

Preparatory Service at the Church of the Great Commission
Camp Springs, Maryland, February 1999
President Kérékou's Message of Apology and Invitation

(This transcription represents Kérékou's message as spoken by his interpreter, Romain Zannou.)

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ—and I want you to feel free—first of all, I'd like to introduce myself to you. But be aware that I'm not a preacher, I'm not a pastor. I'm not a businessman; I'm not even a politician. However, I am the president of the Republic of Benin, in West Africa. I have no political party, I'm the president of Benin and I identify myself with the poor. And the former name of my country was Dahomey. But now, since 1975, the name has been changed to Benin. And, it's a small country of 112,000 square kilometers with about six million people. And my country has been colonized by France, like many states in West Africa. And our people were noted intellectuals, and we gained this name by French government, which call us the Latin area of Africa. And I want you to know that my people are very, very, very intelligent, and sometimes they exceed in intelligence and compete with evil spirits in intelligence. And you should know that my country is known religiously to be the cradle of voodoo.

But Benin is located on the Slave Coast, and a lot of slaves were sold out into the Americas from my country, Benin, and most of the black people you see in Haiti, in [not clear], in Brazil, and even here in the US, all came from Benin. And others come from Nigeria. And your bishop even mentioned a language that's spoken in both Benin and Nigeria, and I even think that if your bishop is not from Nigeria, then he is from Benin. And if you'll be found in the streets of Africa, people will certainly think of you as being citizens either of Benin or Nigeria.

[Here a lengthy section explaining the circumstances that brought Kérékou to the US and praising the church for its humanitarian work has been omitted.]

Benin, my country, was the most important place for slave trade. White people from Europe were the buyers, or if I may say, the corrupters, and we were the ones selling, we were the corrupt. We are the ones—our ancestors were the ones who sold out your ancestors to the white people, and the white people bought your ancestors and got them into the various countries that they sent them just to build their economies, in the plantation, in the factories, farms just like in America here. Today, we need to face our responsibility, and your bishop knows what I want to say.

Jesus said, "On your way to give an offering on the altar, when you remember that you have something against your brother, go back, reconcile with him, and then come back and make your offering." And if we do not want to live a life of hypocrisy, you African Americans, no matter how you live, you should know there's something missing; we in Africa, no matter how we live, we should be aware there is something missing. The buyers of the slave, I mean the Europeans, the white people, no matter how they live, no matter the amount of churches or cathedrals being built in those countries, they should know there's something missing; and what's missing is forgiveness, and reconciliation.

These three [. . .] people need to come together—you the victims, we the sellers and buyers—for reconciliation; we need to come together. And what I want you to know is that we cannot enter into the third millennium without being reconciled with one another; and my country is working towards having in Benin an international conference on reconciliation, and this we want to happen before this year runs out, before we get into the year 2000, and we want to have together in our country, the buyers, the sellers, and the victims, and we'll all meet in the spirit of peace because the next millennium will be known as the millennium of reconciliation worldwide. [Applause]

Remember that Joseph was sold by his brothers, and you remember that they went through a very dire situation where there was no food in Canaan, and this situation led Jacob and the other members of the family to go to Egypt and meet with Joseph, who was kind of prime minister to Pharaoh.

And if I'm here today, I want you to know why: just to humbly come in the name of my people to say, that if you are the Joseph who was sold, we are taking responsibility and recognizing before God and before you that we are the ones that sold you, and I am here in the name of my people to humbly beg your forgiveness. To tell you that you have a home, a country, a nation: Benin. You are welcome any time.

When you come to Benin, the city that was the slave city, from where many slaves were sold, is still there under a curse. Nothing prospers in that city. In that city, you still have the very road that your ancestors walked on until they got to the sea and they walked through a door that was called—that is still called—the Door of No Return, because once they crossed that door, it was believed that they would never return, but God sent me to tell you that you have the right to return and turn this door into the Door of Return! [Applause] And an international committee has been set up already that is working hard on this project, and our desire is to see this conference coming up before the end of this year, and by the time this committee will come to your church and ask you, maybe to give someone to them to be part of this committee, please do not hesitate to have your pastor in that committee. I want him there; and when this committee will invite you to come back to Benin, be willing to cooperate with them. You are expected.

Thank you very much, and let me tell you this; I want you to realize that why I'm calling this conference: I strongly believe that without reconciliation, Africa will remain under a curse. You have been hearing about a lot of things going on in Africa, but you also need to know that the wealthiest continent that God ever created is still Africa. A lot of resources is there, and people are coming, and we want you to come back with the technology, and knowledge that God has given you, and we need to work hand and hand with the white people; we shouldn't allow any wall to stand between us and the white people, because after all, we all come from the same ancestor, and his name is Adam. [Applause] Thank you very much.