



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE YAOUNDÉ MEETING

To those who are gathering in Yaoundé from all parts of Africa for the Meeting that has been organized on the initiative of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

I have pleasure in greeting among your number, together with Cardinal Opilio Rossi and Cardinal Paul Zoungrana, the high civil authorities of the country which is welcoming you. My cordial and respectful greeting goes to them, as it does to each one of you present for this important moment in the life of the Church in this great continent.

I greet especially the Bishops among you. They are the Presidents of the various Episcopal Commissions of the Laity. Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, I wish to encourage you in all you do to promote the apostolate of the laity in your countries and the participation of the laity in the life and mission of the Church.

I greet the priests who work with the Bishops in this vital service among the laity. Through you I renew my call to all the priests in the countries of this continent. Continue in your efforts to help all the baptized to be aware of the hidden riches they bear within them. You will find that in assisting the laity in this way your own priestly identity will be yet clearer.

Likewise, I greet those who represent the religious Congregations and Institutes in your midst. You have an indispensable role to play in the growth of the Church in Africa, and, indeed, in the integral development of African countries. It is clear that you have a special role to play in ensuring that the spiritual dimension of Christian commitment in social life be not forgotten. In your work of formation and apostolate you are called to give prophetic witness to the Gospel mandate: "Seek first the Kingdom of God". May God always preserve you in the fullness of your calling.

I greet, finally, the many lay men and lay women present at this meeting who are here because by their lives they already express that response to the lay vocation that we wish to hear echoing

throughout every country and region. My thanks, my encouragement, my earnest prayers accompany you in the course of the coming days.

I have been following the preparations for your meeting with deep interest and I have encouraged the Pontifical Council for the Laity in this work. My mind goes back to the Panafrican-Malagasy Seminar in Accra, 1971. As Archbishop of Cracow and as consulter to the Laity Council in Rome I had the opportunity to follow that historic event particularly closely, even though I was not able to be present. In May 1980, in the course of what was for me a cherished visit to a number of countries in Africa, I had occasion while in Accra to refer to that memorable Seminar and to address a message of fraternal solidarity and pastoral instruction to the Catholic laity in every country in Africa. I would, on the occasion of the present meeting, refer you back to something I said on that occasion since it bears directly on the important questions you are about to discuss: “You who are lay persons in the Church, and who possess the faith, the greatest of all resources – you have a unique opportunity and crucial responsibility. Through your lives in the midst of your daily activities in the world, you show the power that faith has to transform the world and renew the family of man. Even though it is hidden and unnoticed like the leaven or the salt of the earth spoken of in the Gospel, your role as laity is indispensable for the Church in the fulfilment of her mission from Christ”.

What I said at that time links directly with the theme chosen for this meeting, namely: “The vocation of the laity: their influence in contemporary society, the spiritual dimension of their commitment”.

In the coming days you will be considering together how to make this vocation known, valued and accepted by each lay person in the Church in Africa. But there is a feature here which is very striking and which I consider to be of the utmost importance: you are doing this *together* – Bishops, priests, religious and laity. By reason of the Baptism and Confirmation which is common to all, you are an image of the Church, the People of God in which there are different ministries and charisms but a shared dignity, a shared responsibility. Your gathering together from all parts of this continent to express and deepen your commitment to your Christian vocation – and to call all members of the Church to live this vocation to the full – is a shining witness to the vital mission of all baptized persons in the Church who, in union with their pastors and under their direction, are building up the Kingdom of God. Your coming together expresses respect for different roles and ministries in the Church; it gives witness to a genuinely shared responsibility and dignity. Collaboration of this nature does not blur the distinction between ministries and charisms; it clarifies the distinction and shows the complementarity of each in the life and mission of the Church. All together make up God’s people and the varied gifts and responsibilities of each form, by the gift of the one Holy Spirit, that communion in Christ which is characteristic of the Church and her mission.

An awareness of this communion of all in the Spirit of Christ truly nurtures and sustains lay men

and women in responding to their daily calling and mission, as baptized Christians, to evangelise the society in which they live and work. As was said in the course of the 1971 Seminar at Accra: the African lay person must be a builder of history, contributing at the same time to the growth of the Church and the integral development of Africa.

Here we touch on that element in your theme which is entitled “the spiritual dimension of lay commitment”. Among the many things that Africa has to offer to the world is the all encompassing spiritual dimension that permeates its culture. There is “a vision of the world where the sacred is central; a deep awareness of the link between Creator and Nature; a great respect of all life; a sense of family and of community that blossoms into an open and joyful hospitality; reverence for dialogue as a means of settling differences and sharing insights; spontaneity and the joy of living expressed in poetic language, song and dance”^[1].

It is the Christian vocation to bring to all of this the presence of Christ, who is the leaven, the salt and the light of history. It follows that each Christian must not only know and be sensitive to the people, the culture, the signs of the times in which he or she lives, but must also know Christ intimately and be deeply united to him. In this way faith and life will interpenetrate one another. In this regard, I would remind you of the solemn words of the Second Vatican Council: “One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and the practice of their daily lives... the Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties towards his neighbour, neglects God himself, and endangers his eternal salvation”^[2].

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, from what I have said you will see that the forming of lay Christians for their unique and irreplaceable task constitutes one of the greatest priorities of the Church today. Your prayers, reflections and discussions during the coming days will all have this formation and this mission as their motivating force.

You will also be discussing in the course of the meeting what structures of coordination for the lay apostolate may be judged necessary or desirable at national, regional and continental levels. This is also a central element of your discussions, because it is directly concerned with the effective and lasting benefits to the local Churches that will result from your discussions. The ways in which the themes of your meeting are later discussed and acted upon at regional and national levels will be the fruits of your present deliberations.

For this purpose, especially at the time when the Church celebrates the Birth of Jesus Christ from the Virgin Mary, I pray to Mary asking her intercession for you, for your families and apostolic associations, for your religious Congregations, for your parishes, dioceses and countries, and I invoke the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ upon you and with deep affection give you my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 31 December 1981.

JOHN PAUL II

[1] Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio ad Exc.mum Virum Hilla Limann, Ganae Praesidem, Accrae habita*, 3, die 8 maii 1980: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, III, 1 (1980) 1239-1240.

[2] *Guadium et Spes*, 43.

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