

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

**EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION WITH THE BISHOPS OF I.M.B.I.S.A.
(INTER-REGIONAL MEETING OF BISHOPS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA)**

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI

*Cimangola Square in Luanda
Sunday, 22 March 2009*

*Dear Cardinals,
Brother Bishops and Priests,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (*Jn* 3:16). These words fill us with joy and hope, as we await the fulfilment of God’s promises! Today it is my particular joy, as the Successor of the Apostle Peter, to celebrate this Mass with you, my brothers and sisters in Christ from throughout Angola, São Tomé and Príncipe, and so many other countries. With great affection in the Lord I greet the Catholic communities from Luanda, Bengo, Cabinda, Benguela, Huambo, Huíla, Kuàndo Kubàngo, Kunène, North Kwanza, South Kwanza, North Lunda, South Lunda, Malanje, Namibe, Moxico, Uíje and Zàire.

In a special way, I greet my brother Bishops, the members of the Inter-Regional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa, assembled around this altar of the Lord’s sacrifice. I thank the President of CEAST, Archbishop Damião Franklin, for his kind words of welcome, and, in the person of their Pastors, I greet all the faithful in the nations of Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe.

Today’s first reading has a particular resonance for God’s people in Angola. It is a message of hope addressed to the Chosen People in the land of their Exile, a summons to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Lord’s Temple. Its vivid description of the destruction and ruin caused by war echoes the personal experience of so many people in this country amid the terrible ravages of the civil war. How true it is that war can “destroy everything of value” (cf. *2 Chr* 36:19): families, whole communities, the fruit of men’s labour, the hopes which guide and sustain their lives and work! This experience is all too familiar to Africa as a whole: the destructive power of civil strife, the descent into a maelstrom of hatred and revenge, the squandering of the efforts of generations of good people. When God’s word – a word meant to build up individuals, communities and the whole human family – is neglected, and when God’s law is “ridiculed, despised, laughed at” (*ibid.*, v. 16), the result can only be destruction and injustice: the abasement of our common humanity and the betrayal of our vocation to be sons and daughters of a merciful Father, brothers and sisters of his beloved Son.

So let us draw comfort from the consoling words which we have heard in the first reading! The call to return and rebuild God's Temple has a particular meaning for each of us. Saint Paul, the two thousandth anniversary of whose birth we celebrate this year, tells us that "we are the temple of the living God" (2 Cor 6:16). God dwells, we know, in the hearts of all who put their faith in Christ, who are reborn in Baptism and are made temples of the Holy Spirit. Even now, in the unity of the Body of Christ which is the Church, God is calling us to acknowledge the power of his presence within us, to reappropriate the gift of his love and forgiveness, and to become messengers of that merciful love within our families and communities, at school and in the workplace, in every sector of social and political life.

Here in Angola, this Sunday has been set aside as a day of prayer and sacrifice for national reconciliation. The Gospel teaches us that reconciliation, true reconciliation, can only be the fruit of conversion, a change of heart, a new way of thinking. It teaches us that only the power of God's love can change our hearts and make us triumph over the power of sin and division. When we were "dead through our sins" (Eph 2:5), his love and mercy brought us reconciliation and new life in Christ. This is the heart of the Apostle Paul's teaching, and it is important for us to remind ourselves: only God's grace can create a new heart in us! Only his love can change our "hearts of stone" (cf. Ezek 11:19) and enable us to build up, rather than tear down. Only God can make all things new!

It is to preach this message of forgiveness, hope and new life in Christ that I have come to Africa. Three days ago, in Yaoundé, I had the joy of promulgating the [*Instrumentum Laboris for the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops*](#), which will be devoted to the theme: *The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*. I ask you today, in union with all our brothers and sisters throughout Africa, to pray for this intention: that every Christian on this great continent will experience the healing touch of God's merciful love, and that the Church in Africa will become "for all, through the witness borne by its sons and daughters, a place of true reconciliation" ([*Ecclesia in Africa*](#), 79).

