

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

**MEETING WITH THE SPECIAL COUNCIL
OF THE SYNOD FOR AFRICA**

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI

*Apostolic Nunciature of Yaoundé
Thursday, 19 March 2009*

*Dear Cardinals,
Dear Brother Bishops,*

It is with deep joy that I greet all of you here in Africa. A First Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was convoked for Africa in 1994 by my venerable predecessor, the Servant of God [John Paul II](#), as a sign of his pastoral solicitude for this continent so rich both in promise and in pressing human, cultural and spiritual needs. This morning I called Africa “the continent of hope”. I recall with gratitude the signing of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [Ecclesia in Africa](#) here at the Apostolic Nunciature fourteen years ago on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, 14 September 1995.

My thanks go to Archbishop Nikola Eterović, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, for the words which he addressed to me in your name, as he introduced this meeting on African soil with you, dear members of the Special Council for Africa. The whole Church looks to our meeting today in anticipation of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, which, God willing, will be celebrated next October, on the theme: “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: ‘You are the Salt of the Earth ... You are the Light of the World’ (Mt 5:13-14)”.

I sincerely thank the Cardinals, the Archbishops and Bishops who are members of the Special Council for Africa for their expert collaboration in the drawing up of the *Lineamenta* and the *Instrumentum Laboris*. I am grateful to you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, for having also presented in your contributions several important aspects of the present ecclesial and social situation in your countries of origin and in the region. In this way you have emphasized the great dynamism of the Church in Africa, but you have also evoked the challenges which the Synod needs to examine, so that the growth of the Church in Africa will be not only quantitative but qualitative as well.

Dear friends, at the beginning of my address, I consider it important to stress that your continent has been blessed by our Lord Jesus himself. At the dawn of his earthly life, sad circumstances led him to set foot on African soil. God chose your continent to become

the dwelling-place of his Son. In Jesus, God drew near to all men and women, of course, but also, in a particular way, to the men and women of Africa. Africa is where the Son of God was weaned, where he was offered effective sanctuary. In Jesus, some two thousand years ago, God himself brought salt and light to Africa. From that time on, the seed of his presence was buried deep within the hearts of this dear continent, and it has blossomed gradually, beyond and within the vicissitudes of its human history. As a result of the coming of Christ who blessed it with his physical presence, Africa has received a particular vocation to know Christ. Let Africans be proud of this! In meditating upon, and in coming to a deeper spiritual and theological appreciation of this first stage of the *kenosis*, Africa will be able to find the strength needed to face its sometimes difficult daily existence, and thus it will be able to discover immense spaces of faith and hope which will help it to grow in God.

The intimate bond existing between Africa and Christianity from the beginning can be illustrated by recalling some significant moments in the Christian history of this continent.

According to the venerable patristic tradition, the Evangelist Saint Mark, who “handed down in writing the preaching of Peter” (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III, I, 1), came to Alexandria to give new life to the seed planted by the Lord. This Evangelist bore witness in Africa to the death of the Son of God on the Cross – the final moment of the *kenosis* – and of his sovereign exaltation, in order that “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (*Phil 2:11*). The Good News of the coming of the Kingdom of God spread rapidly in North Africa, where it raised up distinguished martyrs and saints, and produced outstanding theologians.

Christianity lasted for almost a millennium in the north-eastern part of your continent, after being put to the test by the vicissitudes of history. With the arrival of Europeans seeking the passage to the Indies in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the sub-Saharan peoples encountered Christ. The coastal peoples were the first to receive Baptism. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sub-Saharan Africa saw the arrival of missionaries, men and women from throughout the West, from Latin America and even from Asia. I wish to pay homage to the generosity of their unconditional response to the Lord’s call, and to their ardent apostolic zeal. Here, I would also like to speak of the African catechists, the inseparable companions of the missionaries in evangelization. God prepared the hearts of certain African lay persons, men and women, young and old alike, to receive his gifts and to bring the light of his word to their brothers and sisters. Laity in the midst of laity, they were able to find in their ancestral languages the words of God which would touch the hearts of their brothers and sisters. They were able to share the savour of the salt of the word and to give splendour to the light of the sacraments which they proclaimed. They accompanied families in their spiritual growth, they encouraged priestly and religious vocations, and they served as a link between their communities and the priests and Bishops. Quite naturally, they brought about a successful inculturation which yielded wondrous fruit (cf. *Mk 4:20*). The catechists allowed their “light to shine before others” (*Mt 5:16*), for in seeing the good they did, entire peoples were able to give glory to Our Father in heaven. This was a case of Africans evangelizing other Africans.

