



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO SENEGAL, THE GAMBIA AND GUINEA

MEETING WITH PRIESTS, MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS,
SEMINARIANS AND LAY PEOPLE OF THE GAMBIA

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Cathedral of the Assumption, Banjul

Sunday, 23 February 1992

Dear Bishop Cleary and my other Brothers in the Episcopate,

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. Today God gives me the grace of seeing at first hand your fervour and devotion and of joining my voice to yours in praise of his Holy Name. *You are "the leaders and workers in the missionary apostolate"* (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, VI) here in the Diocese of Banjul. As the Successor of the Apostle Peter I have come *to confirm you in your service of preaching Christ*. I extend cordial greetings to each one of you: Bishop Cleary, the priests, Religious, seminarians, catechists and lay leaders who have gathered for the celebration of Evening Prayer in this Cathedral, dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

2. Tonight we make our own the words of the Psalmist: we "give thanks to the Lord with [our] whole heart", we worship him whose saving deeds are "great" and "full of honour and majesty" (Ps. 111(110):1-3). Here, in *this* congregation, the Lord "has caused his wonderful works to be remembered" (Ps. 111 (110):4). We are filled with the memory of how he "has shown his people the power of his works in giving them the heritage of the nations", of how "he sent redemption to his people" (*Ibid.* 6 and 9).

As we sing this song of thanksgiving together, we are particularly aware of the *many ways in which the Lord has sent redemption to The Gambia, to this corner of his beloved Africa*. God's

word has gone forth and accomplished his purpose. As the Prophet proclaimed, this word does not return to God empty (Cf. Is. 55:11). All of you can testify that it has struck root in The Gambia; *it has found a dwelling place in the hearts and minds, in the thoughts and actions of many people in this land.*

3. *All those who accept God's word recognize that they are bound in turn to share this word with others.* That greatest of missionaries, the Apostle Paul, gave voice to this "law" of the Christian life when he explained that, in preaching to the Corinthians, he had handed on what he himself had received (Cf. 1 Cor. 11: 23 and 15:3). Having accepted the Good News, you too are devoted to sharing this treasure of your hearts with others.

Such devotion to the saving word led the first missionaries to bring the Gospel to The Gambia despite the suffering and danger it entailed. Your forebears in the mission could have joined with Saint Paul in cataloguing the trials and hardships, the hunger and thirst, the dangers at sea and the dangers in the wilderness (Cf. 2 Cor. 11:23-27) which they endured in order to bring the word of God to their Gambian brothers and sisters. *Love moved them to take up the task of evangelization.* Their way of giving thanks for this precious gift was to share it.

The same ardent love must be the motivating force of all your own efforts to make Christ known. The Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* repeats this conviction of mine: "Those who have the missionary spirit feel Christ's burning love for souls... [They are] urged on... by a zeal inspired by Christ's own charity" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 89). Once we have been captured by this love, like Peter and John we cannot but speak of it (Cf. Acts 4:20), and like Paul each of us must say: "Woe to me if I do not preach" (1 Cor. 9:16). Indeed, *how can we rest until all those whom Christ wishes to call his own have come to hear of his love?*

4. Dear *Brother Priests*: you have dedicated your lives to the service of the Gospel in this land. Each of you brings to this evening's prayer of praise and thanksgiving his own memories of the times when he has been the instrument for God's word to be welcomed in the hearts of others, especially through the offering of the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance.

Never cease being grateful to God for the priesthood, and never lose heart in the face of obstacles. Certainly, *the harvest is great, and the presbyterate of Banjul is a small band.* There is *so very much to be done for the Master* – much more than you could ever accomplish by yourselves. But when you have prayed to the Lord of the harvest to send more co-workers, and when you have entrusted yourselves to his care, go *forward confidently. The work is Christ's.* It is he who gives the increase (Cf. 2 Cor. 9:10).

By living in hope, disregarding the way the world judges success or failure, you will be faithful to the heritage of the priests who have served here before you. They too were few in number, their

resources scarce, and the difficulties they faced great; and so it is all the clearer that *what they accomplished was from God* and not from themselves.

To the *priests who are native sons of The Gambia*, I extend an especially cordial greeting. In your preaching and your celebration of the sacraments, in your instruction and exhortation, *the one Gospel preached by the universal Church has gained a distinctively Gambian "accent"*. When the Lord addresses your countrymen through you, they find it all the easier to recognize that his invitation is not something foreign or alien. They hear more clearly that they are called to a life which is *the fulfilment and perfection of everything that is noble and praiseworthy in Gambian life*.

