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Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum" dei Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale del Sud Africa

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Alle ore 11 di questa mattina, il Santo Padre Francesco ha ricevuto in Udienza i Vescovi della Conferenza Episcopale del Sud Africa per la visita "ad Limina Apostolorum".

Pubblichiamo di seguito il testo del discorso che il Papa ha consegnato ai Presuli nel corso dell'incontro:

Discorso del Santo Padre

Dear Brother Bishops,

I offer you a warm welcome as you make this pilgrimage *ad Limina Apostolorum*, in which you have come to pray at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and to reflect with me on the joys and challenges of the Church in Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland. Your presence expresses your unity with the Successor of Peter, and provides an opportunity to be refreshed in the faith and in your ministry of shepherding God's people. I thank Cardinal Napier for his warm words of greeting, offered on behalf of Catholics in your dioceses – priests, religious and lay faithful. I assure them through you of my love and prayerful solidarity.

Our meeting today allows us to give thanks to God the Father for the growth of the Church in your countries, thanks to the labours of missionaries from many lands, who along with indigenous men and women of South Africa, Botswana and Swaziland, sowed the seeds of your people's faith so deeply. For generations they have gone out to meet them wherever they are to be found, in villages, towns and cities, and especially in ever-expanding urban townships. They built the churches and schools and clinics that have served your countries for nearly two centuries; this heritage shines forth even now in the heart of every believer and in the continuing works of the apostolate. The Gospel teaches that the seed of the Word, once sown, grows by itself even as the farmer sleeps, accomplishing "what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 22).

Despite many challenges, your countries are blessed by flourishing parishes, thriving often against very great odds: far distances between communities, a dearth of material resources and limited access to the sacraments. I

know you are training permanent deacons in some dioceses, to assist the clergy where priests are fewer. There is a concerted effort to renew and deepen the formation of lay catechists who assist mothers and fathers in preparing the coming generations in the faith. Priests and religious brothers and sisters are of one mind and heart in their service of God's most vulnerable sons and daughters: widows, single mothers, the divorced, children at risk and especially the several million AIDS orphans, many of whom head households in rural areas. Truly the richness and joy of the Gospel is being lived and shared by Catholics with others around them. A Catholic minority in countries of mixed religions, the faithful are having to rely more and more on their own support, with diminished aid from the countries who first sent missionaries. Many of them work with great generosity in numerous projects of charity, manifesting the loving face of Christ to those who need him most. Each is a sign of hope for the whole Church! I pray that they will continue to persevere in building up the Lord's Kingdom with their lives that testify to the truth, and with the work of their hands that ease the sufferings of so many.

You have spoken to me of some of the serious pastoral challenges facing your communities. Catholic families have fewer children, with repercussions on the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Some Catholics turn away from the Church to other groups who seem to promise something better. Abortion compounds the grief of many women who now carry with them deep physical and spiritual wounds after succumbing to the pressures of a secular culture which devalues God's gift of sexuality and the right to life of the unborn. In addition, the rate of separation and divorce is high, even in many Christian families, and children frequently do not grow up in a stable home environment. We also observe with great concern, and can only deplore, an increase in violence against women and children. All these realities threaten the sanctity of marriage, the stability of life in the home and consequently the life of society as a whole. In this sea of difficulties, we bishops and priests must give a consistent witness to the moral teaching of the Gospel. I am confident that you will not weaken in your resolve to teach the truth "in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2), sustained by prayer and discernment, and always with great compassion.

I appreciate the fact that you, the bishops of Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland, are united to your people where they live and work and study, in solidarity with the vast numbers of unemployed in your countries. Most of your people can identify at once with Jesus who was poor and marginalized, who had no place to lay his head. In addressing these pastoral needs, I ask you to offer, in addition to the material support which you provide, the greater support of spiritual assistance and sound moral guidance, remembering that the absence of Christ is the greatest poverty of all. Here too we need to find new and creative ways of helping people encounter Christ through a deeper understanding of the faith.

Another significant challenge I have already touched on is the reduced number of priests – your first co-workers in the task of evangelization – as well as a significant decline in seminarians. What is required is a new impetus: fresh and authentic promotion of vocations in every territory, a prudent selection of candidates for seminary studies, fatherly encouragement of those men in formation, and attentive accompaniment in the years after ordination.

Together with priests, religious and lay catechists have played and continue to play a vital role in the growth of your communities. It is essential that they receive your encouragement and support, especially through the development of programmes of ongoing formation grounded firmly in the inspired word of God, and introducing children and adults to the life of prayer and the fruitful reception of the sacraments. The sacrament of reconciliation, in particular, must be rediscovered as a fundamental dimension of the life of grace. The holiness and indissolubility of Christian matrimony, often disintegrating under tremendous pressure from the secular world, must be deepened by clear doctrine and supported by the witness of committed married couples. Christian matrimony is a lifelong covenant of love between one man and one woman; it entails real sacrifices in order to turn away from illusory notions of sexual freedom and in order to foster conjugal fidelity. Your programmes of preparation for the sacrament of matrimony, enriched by Pope John Paul's teaching on marriage and the family, are proving to be promising and indeed indispensable means of communicating the liberating truth about Christian marriage and are inspiring young people with new hope for themselves and for their future as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers.

I have also noted the concern which you expressed about the breakdown of Christian morals, including a

growing temptation to collude with dishonesty. This is an issue which you prophetically addressed in your pastoral statement on corruption. As you pointed out, "corruption is theft from the poor... hurts the most vulnerable... harms the whole community... destroys our trust". The Christian community is called to be consistent in its witness to the virtues of honesty and integrity, so that we may stand before the Lord, and our neighbours, with clean hands and a pure heart (cf. *Ps* 24:4) as a leaven of the Gospel in the life of society. With this moral imperative in mind, I know that you will continue to address this and other grave social concerns, such as the plight of refugees and migrants. May these men and women always be welcomed by our Catholic communities, finding in them open hearts and homes as they seek to begin a new life.

Dear Brother Bishops, in my Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, issued at the end of the Year of Faith which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, I expressed my hope that all Christians will embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by Gospel joy, seeking "new paths for the Church's journey in years to come" (cf. No. 1). Now is the time to rekindle the precious gift of faith so as to renew your dedicated service to God's people! May the saints of Africa sustain you by their intercession. May Our Lady of Africa be always at your side, and may she guide you as you share in the teaching, sanctifying and governing mission of Christ.

With these sentiments and with great affection, I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, and to all the beloved priests, religious and lay faithful of your countries.

From the Vatican, 25 April 2014

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