

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

WELCOME CEREMONY

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI

*Nsimalen International Airport of Yaoundé
Tuesday, 17 March 2009*

*Mr President,
Distinguished Representatives of the Civil Authorities,
Cardinal Tumi,
My Brother Bishops,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Thank you for the welcome you have extended to me. And thank you, Mr President, for your kind words. I greatly appreciate the invitation to visit Cameroon, and for this I want to express my gratitude to you and to the President of the National Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Tonyé Bakot. I greet all of you who have honoured me by your presence on this occasion, and I want you to know how pleased I am to be here with you on African soil, for the first time since my election to the See of Peter. I warmly greet my brother Bishops as well as the clergy and the lay faithful who are gathered here. My respectful greetings go also to the representatives of the Government, the civil authorities and the diplomatic corps. Since this country, like so many in Africa, is approaching the fiftieth anniversary of its independence, I wish to add my voice to the chorus of congratulations and good wishes that your friends all over the world will offer you on that happy occasion. I gratefully acknowledge too the presence of members of other Christian confessions and the followers of other religions. By joining us today you offer a clear sign of the good will and harmony that exist in this country between people of different religious traditions.

I come among you as a pastor, I come to confirm my brothers and sisters in the faith. This was the role that Christ entrusted to Peter at the Last Supper, and it is the role of Peter's successors. When Peter preached to the multitudes in Jerusalem at Pentecost, there were visitors from Africa present among them. And the witness of many great saints from this continent during the first centuries of Christianity – Saint Cyprian, Saint Monica, Saint Augustine, Saint Athanasius, to name but a few – guarantees a distinguished place for Africa in the annals of Church history. Right up to the present day, waves of missionaries and martyrs have continued to bear witness to Christ throughout Africa, and today the Church is blessed with almost a hundred and fifty million members. How fitting then, that Peter's successor should come to Africa, to celebrate with you the life-giving faith in Christ that sustains and nourishes so many of the sons and daughters of this great continent!

It was [here in Yaoundé in 1995](#) that my venerable Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, promulgated the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, the fruit of the First Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, held in Rome the previous year. Indeed, the tenth anniversary of that historic moment was celebrated with great solemnity in this same city not long ago. I have come here to issue the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Special Assembly, which will take place in Rome this coming October. The Synod Fathers will reflect together 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)”. Almost ten years into the new millennium, this moment of grace is a summons to all the Bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful of the continent to rededicate themselves to the mission of the Church to bring hope to the hearts of the people of Africa, and indeed to people throughout the world.

Even amid the greatest suffering, the Christian message always brings hope. The life of [Saint Josephine Bakhita](#) offers a shining example of the transformation that an encounter with the living God can bring to a situation of great hardship and injustice. In the face of suffering or violence, poverty or hunger, corruption or abuse of power, a Christian can never remain silent. The saving message of the Gospel needs to be proclaimed loud and clear, so that the light of Christ can shine into the darkness of people’s lives. Here in Africa, as in so many parts of the world, countless men and women long to hear a word of hope and comfort. Regional conflicts leave thousands homeless or destitute, orphaned or widowed. In a continent which, in times past, saw so many of its people cruelly uprooted and traded overseas to work as slaves, today human trafficking, especially of defenceless women and children, has become a new form of slavery. At a time of global food shortages, financial turmoil, and disturbing patterns of climate change, Africa suffers disproportionately: more and more of her people are falling prey to hunger, poverty, and disease. They cry out for reconciliation, justice and peace, and that is what the Church offers them. Not new forms of economic or political oppression, but the glorious freedom of the children of God (cf. *Rom* 8:21). Not the imposition of cultural models that ignore the rights of the unborn, but the pure healing water of the Gospel of life. Not bitter interethnic or interreligious rivalry, but the righteousness, peace and joy of God’s kingdom, so aptly described by Pope Paul VI as the civilization of love (cf. *Regina Coeli* Message, Pentecost Sunday, 1970).

Here in Cameroon, where over a quarter of the population is Catholic, the Church is well placed to carry forward her mission of healing and reconciliation. At the Cardinal Léger Centre, I shall observe for myself the pastoral solicitude of this local Church for the sick and the suffering; and it is particularly commendable that Aids sufferers are able to receive treatment free of charge in this country. Education is another key element of the Church’s ministry, and now we see the efforts of generations of missionary teachers bearing fruit in the work of the Catholic University for Central Africa, a sign of great hope for the future of the region.

Cameroon is truly a land of hope for many in Central Africa. Thousands of refugees from war-torn countries in the region have received a welcome here. It is a land of life, with a Government that speaks out in defence of the rights of the unborn. It is a land of peace: by resolving through dialogue the dispute over the Bakassi peninsula, Cameroon and Nigeria have shown the world that patient diplomacy can indeed bear

fruit. It is a land of youth, blessed with a young population full of vitality and eager to build a more just and peaceful world. Rightly is it described as “Africa in miniature”, home to over two hundred different ethnic groups living in harmony with one another. These are all reasons for giving praise and thanks to God.

As I come among you today, I pray that the Church here and throughout Africa will continue to grow in holiness, in the service of reconciliation, justice and peace. I pray that the work of the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will fan into a flame the gifts that the Spirit has poured out upon the Church in Africa. I pray for each of you, for your families and loved ones, and I ask you to join me in praying for all the people of this vast continent. God bless Cameroon! And God bless Africa!

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