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A Message of Hope and Comfort

Benedict XVI began his first trip to Africa with a stop in Cameroon. There he spoke about "the witness of many great saints from this continent."

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Upon arriving for his first papal trip to Africa, the Holy Father said on the tarmac. "I come among you as a pastor, 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."

Speaking in French after the welcome of Cameroon's President, Paul Biya, the Pope drew attention to how "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."

After pointing out that there are now 150 million Catholics in Africa, the Pope explained one reason for his visit: "I have come here to prepare for the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of African Bishops that will take place in Rome this coming October. The Synod Fathers will reflect together on the theme: *The Church in Africa, in Service of 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 Church's mission to bring hope to the hearts of the people of Africa, and indeed to people throughout the world."

The Pope mentioned St. Josephine Bakhita as an example of "the transformation that an encounter with the living God can bring to a situation of great hardship and injustice," and he added that "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."

The Holy Father said that in these times of scarcity of food, financial turmoil and climate change, Africa suffers disproportionately from the evils of "hunger, poverty and disease." In the face of these evils, the African people "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. 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."

"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," the Pope added, "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."

Pointing to Cameroon as an example of peace, Benedict XVI described it as "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."

The Pope beseeched God "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."

In conclusion, the Holy Father said that he prayed for all of those present and their families and loved ones. "I ask you to join me in praying for all the people of this vast continent. God bless Cameroon! God bless Africa!"

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