



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO AFRICA

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Accra (Ghana), 8 May 1980

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. A little less than ten years ago, the first Pan African and Malagasy Meeting of the Laity was held here in Accra. As Archbishop of Krakow and also consultor to the Council for the Laity I had the opportunity at that time, although I was not present, to follow with particular attention, interest and admiration the highlights of that historic event. The lay men and women who had come from thirty-six African countries were, in effect, saying in unison: "Present!". They were telling the world: "We are present in the communion of the faithful; we are present in the mission of the Church of Christ in Africa!".

2. Ten years later, God has granted me the opportunity to come to Accra, to be with you today, to celebrate the Eucharist together with you, to speak to you, and through you to address a message to all the Catholic laity of Africa. Today it is the Successor of Peter, it is Pope John Paul II who says: "Present!". Yes, I am present with the laity of Africa; I come as your father and as Pastor of the universal Church. I am present as your brother in the faith! As a brother in Christ I wish to tell you how close I am to you in the infinite charity of the Crucified and Risen Lord, how much I love you, how much I love the laity of Africa!

As your Pastor, I wish to confirm you in your efforts to remain faithful to the Gospel, and in your mission to carry to others the Good News of our salvation. I wish to exhort you, the laity, to renew through the Eucharist the strength of your Christian commitment, to revive the joy of being members of the Body of Christ, to dedicate yourselves once again as Christians in Africa to promote the true and integral development of this great continent. Together with you I wish to give thanks to the heavenly Father, remembering "how you have shown your faith in action, worked for

love and persevered through hope, in your Lord Jesus Christ" .

3. Brothers and sisters in Christ, I desire to direct my words, my greeting and my blessing to the Catholic laity in every country of Africa. I went to reach beyond the boundaries of language, geography and ethnic origin, and, without distinction, to entrust each one to Christ the Lord. Thus I ask everyone of you who hears my message of fraternal solidarity and pastoral instruction to pass it on. I ask you to make my message travel from village to village, from home to home. Tell your brothers and sisters in the faith that the Pope loves you all and embraces you in the peace of Christ.

4. This vast continent of Africa has been endowed by the Creator with many natural resources. In our own day we have witnessed how the development and use of these numerous resources have greatly served to advance the material and social progress of your individual countries. As we thank God for the benefits of this progress, we must not forget, we dare not forget, that the greatest resource and the greatest treasure entrusted to you or to anyone is the gift of faith, the tremendous privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

You who are laypersons in the Church, and who possess 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 to 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. This was clearly taught by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council when they stated: "The Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is she a perfect sign of Christ among people, unless there exists a laity worthy of the name, working alongside the hierarchy. For the Gospel cannot be deeply imprinted on the mentality, life and work of any people without the active presence of lay people" .

5. The role of lay people in the mission of the Church extends in two directions: in union with your pastors and assisted by their guidance you build up the communion of the faithful; secondly, as responsible citizens you permeate with the leaven of the Gospel the society in which you live, in its economic, social, political, cultural and intellectual dimensions. When you faithfully carry out these two roles as citizens of both the earthly city and the heavenly Kingdom, then are the words of Christ fulfilled: "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world" .

6. Today our brothers and sisters receive new life through water and the Holy Spirit . By Baptism they are incorporated into the Church and reborn as children of God. They receive the greatest dignity possible for any person. As Saint Peter said, they become "a chosen race, a royal

priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God" . In the sacrament of Confirmation they are more intimately joined to the Church and endowed by the Holy Spirit with special strength . By means of these two great sacraments Christ summons his people, Christ

summons each one of the laity to assume a share in the responsibility for building up the communion of the faithful.

As members of the laity, you are called to take an active part in the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church, especially in the Eucharistic sacrifice. At the same time you are called to spread the Gospel actively through the practice of charity and through involvement in catechetical and missionary efforts, according to the gifts which each one of you has received . In every Christian community, whether it be the "domestic Church" constituted by 'the family, or the parish collaborating with the priest, or the diocese united around the Bishop, the laity strive, like the followers of Christ in the first century, to remain faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, faithful to fraternal service, faithful to prayer and to the celebration of the Eucharist .

