



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF RWANDA
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT***

Thursday, 3 April 2014

Dear Brother Bishops,

I welcome you to Rome on the occasion of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. I hope with all my heart that by the intercession of St Peter and St Paul and in light of their testimony, you may renew in your hearts the faith and courage necessary for your demanding pastoral mission. I thank Bishop Smaragde Mbonyinge, President of your Episcopal Conference, for the cordial message he has just addressed to me. Through you I express my deep affection to the priests, men and women religious, and to the lay faithful of your dioceses as well as to all the inhabitants of your country.

In a few days time, Rwanda will be commemorating the 20th anniversary of the start of that terrible genocide that inflicted so much suffering and so many wounds that are still far from being healed. I wholeheartedly join in the national mourning, and I assure you of my prayers for you, for your often divided communities, for all the victims and their families, for all the people of Rwanda, irrespective of their religion, ethnicity or political leaning.

Twenty years after those tragic events, reconciliation and the healing of these wounds certainly remains the priority of the Church in Rwanda. And I encourage you to persevere in this resolve, which you have already put into practice through numerous initiatives. To pardon the offences and bring about sincere reconciliation, which might seem impossible to human eyes after so much suffering, are nevertheless a gift that it is possible to receive from Christ, through a life of faith and prayer, even though the road may be long and demand patience, mutual respect and dialogue. The Church, therefore, has a role in the rebuilding of a reconciled Rwandan society; with all the strength of your faith and of Christian hope, go forward decisively, bearing perpetual witness to the

truth.

However we must remember that it is only by being united in love that we may ensure that the Gospel touches and converts hearts in a deep way: “that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me” (Jn 17:23), Jesus tells us. It is therefore important that, overcoming prejudice and ethnic divisions, the Church speak with one sole voice, manifesting her unity and strengthening her communion with the universal Church and with the Successor of Peter.

With a view to national reconciliation, it is likewise necessary to strengthen the relationship of trust between Church and State. The celebration, on 6 June, of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Rwanda and the Holy See can be an opportunity to recall the beneficial fruits that can be expected from such relations, for the good of the people of Rwanda. Constructive and authentic dialogue with the Authorities cannot but foster the common work of reconciliation and the rebuilding of society on the values of human dignity, justice and peace. Be a Church that “goes forth” and takes the initiative (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 24) and builds trust.

Do not be afraid to emphasize the irreplaceable contribution that the Church makes to the common good. I know that the work you have done, especially in the fields of education and healthcare, is considerable. And I acknowledge, in this regard, the steadfast work of religious institutes, which, with many people of good will, are dedicated to all those wounded by the war, in body and soul, in particular widows and orphans, but also the elderly, the sick and children. Religious life, through adoration and prayer, makes credible the witness that the Church bears to Christ Risen and to his love for all human beings, especially the poorest.

Educating the young is the key to the future in a country with a predominantly young population. “This youthfulness is a gift and a treasure from God for which the whole Church is grateful to the Lord of life. Young people should be loved, esteemed and respected” (*Africae Munus*, n. 60). It is therefore a duty of the Church to form children and young people in the values of the Gospel which they will learn especially through familiarity with the Word of God, which will be for them a compass indicating the path to be followed. There they learn to be active and generous members of society, for it is on them that the future rests. To do this it is necessary to strengthen pastoral care in universities and in schools, both Catholic and state, always seeking to link the work of education and the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, which must never be separated (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, nn. 132, 134).

In the tasks of evangelization and reconstruction, the laity have an essential role to play. And here I would like to thank all the catechists warmly again for their generous and enduring commitment. The laity are strongly involved in the life of the *Communautés Ecclésiales de Base* [grassroots communities], in movements, schools, charities, as well as in other areas of social life. Special

attention should therefore be paid to their training and support, both in their spiritual life and in their human and intellectual formation which must be of a high quality. In deed, their involvement in society will be credible to the extent that they are competent and honest.

An entirely special kind of attention must be given to families, who are the vital cells of society and the Church, and who today are seriously threatened by the process of secularization; moreover, in your country, so many families were broken up and reunited. They need your care, your closeness and your encouragement. It is first and foremost within the family that the young can experience the true Christian values of integrity, fidelity, honesty and gift of self, which will allow them to know true happiness according to the heart of God.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the priests who generously devote themselves to their ministry. Their task is all the greater as they are still few in number. I urge you to constantly perfect the human, intellectual and spiritual formation of seminarians. May they ever find in their formators joyful examples of fulfilled priestly life. Be very attentive and close to your priests, listening to them, being available to them. Their task is difficult and they absolutely need your support and your personal encouragement. Do not neglect their continuing formation and I ask you to organize more opportunities for encounter and brotherly contact.

Dear Brothers, I assure you again of my affection for you, for your diocesan communities, for the whole of Rwanda, and I entrust you all to the motherly protection of the Virgin Mary. The Mother of Jesus wished to appear in your country to several children, reminding them of the efficacy of fasting and of prayer, especially the recitation of the Rosary. I sincerely hope that you can make the Shrine of Kibeho radiate even more the love of Mary for all her children, especially for the poorest and most wounded, and that there may be for the Church in Rwanda and beyond an appeal to turn with confidence to “Notre Dame des Douleurs”, that she may accompany each one in his or her path and obtain for them the gift of reconciliation and peace. I impart to you with my whole heart an Apostolic Blessing.