



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS
IN THE CONGRESS OF CATHOLIC LAITY
OF EASTERN EUROPE
(Kyev, 8-12 October 2003)**

1. I extend my greetings of peace to all of you – Cardinals, Venerable Brother Bishops, beloved priests, men and women religious, and lay faithful – who have gathered in Kyiv from different Countries, and not without sacrifice, in order to take part in the Congress of Catholic Laity of Eastern Europe. You have come to this meeting inspired by the same hope that sustains your Churches: Churches of heroes and martyrs, which amidst tribulations, and often to the point of shedding blood, have persevered in faithfulness to Christ the one Lord, in fidelity to the Catholic Church, in affirming the values of truth. A special word of greeting and thanks goes to Cardinals Lubomyr Husar and Marian Jaworski, without whose precious support this Congress could not have taken place. My gratitude goes also to the Church in the Ukraine — which the Lord allowed me to visit two years ago during the month of June, and of which the memories remain vividly etched in my mind — for agreeing to host such a significant event. I congratulate Cardinal James Stafford for this exciting initiative of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, which is a cause of great satisfaction for me.

2. The harsh legacy of atheistic totalitarian regimes, which have left emptiness and deep scars on consciences, requires that the countries of Eastern Europe take up today the hard work of proceeding with religious, moral and civil reconstruction; of strengthening refound sovereignty, freedom and democracy; of mending the economy. On the difficult road that your Nations will have to set out upon in order to take renewed possession of their history and cultural dignity, you, the Christian lay faithful, have an irreplaceable role of fundamental importance. The Lord asks you who have been stalwart witnesses of faith in times of trial and persecution, and in the time that has now seen you regain religious freedom, to prepare the soil for a vigorous rebirth of the Church in your Countries. After long decades of painful separation, which has caused a kind of asphyxia among the Christian communities of the East, Europe can breathe once more with both its lungs, revealing great possibilities for the spread of the Gospel.

3. An old Europe, from West to East, is looking for a new identity. In this process, it must not forget its roots. Europe must remember that Christianity has been the lifeblood from which it has drawn the noblest inspirations of its spirit for two thousand years. As I wrote in my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*: “European culture gives the impression of ‘silent apostasy’ on the part of people who have all that they need and live as if God does not exist” (No. 9). And yet there is no lack of encouraging signs of “a great springtime for Christianity” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 86), which can be seen also in the contexts of your Churches. The full blossoming of this springtime, however, will depend on the indispensable contribution of the lay faithful, who are called to make Christ’s Church present in the world by proclaiming and serving the Gospel of hope (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic

Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, 41). The theme of your Congress — “Being witnesses of Christ today” — expresses well the meaning of this mission, which none of the Baptized can delegate to others or avoid. To you, gathered in this marvellous city of Kyiv that witnessed the Baptism of the ancient Rus’, is entrusted the responsibility of passing on to future generations the heritage of Christian faith. This will be possible to the extent that each of you is able to strengthen the awareness of your own Baptism. The sacrament of Baptism makes us children of God called to holiness, members of the Church — the Mystical Body of Christ — with a shared responsibility for building up the Christian community, participants in the Church’s mission of announcing to men and women the Good News of salvation. The rediscovery of the baptismal dignity of the laity and of their responsibility in the Church’s mission is one of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council. For this reason, to you who are gathered in Kyiv I repeat the words that I spoke to the faithful who had assembled in Rome in the year 2000 to celebrate the Jubilee of the Apostolate of the Laity: “We must return to the Council. We must once again take the documents of the Second Vatican Council in hand to rediscover the great wealth of its doctrinal and pastoral motives. In particular, you lay people must again take those documents in hand. To you the Council opened extraordinary perspectives of commitment and involvement in the Church’s mission” (*Homily at the Mass for the Jubilee of the Apostolate of the Laity*, St. Peter’s Square, 26 November 2000, 3). The Council has made this the hour of the laity in the Church! Your vocation and mission will bear fruit provided that, in your actions, you are able always to make a return to Christ, to set out from Christ, to keep your gaze fixed firmly on Christ’s face. “You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:13,14): the Lord speaks these words to each of you. Let his light shine in your personal lives, in your families, in your workplaces, in the world of education, culture and politics, in every sector where people work for peace and for the building of a social order that is of a more human dimension and that respects the inalienable dignity of men and women.⁴ For the laity, this is a time of hope and courage! The Church needs you and knows that she can entrust great responsibilities to you. I therefore thank your Bishops, priests and religious for the commitment that they have demonstrated up to the present in the formation of mature Christians rooted in the faith. Expressing my gratitude to them, I urge them to continue this work, aiming at a systematic catechesis formulated for different age groups and for different situations and conditions of life. I encourage them especially to invest energy and means in the human and Christian formation of the younger generations, the hope of the Church and the future of mankind. A precious contribution in this regard can be made by associations, church movements and new communities, the experience of which has given birth to fruitful pedagogical paths and a renewed apostolic enthusiasm. Dear lay faithful, do not be discouraged as you face the challenges of our day! Draw strength from the example and intercession of the martyrs, whose witness is the “supreme incarnation of the Gospel of hope” (*Ecclesia in Europa*, 13). Make your families true domestic Churches and your parishes true schools of prayer and Christian life. You have regained freedom at the price of great suffering; do not let it ever devolve into the pursuit of false ideals suggested by the utilitarianism, individualistic hedonism or unrestrained consumerism that characterize so much of modern culture. Preserve your rich Christian traditions, resisting the insidious temptation to exclude God from your lives or to reduce faith to gestures and sporadic, superficial occurrences. You are “new” men and women. May your eyes, firmly set on reality, be illuminated by faith and by the teaching of the Church.⁵ There should be due consideration in your Churches for the need to promote “a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43). This should be the case in your Dioceses, parishes, families and societies. Such a spirituality calls us in a special way to a renewed ecumenical commitment. The lay faithful, with a proper formation and always in respect of freedom, in brotherly love, in dialogue and in cooperation, can open new paths to Christian unity, which is a “walking together towards Christ”. Here too I would like to recall the example of the martyrs, whose witness has become the common heritage of the different Christian Churches and speaks louder than those things that bring

division (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 37). You too are called to bear witness to Christ together with all our Christian brothers and sisters, wherever you may live and in whatever projects you may undertake in cooperation with them. The love of Christ heals wounds, overcomes prejudices, prepares the paths of unity. Pray unceasingly so that what seems impossible by the standards of human logic will be made possible by God, who offers his powerful assistance. Bring to fulfilment the commandment of his Son: “*Ut unum sint*” (Jn 17:21).⁶ In my ministry as Successor of Peter, as a pilgrim in the world, God has allowed me to visit some of your Countries. Those extraordinary experiences of a joyful welcome and cordial hospitality, of faith and devotion are vividly etched in my mind. Providence alone knows whether I shall be able to continue my pastoral pilgrimages in your blessed lands. Today I embrace you and, together with you, all the peoples, Nations and Christian communities to which you belong. I entrust all of you to Mary, Mother of the Church and Help of Christians. We turn to her with special devotion in this year dedicated to the Rosary. May the Virgin intercede with her Son so that his grace will nourish and sustain the rebirth of your Churches and your Countries. Expressing the hope that the Congress of Catholic Laity of Eastern Europe will bear the abundant fruits of a renewed commitment to the cause of Christ, I cordially send my special blessing to all the participants and willingly extend it to your loved ones and to all whom you will meet on your path as disciples of Christ. *From the Vatican, 4 October 2003* JOHN PAUL II
