christian denominations and other religions, including Islam, thus fostering a climate of mutual trust through joint cooperation in the areas of educational and humanitarian assistance.

6. Dear Brother Bishops, my words to you today are meant to offer encouragement in the Lord. I am aware of your daily toils and of the great pain and suffering that your people still endure: I assure you and them once

more of my prayers and solidarity. With all of you I beseech the God of peace to grant success to the process of dialogue and negotiation now underway, so that truth, justice and reconciliation may again reign in the Sudan. I commend you and your Dioceses to the loving care of Mary, Queen of Apostles, and to the heavenly intercession of Saints Josephine Bakhita and Daniel Comboni. During this season of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate our Saviour's birth, may you and the priests, Religious and lay faithful of your local Churches be renewed in the hope that springs from the "glad tidings of great joy" proclaimed in Bethlehem. To all of you I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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