In evoking their glorious memory, I greet and encourage their worthy successors who work today with the same selflessness, the same apostolic courage and the same faith as their predecessors. May God bless them generously! During this period, Africa was also blessed with numerous saints. I will content myself with naming the martyrs of Uganda, the great missionaries Anne-Marie Javouhey and [Daniele Comboni](#), as well as Sister Anuarite Nengapeta and the catechist Isidore Bakanja, without forgetting the humble [Josephine Bakhita](#).

We find ourselves presently at a historical moment which coincides from the civil standpoint with regained independence and from the ecclesial standpoint with the Second Vatican Council. During this time the Church in Africa contributed to and accompanied the building of new national identities and, at the same time, sought to translate the identity of Christ along its own ways. As the hierarchy became increasingly African following Pope Pius XII's ordination of Bishops from your continent, theological reflection began to ferment quickly. It would be well for your theologians today to continue to probe the depth of the Trinitarian mystery and its meaning for everyday African life. This century will perhaps permit, by God's grace, the rebirth, on your continent, albeit certainly under a different and new form, of the prestigious School of Alexandria. Why could we not hope that Africans today and the universal Church might thereby be furnished with great theologians and spiritual masters capable of contributing to the sanctification of those who dwell in this continent and throughout the Church? The First Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops helped to point out the directions to be taken, and it brought out, among other things, the need to appreciate more deeply and to incarnate the mystery of the Church-as-Family.

I would now like to suggest some reflections about the specific theme of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, namely: reconciliation, justice and peace.

According to the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, "the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament – a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men and women" ([Lumen Gentium](#), 1). To carry out her mission well, the Church must be a community of persons reconciled with God and among themselves. In this way, she can proclaim the Good News of reconciliation to contemporary society, which unfortunately experiences in many places conflicts, acts of violence, war and hatred. Your continent, sadly, has not been spared, and it has been and continues to be a theatre of grave tragedies which cry out for true reconciliation between peoples, ethnic groups and individuals. For us Christians, this reconciliation is rooted in the merciful love of God the Father, and it is accomplished through the person of Christ Jesus who, in the Holy Spirit, has offered the grace of reconciliation to all. Its consequences will be shown, then, in the justice and peace which are indispensable for building a better world.

Truly, what is more dramatic, in the present socio-political and economic context of the African continent, than the often savage conflicts between ethnic groups or peoples bound by brotherhood? And if the Synod of 1994 insisted on the Church as Family of God, what can this year's Synod contribute to the building up of Africa, thirsting for

reconciliation and in pursuit of justice and peace? The local or regional wars, massacres and genocides perpetrated on the continent must challenge us in a special way: if it is true that in Jesus Christ we belong to the same family and share the same life – since in our veins there flows the Blood of Christ himself, who has made us children of God, members of God’s Family – there must no longer be hatred, injustice and internecine war.

