

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI
TO CAMEROON AND ANGOLA
(MARCH 17-23, 2009)

MEETING WITH THE BISHOPS OF CAMEROON

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI

*Church of Christ-Roi in Tsinga - Yaoundé
Wednesday, 18 March 2009*

*Dear Cardinal,
Dear Brother Bishops,*

This meeting with the Pastors of the Catholic Church in Cameroon gives me great joy. I thank the President of your Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Simon-Victor Tonyé Bakot, Archbishop of Yaoundé, for the kind words he has addressed to me in your name. It is the third time that your country has welcomed the Successor of Peter. As you know, my reason for coming is in the first instance to meet the peoples of the beloved African continent and also to present to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. This morning, through you, I would like to offer affectionate greetings to all the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care. May the grace and peace of the Lord Jesus be with each one of you, with all the families of your great and beautiful country, with the priests, the men and women religious, the catechists, and all who are engaged with you in proclaiming the Gospel!

In this year dedicated to Saint Paul, it is most opportune to recall the urgent need to proclaim the Gospel to everyone. This mandate, which the Church received from Christ, remains a priority, for there are countless people still waiting to hear the message of hope and love that will enable them to “obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God” (*Rom* 8:21). Together with you, dear Brothers, it is your entire diocesan communities that are sent out to be witnesses of the Gospel. The Second Vatican Council emphasized that “missionary activity flows immediately from the very nature of the Church” (*Ad Gentes*, 6). In order to guide and inspire the People of God in this task, the Pastors themselves, first and foremost, must be preachers of the faith, leading new disciples to Christ. The proclamation of the Gospel is the particular task of the Bishop, who can say, with Saint Paul: “If I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (*1 Cor* 9:16). To strengthen and purify their faith, the faithful need to hear the words of their Bishop, the catechist *par excellence*.

In order to undertake this mission of evangelization and respond to the many challenges of today’s world, besides holding formal meetings, which are necessary in themselves, the Pastors of the Church must be united by a profound communion with one another. The quality of the work accomplished by your Episcopal Conference, reflecting well the life of the Church and of Cameroonian society, enables you to search collectively for answers to the many challenges which the Church has to face and, through your pastoral letters, to give common guidelines to assist the faithful in

their ecclesial and social life. A lively awareness of the collegial dimension of your ministry should impel you to bring about among yourselves a variety of expressions of sacramental fraternity, ranging from mutual acceptance and esteem to the various manifestations of charity and practical cooperation (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 59). Effective collaboration between dioceses, particularly with regard to better distribution of priests in your country, cannot fail to promote relations of fraternal solidarity with the poorer dioceses, so that the proclamation of the Gospel should not suffer through lack of ministers. This apostolic solidarity should also extend generously to meet the needs of other local Bishops, especially those of your continent. Thus it will appear clearly that your Christian communities, following the example of those that brought the Gospel message to you, are likewise a missionary Church.

Dear Brothers, the Bishop and his priests are called to maintain relations of close communion, founded on the one priesthood of Christ in which they share, albeit in different degrees. The quality of the bond uniting you with the priests, your principal and irreplaceable co-workers, is of the greatest importance. If they see in their Bishop a father and a brother who loves them, listens to them and offers them comfort in their trials, who devotes particular attention to their human and material needs, they are encouraged to carry out their ministry whole-heartedly, worthily and fruitfully. The words and example of their Bishop have a key role in inspiring them to give their spiritual and sacramental life a central place in their ministry, spurring them on to discover and to live ever more deeply the particular role of the shepherd as, first and foremost, a man of prayer. The spiritual and sacramental life is an extraordinary treasure, given to us for ourselves and for the good of the people entrusted to us. I urge you, then, to be especially vigilant regarding the faithfulness of priests and consecrated persons to the commitments made at their ordination or entry into religious life, so that they persevere in their vocation, for the greater holiness of the Church and the glory of God. The authenticity of their witness requires that there be no dichotomy between what they teach and the way they live each day.

In your dioceses, many young men are presenting themselves as candidates for the priesthood. We can only thank the Lord for this. It is essential that serious discernment should take place. With this in mind, I encourage you, despite the organizational difficulties that can sometimes occur at the pastoral level, to give priority to the choice and training of formators and spiritual directors. They must have a personal and profound knowledge of the candidates for the priesthood, and must be capable of offering them a solid human, spiritual and pastoral formation so as to make them mature and balanced men, well prepared for priestly life. Your constant fraternal support will help the formators to accomplish their task in the love of the Church and her mission.