7. Your Christian vocation does not take you away from any of your other brothers and sisters. It does not inhibit your involvement in civic affairs nor exempt you from your responsibilities as a citizen. It does not divide you from society nor relieve you of the daily trials of life. Rather your continued engagement in secular activities and professions is truly a part of your vocation. For you are called to make the Church present and fruitful in the ordinary circumstances of life - in married and family life, in the daily conditions of earning a living, in political and civic responsibilities and in cultural, scientific and educational pursuits. No human activity is foreign to the Gospel. God wishes all of creation to be ordered to his Kingdom, and it is especially to the laity that the Lord has entrusted this task.

8. The laity of the Church in Africa have a crucial role to play in meeting the urgent problems and challenges which face this vast continent. As Christian laity, the Church expects you to help shape the future of your individual countries, to contribute to their development in some particular sphere. The Church asks you to bring the influence of the Gospel and the presence of Christ into every human activity, and to seek to build a society where the dignity of each person is respected and where equality, justice and freedom are protected and promoted.

9. Today, I also wish to emphasize the need for the continuing instruction and catechesis of the laity. For only a serious spiritual and doctrinal formation in your Christian identity, together with an adequate civic and human preparation in secular activities, can make possible that contribution of the laity to the future of Africa which is so greatly desired. In this regard we are reminded of the exhortation of Saint Paul: "... we urge you and appeal to you in the Lord Jesus to make more and more progress in the kind of life you are meant to live: the life that God wants..." . In order to accomplish this goal, greater knowledge is needed of the mystery of Christ. It is necessary for the laity to enter into this mystery of Christ and to be trained especially in the word of God, which leads to salvation. The Holy Spirit is calling upon the Church to pursue this path with loving tenacity and perseverance. Hence I wish to encourage the worthy initiatives on all levels which have already been undertaken in this field. May these efforts continue and increasingly equip the laity for their mission, so that with holiness of life they may meet the many needs that lie ahead, so

that the whole Church in Africa will ever more effectively communicate Christ.

10. My brothers and sisters, we were reminded today by the second reading that Jesus Christ "is the living stone..." . Jesus Christ is the one on whom the future of the world is built, on whom the future of every man and woman depends. At all times we must look to him. At all times we must build on him. Thus I repeat to you what I said to the world on Easter Sunday of this year: "Do not reject him, you who, in whatever way and in whatever sphere, are building the world of today and of tomorrow: the world of culture and civilization, the world of economics and of politics, the world of science and information. You who are building the world of peace... Do not refuse Christ: he is the cornerstone!".

11. With the words of the Apostle Peter, I invite you to "set yourselves close to him so that you too... may be living stones making a spiritual house" , building up the Church in Africa, advancing the Kingdom of God on earth.

It is in this spirit that we pray to our heavenly Father: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". Amen.

Chers frères et Sœurs du Togo et du Bénin,

Merci d'être venus si nombreux, d'avoir marché longuement pour rencontrer le Vicaire du Christ. Je vous invite vous aussi à demeurer fermes dans la foi, et très unis entre vous. Le Seigneur est fidèle; il ne vous abandonnera pas si vous lui donnez votre confiance. Et il vous rendra forts pour que vous témoigniez de votre foi, non seulement à l'église, mais dans les actes de votre vie quotidienne, où il faut sans cesse choisir de vivre selon la vérité, selon la pureté, selon la charité de l'Évangile. Continuez à vous instruire des vérités de la foi. Et approchez-vous avec joie des sacrements de pénitence et de l'Eucharistie, en pensant que c'est le Seigneur qui vous pardonne, qui vous nourrit, qui vous donne sa grâce. C'est le signe visible de sa présence invisible. Comme disait Jésus ressuscité: "Paix à vous". "Ne craignez pas". Que le Seigneur vous bénisse.

