



The Holy See

JUBILEE OF THE APOSTOLATE OF THE LAITY

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO CARDINAL J. FRANCIS STAFFORD
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CONGRESS
OF THE CATHOLIC LAITY**

*To my Venerable Brother Cardinal James Francis Stafford
President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity*

1. In the coming days the Congress of the Catholic Laity organized by this Pontifical Council for the Laity will be held in Rome with the theme: *"Witnesses to Christ in the New Millennium"*. This is a happy initiative which will offer the participants a further opportunity during the Great Jubilee to grow in faith and ecclesial communion. For the assembly will see many lay people gather with Cardinals, Bishops, priests and religious, signifying all the people baptized in the Lord, the *christifideles*, who are walking to the Father's house amid the afflictions of the world and the consolations of God (cf. 2 Cor 1: 4). The congress will thus be a moment of reflection and dialogue, of sharing faith and prayer, within the framework of the celebrations for the Jubilee of the Laity, culminating with Holy Mass in St Peter's Square on the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.

Through you I thank the Pontifical Council for the Laity, which wanted to organize this stimulating programme that has us listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church (cf. Rv 2: 7) through the faith experience of so many lay Christians, men and women of our time.

2. The congress is thematically related with the other great meetings of the lay faithful which in the last 50 years have marked important stages on the journey of the promotion and development of the Catholic laity. I am thinking in particular of the world congresses of the apostolate of the laity held in Rome respectively in 1951, 1957 and then in 1967, immediately after the Council. I am also thinking of the two world consultations of the Catholic laity organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity for the Holy Year of 1975 and in preparation for the Seventh General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1987, whose results I synthesized in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*.

In this regard, as I have already had occasion to stress, the present meeting "will sum up the laity's progress from the Second Vatican Council to the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation" (*L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 10 March 1999, p. 5). Starting with an assessment of the implementation of the Council's teachings in the life and apostolate of the laity, your meeting will certainly help to instil new zeal in their missionary efforts. An essential dimension of the Christian's vocation and mission is to bear witness to God's saving presence in human history, as is well stated by the congress' theme: "*Witnesses to Christ in the New Millennium*".

3. The last decades of the 20th century saw the seeds of an encouraging spiritual springtime blossoming in the Church. How, for example, could we not be grateful to God for the clearer awareness that the lay faithful - men and women - have acquired of their own dignity as baptized persons who have become a "new creation"; of their own Christian vocation; of the need to grow in the knowledge and experience of faith as *christifideles*, that is, as true disciples of the Lord; and of their own membership in the Church?

At the same time, however, in a climate of widespread secularism, many believers are tempted to leave the Church, and unfortunately they let themselves be infected with indifference or make compromises with the dominant culture. Many of the faithful, too, have selective and critical attitudes to the Church's Magisterium. To reawaken in the consciences of Christians a livelier sense of their identity, there is a need then, in the framework of the Great Jubilee, for that serious examination of conscience which I spoke of in *Tertio millennio adveniente* (cf. n. 34). There are essential questions which no one can avoid: What have I done with my Baptism and Confirmation? Is Christ truly the centre of my life? Do I make room for daily prayer? Do I live my life as a vocation and a mission? Christ continues to remind us: "You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world.... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5: 13, 14, 16).

4. The vocation and mission of the lay faithful can be understood only in the light of a renewed awareness of the Church, which "is in the nature of sacrament - a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 1), and of one's personal duty to adhere more firmly to her. The Church is a mystery of communion which originates in the life of the Blessed Trinity. She is the Mystical Body of Christ. She is the People of God who, made one by the same faith, hope and charity, journey through history to their definitive homeland in heaven. And we, as the baptized, are living members of this marvellous and fascinating organism, nourished by the sacramental, hierarchical and charismatic gifts which are coessential to it. That is why, today more than ever, it is necessary for Christians, enlightened and guided by faith, to know the Church as she is in all her beauty and holiness, so that they can listen to her and love her as their mother. To this end it is important to reawaken in the entire People of God a true *sensus Ecclesiae*, along with a deep awareness of being Church, that is, a mystery of communion.

5. At the threshold of the third millennium, God calls believers, especially lay people, to a renewed missionary zeal. Mission is not an appendix to the Christian vocation. Rather, as the Second Vatican Council recalls, the Christian vocation by its nature is a vocation to the apostolate (cf. *Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 2). Christ should be proclaimed by word and the witness of life, and, before being a strategic and organized effort, the apostolate involves the grateful and joyful communication to all of the gift of meeting Christ. An evangelically mature person, or community, is motivated by intense missionary enthusiasm, which spurs him to bear witness to Christ in every circumstance and situation, in every social, cultural and political context. In this regard, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, "by reason of their special

vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will.