Dear friends, this is the message that the Pope is bringing to you and your children. You have received power from the Holy Spirit to be the builders of a better tomorrow for your beloved country. In Baptism you were given the Spirit in order to be heralds of God's Kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace (cf. *Roman Missal*, Preface of Christ the King). On the day of your Baptism you received the light of Christ. Be faithful to that gift! Be confident that the Gospel can affirm, purify and ennoble the profound human values present in your native culture and traditions: your strong families, your deep religious sense, your joyful celebration of the gift of life, your appreciation of the wisdom of the elderly and the aspirations of the young. Be grateful, then, for the light of Christ! Be grateful for those who brought it, the generations of missionaries who contributed – and continue to contribute – so much to this country's human and spiritual development. Be grateful for the witness of so many Christian parents, teachers, catechists, priests and religious, who made personal sacrifices in order to pass this precious treasure down to you! And take up the challenge which this great legacy sets before you. Realize that the Church, in Angola and throughout Africa, is meant to be a sign before the world of that unity to which the whole human family is called, through faith in Christ the Redeemer.

The words which Jesus speaks in today's Gospel are quite striking: He tells us that God's sentence has already been pronounced upon this world (cf. *Jn 3:19ff*). The light has already come into the world. Yet men preferred the darkness to the light, because their deeds were evil. How much darkness there is in so many parts of our world! Tragically, the clouds of evil have also overshadowed Africa, including this beloved nation of Angola. We think of the evil of war, the murderous fruits of tribalism and ethnic rivalry, the greed which corrupts men's hearts, enslaves the poor, and robs future generations of the resources they need to create a more equitable and just society – a society truly and authentically African in its genius and values. And what of that insidious spirit of selfishness which closes individuals in upon themselves, breaks up families, and, by supplanting the great ideals of generosity and self-sacrifice, inevitably leads to hedonism, the escape into false utopias through drug use, sexual irresponsibility, the weakening of the marriage bond and the break-up of families, and the pressure to destroy innocent human life through abortion?

Yet the word of God is a word of unbounded hope. "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son ... so that through him, the world might be saved" (*Jn 3:16-17*). God does not give up on us! He continues to lift our eyes to a future of hope, and he promises us the strength to accomplish it. As Saint Paul tells us in today's second reading, God created us in Christ Jesus "to live the good life", a life of good deeds, in accordance with his will (cf. *Eph 2:10*). He gave us his commandments, not as a burden, but as a source of freedom: the freedom to become men and women of wisdom, teachers of justice and peace, people who believe in others and seek their authentic good. God created us to live in the light, and to be light for the world around us! This is what Jesus tells us in today's Gospel: "The man who lives by the truth comes out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God" (*Jn 3:21*).

"Live", then, "by the truth!" Radiate the light of faith, hope and love in your families and communities! Be witnesses of the holy truth that sets men and women free! You know from bitter experience that, in comparison with the sudden, destructive fury of evil, the work of rebuilding is painfully slow and arduous. Living by the truth takes time, effort and perseverance: it has to begin in our own hearts, in the small daily sacrifices required if we are to be faithful to God's law, in the little acts by which we demonstrate that we love our neighbours, all our neighbours, regardless of race, ethnicity or language, and by our readiness to work with them to build together on foundations that will endure. Let your parishes become communities where the light of God's truth and the power of Christ's reconciling love are not only celebrated, but proclaimed in concrete works of charity. And do not be afraid! Even if it means being a "sign of contradiction" (*Lk 2:34*) in the face of hardened attitudes and a mentality that sees others as a means to be used, rather than as brothers and sisters to be loved, cherished and helped along the path of freedom, life and hope.

Let me close by addressing a special word to the young people of Angola, and to all young people throughout Africa. Dear young friends: you are the hope of your country's future, the promise of a better tomorrow! Begin today to grow in your friendship with Jesus, who is "the way, and the truth and the life" (*Jn 14:6*): a friendship nurtured and deepened by humble and persevering prayer. Seek his will for you by listening to his word daily, and by allowing his law to shape your lives and your relationships. In this way you will become wise and generous prophets of God's saving love. Become

evangelizers of your own peers, leading them by your own example to an appreciation of the beauty and truth of the Gospel, and the hope of a future shaped by the values of God's Kingdom. The Church needs your witness! Do not be afraid to respond generously to God's call, whether it be to serve him as a priest or a religious, as a Christian parent, or in the many forms of service to others which the Church sets before you.

Dear brothers and sisters! At the end of today's first reading, Cyrus, King of Persia, inspired by God, calls the Chosen People to return to their beloved land and to rebuild the Temple of the Lord. May his words be a summons to all God's People in Angola and throughout Southern Africa: Arise! *Ponde-vos a caminho!*(cf. 2 Chr 36:23) Look to the future with hope, trust in God's promises, and live in his truth. In this way, you will build something destined to endure, and leave to future generations a lasting inheritance of reconciliation, justice and peace. Amen.

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