Dear *Seminarians*: from all that I have said to the priests, you will clearly understand that the life to which you aspire is to be Christ's heralds, preachers of his Gospel and ministers of his sacraments (Cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4-5). Your service to the Kingdom of God at this time is measured by the devotion and zeal which you bring to the prayer, studies, and pastoral formation which make up the seminary programme. You will become pastors after the very pattern of Christ, the Good Shepherd, insofar as you subordinate your own plans to the responsibilities the Church gives you to fulfil, and to the degree that all your words and actions are directed to bringing others to our Eternal Father.

5. It is a special joy for me to say a word of deep appreciation and encouragement *to the men and women Religious*: to the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, which has been present in The Gambia since 1848; to the Christian Brothers who have arrived more recently; to the spiritual daughters of Blessed Anne Marie Javouhey, the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny, who continue to labour here after the example of their Foundress, to the Presentation of Mary Sisters, the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Annecy, the Marist Sisters and the School Sisters of Notre Dame. I cannot fail to mention with gratitude that many of the missionaries both now and in the past have come from Ireland, including the recently deceased and dearly remembered first Bishop of Banjul, Michael Maloney. I thank you all in the name of the Church for the witness of your consecration and your dedicated apostolate.

Within the Church, Religious bear a special witness to Christ through their example of chastity, poverty and obedience for the sake of the Kingdom. The evangelical counsels reveal the heart of the Gospel: the Good News that God loves us and invites us to respond to his love with the total gift of ourselves. *Religious life is therefore of its very nature apostolic*. The various *pastoral and apostolic tasks* which you perform, your teaching, your works of charity and Christian service are the *expression of this love*. All your activities, therefore, *must flow from prayer and contemplation*. Saint John reminds us that those who are sent to announce the Word of life do so by testifying to what they have come to know personally and intimately. He says: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you" (1 Jn. 1:3). Dear Religious, know that you have a special place in the Pope's heart.

Perhaps those of you who have come to The Gambia from far away sometimes wonder whether what you are doing is worthwhile. Dear missionaries: I can only assure you that *your sacrifice is most pleasing in the Lord's sight*. You have been set apart so that all may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (Cf. 1 Tim. 2:4). *Be confident in your special vocation!* (Cf. *Ad Gentes*, 23). Every day I pray earnestly that God will sustain with his gracious presence the men and women "on mission", often in difficult, remote, demanding situations. The Son of God, who wholeheartedly accepted his mission to come among us, will not leave you without "the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

6. To you, the *catechists of The Gambia*, the Pope has come to affirm the priceless value of all that you do to spread knowledge of the faith. In many cases you are the *first messengers of the Gospel* to those who are not Christians. From you they gain their first impression of what it means to be a Christian. It is by *your example* that the Lord *speaks most clearly and persuasively*.

It is my hope that a firm conviction of the importance of the help which you give the Church will lead you to study her teachings all the more diligently, so that you will offer inquirers, catechumens and the baptized the full riches of our Apostolic faith. Take new heart; be strong against every form of discouragement. Thank you for your unfailing fidelity to the Church!

7. Some members of Christ's Body are set aside completely for the preaching of the Word (Cf. Acts 13:2), but *every Christian* is "a witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church" (*Lumen Gentium*, 33). This means that the *lay leaders* of this local Church *have their own indispensable role to play in proclaiming the Word of God in The Gambia*. And so – in the words of the Second Vatican Council – I appeal to you, members of the laity, to "stand before the world as a witness to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus Christ and as a sign that God lives" (*Ibid.* 38). By striving to *order the affairs of the various spheres of Gambian society* according to the New Law of Christ, you *bring your fellow-citizens face to face with the Gospel*. God's revelation, as it shines out from your homes and businesses, schools and farms, will exercise its own inherent power to attract hearts which are well-disposed.

All the members of the Church are called to live in communion, for although we are many we form one body in Christ (Cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-27). Remain united in love and try to outdo one another only in humble service.

8. Dear Friends in Christ: as we celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours we are united in the worship which the whole Church offers to the Blessed Trinity. We give thanks that the family of God in The Gambia is growing through your fidelity to God's grace. In your devotion to spreading God's word the Church's essential missionary dimension shines out and she responds anew to the Lord's summons: "Go into the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk. 16:15).

Together we shall sing Mary's Canticle, the *Magnificat*, joining our voices to hers in praise of God

for the great things which he has done to save his people. Mary was with the Apostles on that Pentecost Day when they first went forth boldly to proclaim the Lord Jesus. For two thousand years she, the Queen of Apostles, has never ceased to watch over the spread of the Good News. I commend to her powerful intercession the *Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops*. I ask you to pray with me that she will obtain for all who contribute to that Assembly a clear understanding of the evangelizing mission of the Church in Africa and the strength to respond wholeheartedly. I ask you to make this intention your own especially when you say the Rosary, a most efficacious prayer, one which has a strong tradition here and which you must strive to preserve and see grow (Cf. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 61).

To you and to all those for whom you, like Mary, are the humble servants of the Word of Life, I impart my Apostolic Blessing.