They live in the world, that is, they are engaged in each and every work and business of the earth and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, constitute their very existence. There they are called by God that they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 31).

Dear brothers and sisters, the Church needs you and is counting on you! The promotion and defence of the human person's dignity and rights, today more urgent than ever, demands the courage of individuals who are enlivened by faith, capable of selfless love and deeply compassionate, respectful of the truth about man made in the image of God and destined to grow to the full stature of Christ Jesus (cf. *Eph* 4: 13). Do not be discouraged by the complexity of situations! Seek the source of all apostolic strength in prayer; draw from the Gospel the light to guide your steps.

The complexity of situations must not discourage you, but rather should spur you to look with wisdom and courage for adequate answers to the demand for bread and work, and to the requirements of freedom, peace and justice, sharing and solidarity.

6. Dear lay faithful, men and women, you are also called to accept willingly and generously your share of responsibility for the life of the ecclesial communities to which you belong. The image of your parishes, called to be welcoming and missionary, depends on you. No baptized person can be idle. As participants in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ and enriched by a variety of charisms, lay Christians can make their own contribution to the liturgy, catechesis, and different kinds of missionary and charitable programmes. Some can also be called to assume non-ordained offices, roles or ministries at the parish or diocesan level (cf. *Christifideles laici*, n. 14). This is a valuable service and, in various parts of the world, more and more indispensable. However, the risk of distorting the role of the lay person by excessive withdrawal into intra-ecclesial needs should be avoided. Therefore, the identity both of the lay faithful and of the ordained minister must be respected, while collaboration between lay faithful and priests and, in cases determined by ecclesiastical discipline, the substitution of priests by lay persons must take place in a spirit of ecclesial communion in which tasks and states of life are seen as complementary and are mutually enriching (cf. *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests*).

7. Participation of the lay faithful in the life and mission of the Church is expressed and supported by various associations, many of which are represented at this congress. Especially in our times, they represent an important means for deeper Christian formation and more effective apostolic activity. The Second Vatican Council says: "Associations are not ends in themselves; they are meant to be of service to the Church's mission to the world. Their apostolic value depends on their conformity with the Church's aims, as well as on the Christian witness and evangelical spirit of each of their members and of the association as a whole" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 19). Thus, if they are to remain faithful to their own identity, lay groups must constantly evaluate themselves according to the criteria of ecclesiality which I wrote about in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* (cf. n. 30).

Today we can speak of a "new era of group endeavours of the lay faithful" (ibid., n. 29). It is one of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council. Along with the associations with a long and praiseworthy tradition, we observe a vigorous and

diversified flourishing of ecclesial movements and new communities. This gift of the Holy Spirit is another sign of how God always finds appropriate and timely responses to the challenges posed to faith and to the Church in every historical era. Here too we must thank the associations, movements and ecclesial groups for their work in Christian formation and for the missionary enthusiasm they continue to bring to the Church.

8. Dear brothers and sisters! In these days you are sharing reflections and experiences, evaluating the ground covered and turning your gaze to the future. In looking at the past, you can clearly see how essential the role of the laity is to the life of the Church. How could we forget here the harsh persecutions which the Church suffered in the 20th century in vast areas of the world? It is above all due to the courageous witness of the lay faithful, often to the point of martyrdom, that faith was not erased from the lives of entire peoples. Experience shows that the blood of martyrs becomes the seed of confessors, and we Christians are deeply indebted to these ""unknown soldiers' of God's great cause" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 37).

As for the future, there are many reasons for entering the new millennium with well-founded hope. The Christian springtime, many signs of which we can already glimpse (cf. *Redemptoris missio*, n. 86), is perceivable in the radical choice of faith, in the genuine holiness of life, in the extraordinary apostolic zeal of many lay faithful, men and women, the young, adults and the elderly. It is therefore the task of the present generation to bring the Gospel to future humanity. Be "witnesses to Christ in the new millennium", as the theme of your congress says. Be well aware of it, and respond with prompt fidelity to this urgent missionary call. The Church is counting on you!

I wish every success to the work of your assembly and, as I invoke upon everyone the protection of Mary, Queen of Apostles and Star of the new evangelization, I cordially impart my special Blessing to you, Your Eminence, and to all the participants, and willingly extend it to your loved ones and to everyone you meet in your apostolate.

From the Vatican, 21 November 2000.

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