Cognizant of the growth of violence and the emergence of selfishness in Africa, Cardinal Bernardin Gantin of venerable memory called in 1988 for a theology of fraternity as a response to the pressing appeals of the poor and the little ones (*L’Osservatore Romano*, French edition, 12 April 1988, pp. 4-5). Perhaps he had in mind the words of the African Lactantius, written at the dawn of the fourth century: “The first duty of justice is to recognize others as brothers and sisters. Indeed, if the same God created us and gave us birth in the same condition, in view of righteousness and life eternal, we are surely united by bonds of brotherhood: whoever does not acknowledge those bonds is unjust” (*Divine Institutions* 54, 4-5: S.C. 335, p. 210). The Church, as the Family of God in Africa, made a preferential option for the poor at the First Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. In this way she showed that the situation of dehumanization and oppression afflicting the African peoples is not irreversible; on the contrary, she set before everyone a challenge: that of conversion, holiness and integrity.

The Son, through whom God speaks to us, is himself the Word made flesh. This was the subject of the discussions at the recent Twelfth General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Having become flesh, this Word is at the origin of all that we are and all that we do; he is the foundation of every life. It is therefore on the basis of this Word that we need to enhance African traditions, and to correct and perfect their concept of life, humanity and the family. Christ Jesus, the Word of life, is the source and fulfilment of all our lives, for the Lord Jesus is the one mediator and redeemer.

It is urgent that Christian communities increasingly become places of profound listening to the word of God and meditative reading of sacred Scripture. It is through such meditative and communitarian reading in the Church that every Christian encounters the Risen Christ, who speaks to him and offers renewed hope in the fullness of life which he gives to the world.

As for the Eucharist, it makes the Lord truly present in history. Through the reality of his Body and his Blood, the whole Christ makes himself substantially present in our lives. He is with us always, until the end of time (cf. *Mt* 28:20) and he sends us back to our daily lives so that we can fill them with his presence. In the Eucharist, it becomes clearly evident that our life is a relationship of communion with God, with our brothers and sisters, and with all creation. The Eucharist is the source of a unity reconciled in peace.

The word of life and the Bread of life offer light and nourishment as medicine and food for our journey in fidelity to the Teacher and Shepherd of our souls, so that the Church in Africa can carry out the service of reconciliation, justice and peace, in accordance with the programme of life provided by the Lord himself: “You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world” (*Mt* 5:13-14). If they are truly to be this, the faithful must

undergo conversion and follow Jesus Christ; they must become his disciples in order to be witnesses of his saving power. During his earthly life, Jesus was “mighty in deed and word” (Lk 24:19). By his resurrection, he has subjected to himself every authority and power (cf. Col 2:15), every power of evil, in order to set free those who are baptized in his name. “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1). The Christian vocation consists in letting oneself be freed by Jesus Christ. He has conquered sin and death and he offers to all the fullness of life. In the Lord Jesus there is no more Jew or Gentile, man or woman (cf. Gal 3:28). In his flesh he has reconciled all peoples. In the power of the Holy Spirit, I appeal to everyone: “Be reconciled to God!” (2 Cor 5:20). No ethnic or cultural difference, no difference of race, sex or religion must become a cause for dispute among you. You are all children of the one God, our Father, who is in heaven. With this conviction, it will then be possible to build a more just and peaceful Africa, an Africa worthy of the legitimate expectations of all its children.

In conclusion, I invite you to advance the preparation of the Synodal event by reciting, together with the faithful, the prayer found at the end of the *Instrumentum Laboris* which I presented to you this morning, a prayer for the successful outcome of the Synodal Assembly. Together, my brothers, let us pray:

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, Protectress of Africa, you have given the world its true light, Jesus Christ. By your obedience to the Father and by the grace of the Holy Spirit, you have given us the source of our reconciliation and our joy.

Mother of tenderness and wisdom, show us Jesus, your Son and the Son of God, sustain our journey of conversion, so that Jesus may enlighten us with his Glory in all the settings of our personal, family and social life.

Mother full of Mercy and Justice, by your docility to the Spirit, the Comforter, obtain for us the grace to be witnesses of the Risen Lord, so that we may become ever more fully the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Mother of Perpetual Succour, to your maternal intercession we entrust the preparation and the fruits of the Second Synod for Africa. Queen of Peace, pray for us! Our Lady of Africa, pray for us!”