



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE FIRST CONGRESS OF CATHOLIC LAITY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

To His Excellency

Archbishop James Francis Stafford

President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity

1. On the occasion of the first Congress of the Catholic Laity of the Middle East which you have organized in Beirut from 10 to 14 June, I give thanks for this initiative which is particularly timely within the perspective of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

“Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, constant in prayer” (cf. Rom 12: 12), the lay people who represent the Catholic communities of the Middle East are anxious to share their experiences and to reflect on their commitments in the Church and in the world. The Catholic communities of the Middle East belong to the universal Church. At the same time, they have a heritage —cultural, historical, theological, liturgical and spiritual — that is specific and that comes from different ritual traditions. The lay people are called to act in such a way that this diversity may be an opportunity for the enrichment of the different communities and may strengthen the unity of the Church of Christ. Day by day, in-depth dialogue will foster cooperation between Catholics of different rites; it will also enhance fraternal living and solidarity with the Christians belonging to the Orthodox communities. All Christ’s faithful will be concerned to give one another mutual help and support, especially in social contexts where they are in the minority.

The Catholics of the Middle East also have the vocation to be the primary agents of concrete interreligious dialogue with the believers of the great monotheistic religions. Sharing work, residing in the same neighbourhoods, experiencing a simple and genuine solidarity: all these aspects of life in common cannot fail to increase mutual knowledge, friendship, reciprocal understanding and respect for freedom of conscience and religion. So I encourage the participants in the Congress and all the lay people of the region to open their hearts to the Holy Spirit, so as to respond ever

more readily to the calls of the Spirit, and to carry out their mission as baptized people in the Church, in communion with their Pastors; in society also, where they have to play their part in building a world of greater justice, solidarity and fraternity.

The Congress is taking place a month after my Pastoral Visit to the land of Lebanon, during which I was able to meet representatives of the different religious communities in the country, and to invite all the people in Lebanon and in the Middle East to live in brotherhood. The signing of the recent Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban* and its presentation to the Pastors and faithful of the country marked a specially important moment of my journey. This document is addressed mainly to Lebanese Catholics, but I entrust it also to all the participants of your Congress. May they help to inspire new confidence in the Catholic lay people of the region and to give them new energy for the witness of faith, of hope and of salvation that they must bring to their brothers and sisters.

2. In this region of the world, Abraham, our Father in the faith, has walked, and all his descendants. Following in their footsteps, every Christian is called to respond to the call of the Lord, letting himself be led by him, so as to find true life. In these lands, God carried out his divine plan of love by sending his only Son, Jesus of Nazareth, for the salvation of the world and to gather together scattered mankind. In Christ, all the divine promises have been fulfilled and life has conquered death, so that hope dwells within us. The Apostles brought the Gospel to the peoples of the region; in Antioch, for the first time, the disciples were called Christians (cf. Acts 11:28). The texts of the Eastern Fathers of the Church, the great monastic traditions, the example of many saints, both men and women, all these riches are part of the heritage of faith that the faithful have the duty of preserving and maintaining, for “the Church drinks from the evangelical and apostolic springs, which never grow dry” (Origen, *Homily on Genesis*), and that act as a stimulant for the spiritual and liturgical life, and for the witness that must be given today. It is for the laity in particular to pass on to future generations the Good News of the Gospel, so that young people, by discovering Christ, may find reasons for hope and by building up their personality, may play their part in ecclesial and social life as agents of the new evangelization and sowers of God’s Word among other young people (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban*, n. 51).

Christ’s faithful have a mission deriving from the sacrament of Baptism. Signed with the holy oil, God’s children remain eternally members of Jesus Christ, priest, prophet and king. They share in Christ’s priestly office by all “their works, prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit —indeed even the hardships of life if patiently borne — all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, n. 34). They share in the prophetic office when they let the newness and the strength of the Gospel shine forth in all fields of their life. They share, finally, in the kingly office when, with self-mastery, they enter the spiritual combat against the reign of sin in themselves and in the world, and when their concern is to serve

God and to serve their brothers and sisters in charity.

The lay people taking part in the meeting and all members of the Church will become aware of the value of their Baptism and will together be able to help and support one another in order to be responsible Christians, agents of peace, dialogue and reconciliation. In this way, they will be urged to place their talents and their professional skills at the service of their fellow-citizens' development, and to participate actively in the management of society and in the political life of their country.

Every Christian community is composed of persons differing in origin and in sensitivity. Each one should be concerned "to do all things in divine harmony, under the presidency of the Bishop" (St Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians*, 6, 1), avoiding divisions as the root of all evil! In this spirit, special care should be taken to welcome the different movements which make a specific contribution to ecclesial life and make it possible for the faithful to live a life of prayer, sharing and action.

4. Christ left to his disciples the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the whole creation (cf. Mk 16:15). With the grace of the Holy Spirit, and with the support of the Pastors — for whom they are valuable co-workers — lay people are indispensable partners in proclaiming the Good News; they are able to take their share of responsibility in the life and growth of the Christian communities to which they belong; they are called to transform the world in the manner of leaven. They have a "specific and indispensable role" in the life of the Church (Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Lay Apostolate, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 1). Living in the world, they work for its progress and its sanctification. The Jubilee Year, for which we are preparing, must enable us to promote social justice (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 13), and must afford an opportunity for a conversion of hearts.

For renewal in society and in the Church, I especially invite husbands and wives to pay great attention to their married and family life, taking care to give their children the moral and spiritual education that will make of them responsible adults. I salute the role played by women. They are able to manifest their "genius" in the most diverse circumstances of human life and they should be "offered more important forms of participation and responsibilities in ecclesial decisions" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban*, n. 50). Then, a new springtime will dawn, the first-fruits of the kingdom to come.

5. Invoking the assistance of the Holy Spirit on you, on the Pastors of the Middle East, on the members of the Congress, on committed lay people in the Church, and on the priests and religious who guide them in their apostolate, that Christ may be known and loved, I cordially grant my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 30 May 1997.

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