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OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 240325a

Monday 25.03.2024

Audience with the Nigerian Community of Rome

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Nigerian Catholic community of Rome, to whom he delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I offer a cordial greeting and welcome to all of you who have gathered to mark twenty-five years of the presence of the Nigerian Catholic community in Rome. Today's date, 25 March, is significant for several reasons. Normally, it is the celebration of the Solemnity of the Annunciation, which recalls the Incarnation. This year, however, because of Holy Week, the Annunciation is moved to another day. These two realities, namely, the Incarnation of the Lord and the saving mysteries that we commemorate during Holy Week, show us that the Word which became flesh and dwelt among us (cf. *Jn* 1:14), lived, died and rose again in order to bring about reconciliation and peace between God and humanity. Indeed, the Lord has given his life for us!

In this regard, I would like to reflect briefly upon three elements that I believe are *vital* for the life of your community: *gratitude*, *richness in diversity* and *dialogue*.

First of all, *gratitude*. I thank you for all that you have done and continue to do in bearing witness to the joyful message of the Gospel. I join you as well in thanksgiving to Almighty God for the numerous young people from Nigeria who have heard the Lord's call to the priesthood and the consecrated life and have responded with generosity, humility and perseverance. *Some are among you here, young priests and young sisters*. Indeed, each follower of Jesus, according to his or her particular vocation, is entrusted with the responsibility of serving God and neighbour in love, making Christ present in the lives of our brothers and sisters. May you always be missionary disciples, grateful that the Lord has chosen you to follow him and has sent you forth to proclaim our faith with zeal and contribute to building a more just and humane world.

Second, *richness in diversity*. Here, I would say that the diversity of ethnicities, cultural traditions and languages in your nation is not a problem but a gift that enriches the fabric of both the Church and the larger society and allows you to promote the values of mutual understanding and coexistence. It is my hope that your community here in Rome, in welcoming and accompanying the Nigerian faithful and other believers, will always resemble a great and inclusive family in which all can use their different gifts and talents, that are fruits of the Holy Spirit, to support and strengthen one another in moments of joy and sorrow, success and difficulty. By doing so, you will be able to sow the seeds of social friendship and concord for both present and future generations.

Yet it is important to be attentive to a danger, the danger of being closed in, of not being universal but being closed off – here I would say – in a *tribal* isolation. No. Your roots become closed, isolated in this tribal and not universal, not communal, attitude. Community yes, tribe no. This is very important. And it applies to all of us, to everyone, each according to his or her position. Universality does not mean locking oneself into one's own culture. True, one's own culture is a gift, yet not to close it off, but to give it, to offer it. Universal, universality.

Finally, dear brothers and sisters, *dialogue*. Sadly, many regions of the world are experiencing conflict and suffering, and Nigeria, too, is living through a period of hardship. In assuring you of my prayers for the security, unity and spiritual and economic progress of your nation, I also invite everyone to foster dialogue and listen to one another with open hearts, excluding no one at the political, social and religious levels. Integrating, dialoguing, universalizing, always starting from one's own identity. At the same time, I encourage you to be heralds of the Lord's great mercy, working for reconciliation among all your brothers and sisters, helping to ease the burdens of the poor and those most in need and adopting as your own God's style of closeness, compassion and tender love. And what is God's style? Closeness, compassion and tender love. Always remember this. God's style is closeness, compassion and tender love. In this way, all Nigerians can continue to walk together in fraternal solidarity and harmony.

Dear friends, I thank you once again for your presence in this city, at the heart of the Church. It is a providential grace that affords you the opportunity to deepen the awareness of your baptismal call to live always as faithful disciples of the Lord, dedicate yourselves to serving God and his holy people with the charity that Jesus asks of us and celebrate the richness of your diverse heritage as Nigerians. Yes, a great richness, one to give. I entrust your community to the loving protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen and Patroness of Nigeria, and I cordially impart my blessing. And I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.
