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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLE CONFERENZE EPISCOPALI DI SUD AFRICA, BOTSWANA, SWAZILAND, NAMIBIA E LESOTHO

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli delle Conferenze Episcopali di Sud Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, Namibia e Lesotho, incontrati questa mattina alle ore 12 e ricevuti nei giorni scorsi, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" (*Ps 133,1*). In this spirit of harmony I welcome you, the Bishops of South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, Namibia and Lesotho, with joy and affection. Through you I extend my warm greetings to the clergy, religious and laity in your countries. In this year dedicated to the Eucharist you are blessed to make your solemn visit *ad limina apostolorum*. "The Eucharist, the heart of Christian life and the source of the Church's evangelizing mission, cannot but constitute the permanent centre and source of the Petrine Ministry" (*Message at the Missa Pro Ecclesia*, 20 April 2005, 4). Likewise, it must always be at the heart of your Episcopal ministry and an inspiration to those who assist you in your sacred task.

2. Communion with Christ is the unfailing source of every element of ecclesial life - "first of all communion among all the faithful, the commitment to proclaiming and witnessing to the Gospel, the ardour of love for all, especially the poorest and lowliest" (*ibid.*). Catholics in your region constitute a minority. This presents many challenges which require dedication on the part of the Church to tend the flock effectively and, at the same time, remain faithful to her missionary commitment. For this reason it is essential that the bishops promote the crucial work of catechesis in order to ensure that God's people are truly prepared to witness by word and deed to the authentic teaching of the Gospel. As I look at the Church in Africa, and at all that has been accomplished there over the last century, I give thanks to our Heavenly Father for the many priests, religious and lay men and women who have given their lives to this noble task. Bishops have a particular responsibility to ensure that these "irreplaceable evangelizers" are provided with the necessary spiritual, doctrinal and moral preparation (cf.

Ecclesia in Africa, 91).

3. Even though your region still needs more priests, one cannot help but thank God for the large number of vocations to the priesthood you are currently witnessing in Sub-Saharan Africa. As Shepherds of Christ's flock, it is your grave responsibility to help them develop into men of the Eucharist. Priests are called to leave everything and become ever more devoted to the Blessed Sacrament, leading men and women to this mystery and the peace it brings (cf. *Homily Pentecost Sunday 2005*). I encourage you, therefore, in your ongoing efforts to select conscientiously candidates for the priesthood. Likewise these young men should be formed with great concern to guarantee that they are prepared for the many challenges they will face, helping them manifest in word and deed the peace and joy of our Lord and Saviour. A world filled with temptations needs priests who are totally dedicated to their mission. Accordingly, they are asked in a very special way to open themselves fully to serving others as Christ did by embracing the gift of celibacy. Bishops should assist them by ensuring that this gift never becomes a burden but always remains life-giving. One of the ways this can be achieved is by bringing ministers of word and sacrament together for continuing education, retreats and days of recollection.

4. Family life has always been a unifying characteristic of African society. In fact, it is within the "domestic Church", "built on the solid cultural pillar and noble values of the African tradition of the family", that children first learn of the centrality of the Eucharist in Christian life (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 92). It is of great concern that the fabric of African life, its very source of hope and stability, is threatened by divorce, abortion, prostitution, human trafficking and a contraceptive mentality, all of which contribute to a breakdown in sexual morality. Brother Bishops, I share your deep concern over the devastation caused by AIDS and related diseases. I especially pray for the widows, the orphans, the young mothers and all those whose lives have been shattered by this cruel epidemic. I urge you to continue your efforts to fight this virus which not only kills but seriously threatens the economic and social stability of the Continent. The Catholic Church has always been at the forefront both in prevention and in treatment of this illness. The traditional teaching of the Church has proven to be the only failsafe way to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. For this reason, "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).

5. Dear Brothers, as we continue to celebrate a year devoted to the Holy Eucharist, I pray that you will be sustained by the Lord's promise "I am with you always" (*Mt 28:19*). May your witness as men filled with Eucharistic hope help your flocks to arrive at an ever-greater appreciation of this Mystery. To each of you and to all those under your pastoral care, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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