From the earliest days of the Christian faith in Cameroon, men and women religious have made an essential contribution to the life of the Church. I join you in giving thanks to God for this, and I rejoice at the development of consecrated life among the sons and daughters of your country, giving rise also to the expression of distinctively African charisms in communities that originated in your country. In fact, the profession of the evangelical counsels acts as “a sign that can and should effectively inspire all the members of the Church to fulfil indefatigably the duties of their Christian vocation” (*Lumen Gentium*, 44).

In your ministry of proclaiming the Gospel, you are also assisted by other pastoral workers, particularly catechists. In the evangelization of your country, they have

played and they continue to play a key role. I thank them for their generosity and their faithfulness in the service of the Church. Through their work, an authentic inculturation of the faith is taking place. Their human, spiritual and doctrinal formation is therefore indispensable. The material, moral and spiritual support that they receive from their pastors, so that they can accomplish their mission in good living and working conditions, also serves to express to them the Church's recognition of the importance of their commitment to proclaim the faith and foster its growth.

Among the many challenges facing you in your responsibility as Pastors, the situation of the family is of particular concern. The difficulties arising from the impact of modernity and secularization on traditional society inspire you to defend vigorously the essential values of the African family, and to give high priority to its thorough evangelization. In developing the pastoral care of the family, you are eager to promote a better understanding of the nature, dignity and role of marriage, which presupposes an indissoluble and stable union.

The liturgy occupies an important place in the expression of your communities' faith. In general, these ecclesial celebrations are festive and joyful, manifesting the fervour of the faithful who are happy to be together, in Church, giving praise to the Lord. It is therefore essential that the joy expressed in this way does not obstruct, but rather facilitates dialogue and communion with God, attained through a genuine internalization of the structures and words of the liturgy, so that these express what is taking place in the hearts of believers, in true union with all the other participants. The dignity of the celebrations, especially when they take place in the presence of large crowds, is an eloquent sign of this.

The spread of sects and esoteric movements, and the growing influence of superstitious forms of religion, as well as relativism, constitute an urgent invitation to give new impetus to the formation of children and young adults, especially in university settings and intellectual circles. In this regard, I would like to encourage and pay tribute to the work of the *Institut Catholique* of Yaoundé and all the Church institutions which have as their mission to make the word of God and the teaching of the Church accessible and comprehensible to all.

I am glad to know that the lay faithful in your country are becoming increasingly active in the life of the Church and of society. The numerous lay associations flourishing in your dioceses are a sign of the Spirit's work at the heart of the people of God, and they contribute to a renewed proclamation of the Gospel. I am pleased to highlight and to encourage the active involvement of women's associations in several areas of the Church's mission, which shows a genuine recognition of the dignity of women and their particular vocation in the ecclesial community and in society. I give thanks to God for the eagerness of the lay people in your country to contribute to the future of the Church and to the proclamation of the Gospel. Through the sacraments of Christian initiation and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they are empowered to proclaim the Gospel and to serve others, both individuals and society at large. I therefore strongly encourage you to continue to offer them a solid Christian formation so that they can "fully exercise their role of inspiring the temporal order – political, cultural, economic and social – with Christian principles, which is the specific task of the laity's vocation" ([*Ecclesia in Africa*](#), 75).

In the context of globalization with which we are all familiar, the Church takes a particular interest in those who are most deprived. The Bishop's mission leads him to

be the defender of the rights of the poor, to call forth and encourage the exercise of charity, which is a manifestation of the Lord's love for the "little ones". In this way, the faithful are led to grasp the fact that the Church is truly God's family, gathered in brotherly love; this leaves no room for ethnocentrism or factionalism, and it contributes towards reconciliation and cooperation among ethnic groups for the good of all. Moreover, through her social doctrine, the Church seeks to awaken hope in the hearts of those left by the wayside. So it is the duty of Christians, particularly lay people with social, economic and political responsibilities, to be guided by the Church's social teaching, in order to contribute to the building up of a more just world where everyone can live with dignity.

Dear Cardinal, dear Brother Bishops, at the conclusion of our meeting, I would like to say once more what a joy it is to be here in your country and to meet the people of Cameroon. I thank you for your warm welcome, a sign of the generosity of African hospitality. May the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Africa, watch over all your diocesan communities. I entrust to her the entire people of Cameroon, and with all my heart I impart to you an affectionate Apostolic Blessing, which I also extend to the priests, men and women religious, to the catechists and to all the faithful of your dioceses.

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