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◆ VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DI GAMBIA-LIBERIA-SIERRA LEONE

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Alle ore 11.20 di questa mattina, il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI incontra gli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale di Gambia-Liberia-Sierra Leone, ricevuti in questi giorni, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum", e rivolge loro il discorso che pubblichiamo di seguito:

● DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

I am pleased to welcome you, the Bishops of Liberia, The Gambia and Sierra Leone on your *Ad Limina* visit to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul. I am grateful for the sentiments of communion and affection expressed by Bishop Koroma on your behalf, and I ask you to convey my warm greetings and encouragement to your beloved people as they strive to lead a life worthy of their calling (cf. *Eph 4:1*).

The Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops was a rich experience of communion and a providential occasion for renewing your own episcopal ministry and reflecting on its essential task, namely, "to help the People of God to give to the word of revelation the obedience of faith and to embrace fully the teachings of Christ" (*Pastores Gregis*, 31). I am pleased to see from your Quinquennial Reports that, while dedicated to the administration of your Dioceses, you personally strive to preach the Gospel at confirmations, in your visits to parishes, when meeting with groups of priests, religious or lay people and in your pastoral letters. Through your

teaching the Lord preserves your people from evil, ignorance and superstition, and transforms them into children of his Kingdom. Strive to build vibrant and expansive communities of men and women strong in their faith, contemplative and joyful in the liturgy, and well instructed on "how to live in the way that pleases God" (1 Th 4:1). In an environment marked by divorce and polygamy, promote the unity and well-being of the Christian family built on the sacrament of marriage. Initiatives and associations dedicated to the sanctification of this basic community deserve your full support. Continue to uphold the dignity of women in the context of human rights and defend your people against attempts to introduce an anti-birth mentality disguised as a form of cultural progress (cf. *Caritas in Veritate*, 28). Your mission also requires that you give attention to the adequate discernment and preparation of vocations and to the ongoing formation of priests, who are your closest collaborators in the task of evangelization. Continue to lead them by word and example to be men of prayer, sound and clear in their teaching, mature and respectful in their dealings with others, faithful to their spiritual commitments and strong in compassion towards all in need. Likewise do not hesitate to invite missionaries from other countries to assist the good work being done by your clergy, religious and catechists.

In your countries the Church is held in high regard for her contribution to the good of society especially in education, development and health care, offered to all without distinction. This tribute speaks well of the vitality of your Christian charity, that divine legacy given to the Universal Church by her founder (cf. *Caritas in Veritate*, 27). I appreciate in a special way the assistance you offer to refugees and immigrants and I urge you to seek, when possible, pastoral cooperation from their countries of origin. The struggle against poverty must be carried out with respect for the dignity of all concerned by encouraging them to be the protagonists of their own integral development. Much good can be done through small-scale community engagements and microeconomic initiatives at the service of families. In developing and sustaining such strategies, improved education will always be a decisive factor. Hence I encourage you to continue providing school programmes that prepare and motivate new generations to become responsible citizens, socially active for the good of their community and their country. You rightly encourage people in positions of authority to lead in the struggle against corruption by calling attention to the gravity and injustice of such sins. In this regard, the spiritual and moral formation of lay men and women for leadership, through specialized courses in Catholic Social Doctrine, is an important contribution to the common good.

I commend you for your attention to the great gift which is peace. I pray that the process of reconciliation in justice and truth, which you have rightly supported in the region, may produce lasting respect for all God-given human rights and defuse tendencies to retaliation and vengeance. In your service to peace continue to promote dialogue with other religions, especially with Islam, so as to sustain the existing good relations and forestall any form of intolerance, injustice or oppression, detrimental to the promotion of mutual trust. Working together in the defence of life and in the struggle against disease and malnutrition will not fail to build understanding, respect and acceptance. Above all, a climate of dialogue and communion must characterize the local Church. By your own example, lead your priests, religious and lay faithful to grow in understanding and cooperation, in listening to one another and in sharing initiatives. The Church as the sign and instrument of the one Family of God must bear clear witness to the love of Jesus our Lord and Saviour that extends beyond ethnic frontiers and embraces all men and women.

Dear Brother Bishops, I know that you find inspiration and encouragement in the words of the Risen Christ to his Apostles: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20:21). On your return home to continue your mission as successors of the Apostles, please convey my affectionate and prayerful good wishes to your priests, religious, catechists and all your beloved people. To each of you, and to those entrusted to your pastoral care, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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