

**Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
At Thanksgiving Mass Dedicating Catholic Media Center Building
Sacred Heart Cathedral
Broad Street, Monrovia, Liberia
Sunday, March 6, 2011**

Archbishop Lewis Jerome Ziegler;
Reverend Monsignor Andrew Karnley
Officials and Members of the Sacred Heart Family;
Parishioners;
Members of the Media;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let all of us assembled here in Sacred Heart Cathedral, this landmark edifice of the Roman Catholic Church in Liberia, give thanks and praise to Almighty God for his many blessings bestowed upon us as a people and as a nation.

Archbishop Ziegler, let me congratulate you, formally, on your elevation, less than a month ago, as Archbishop of Monrovia. We know that the Gbarnga Diocese will miss you, but Monrovia needs you more. We pray God's grace upon you as you shepherd the affairs of this Roman Catholic Archdiocese, whose history is so inextricably linked with that of this country, dating back to the 1840s, long before Liberia became a Republic.

Let me also congratulate Reverend Monsignor Andrew Karnley, for your just announced elevation as the Bishop-elect of the Cape Palmas Diocese. We will be taking the Cabinet on the road and touring Maryland County and the rest of the southeast later this month, and look forward to seeing you there.

We fondly remember the outspoken and dynamic Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis, the first indigenous Liberian Bishop in the Catholic Church, who raged against corruption and other ills of the society. His was a powerful voice that reminded the regime of the day of its duty to protect the rights of its citizens, during years of civil unrest and conflict. Archbishop Francis served his Church and his country well. He was and still is the conscience of the nation.

We visit him whenever we can, and continue to pray for God's loving care and protection for the Archbishop Emeritus.

When the invitation to be a part of this Thanksgiving Mass was extended to me, for the dedication of the Catholic Media Center Building, home of Radio VERITAS, I accepted without hesitation, because of the sterling role this radio station has played in the struggle for the freedom of expression and its courage in speaking truth to power. "Veritas" means truth, and Radio VERITAS has lived up to its name and reputation of reporting the news truthfully and without fear. So I thank you most sincerely for the opportunity to join in this Thanksgiving Mass.

The Catholic Media Center has been a force to reckon with for 30 years, serving, during repressive times, as a fearless and trusted voice of the people. To convey its message, it first established ELCM Community Radio, which was destroyed in an arson attack by rebel forces in April 1996. A year later, in 1997, just ahead of the general elections in which I was a contender, the station was back on the air, this time bearing the name given to it by Archbishop Francis and garnering a reputation for accurate, balanced and credible reporting.

In the period of turmoil that ensued, and despite risks and threats to the station and its staff, Radio VERITAS persevered, determined to exercise the right of the people to free speech and other fundamental human rights. Ordered shut, in March 2000, by the regime, armed officers then ransacked the premises and humiliated its staff. Other attempts to intimidate, muzzle, and halt the station's operations included revoking its shortwave transmission license on grounds of national security, and being ordered to restrict its broadcasts to religious content since it claimed to be a religious station.

I was delighted when, following my election as President, and as a result of the prevailing conducive political atmosphere, the Vatican decided to reopen its mission, returning to Liberia the envoy of the Holy See. That wise decision compelled Radio VERITAS to find a new home – the building which is being formally opened today, and which, most fittingly, at the same spot where the original radio station had stood.

Through the years, Radio VERITAS faced other setbacks, but remained undaunted, steadfast. I especially recall when a violent storm brought down the

radio tower and all the transmission equipment installed on it. Our Administration was, fortunately, able to lend a helping hand to keep the station on the air.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Today is a day for giving thanks and celebrating the achievements, the commitment and the resolve of an honorable member of our media family. As I told the National Legislature, and the nation, in my Annual Message on January 24th, I strongly believe that the most essential and precious ingredient of democracy is freedom of speech, with the attendant political right that gives rise to a vibrant and thriving society. Without a free press, we cannot speak of a free society. Our role, as a government, has been to create the environment where freedom of expression flourishes, where nobody goes to jail or is punished for speaking the truth or expressing their ideas.

As we strive to run a government, the media remains an essential partner. Through the media we learn if what we are doing is right; whether we serve the people well; whether our policies make sense or not. We learn what the people think and expect from government. Only the media can play that watchdog role, and we welcome it.

The media has responsibility too – the responsibility to act and speak in a manner which protects the image and the potential of the country; and to be fair, accurate and professional in their reporting.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It was in recognition of this freedom and the open society that we have promoted since coming to office, that journalists from across Africa, at the African Editors Forum held in Bamako, last October, awarded me the “Friend of the Media Award” – the first to be awarded a sitting President. I am very proud of the partnership between this Government and the media in Liberia.

Today, thanks to the performance of media organizations like the Catholic Media Center and its Radio VERITAS, we in Liberia are on our way to achieving a pluralistic society, under the rule of the law, with freedom for all. We applaud you, the Catholic Media Center, and Radio VERITAS, for your contributions towards getting our country to where it is today. We call upon you to continue to speak the truth and nothing but the truth!

Thirty years have come and gone, and the Catholic Media Center and Radio VERITAS have solidified their positions as respected Liberian institutions that can proudly take credit for contributing to the peace we, in Liberia, enjoy today. I wish you continued success, as a voice of the people, for many, many years to come.

May God richly bless you! I thank you.