



The Holy See

**LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO H. Em. CARDINAL OPILIO ROSSI,
PRESIDENT OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY**

*To my venerable Brother
Cardinal Opilio Rossi
President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity*

Through you I wish to extend my warm greetings to all those who have gathered in Hong Kong for the meeting on the theme: "The role of the laity in the Church's life and mission in Asian society".

This is the fourth in a series of continental meetings sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the Laity and I want all of you to know that I look with love and hope towards you at this time.

On this occasion I would recall the words I addressed to members of the Church in Asia during my first visit there, words apply directly to yourselves: "The Church has been present in Asia from her very beginning, and you are the successors of the early Christians who spread the Gospel message of love and service throughout Asia. In many parts of this continent you are small in number but in every country the Church has taken root. In the members of his Church-in you-Christ is Asian" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II, *Nuntius ad universae Asiae incolas e Manilensi radiophonica statione «Radio Veritas»*, 12, die 21 febr. 1981: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, IV, 1 (1981) 458).

In you and through you the mission given by Christ to his Church continues, and your meeting, with its special consideration of the vocation of the laity, will be a very valuable contribution to the deepening and furthering of this work of evangelization in Asia.

The nature of the Church is a communion of all the believers in Christ is wonderfully illustrated in the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church. This document speaks of the Holy Spirit as the principle of the Church's "union and unity in the teaching of the Apostles and fellowship, in

the breaking of bread and prayer” (*Lumen Gentium*, 13). It is this unity in the Church that your gathering in Hong Kong so eloquently expresses.

Within your reflection on the life and mission of the Church you are considering especially the vocation of the laity. The laity must have an awareness of the greatness of their vocation, a sense of being an essential component of the ecclesial community, a sense of living union with Christ. It means making their own the call of Leo the Great many centuries ago: “O Christian, recognize your dignity”.

Lay participation in the Church’s mission is expressed in numerous ways. In union with their pastors and under their direction, the laity promote the growth and life of the ecclesial community, by exercising a great variety of services and apostolates according to the graces and charisms given by the Lord.

Among these, the family occupies a place of primary importance. In the words of Paul VI: “The family, like the Church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates. In a family which is conscious of this mission all the members evangelize and are evangelized” (PAULI VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 71).

I also wish to remind parents that just as the family is the first school of Christian living, where a love for Christ and his Church is fostered, so too it is there that vocations to the priesthood and religious life find their necessary growth. I ask parents gently to encourage such vocations and to ask God’s grace to guide them and help them in this task.

I would also like to draw your attention to the apostolate of the Christian worker. Particular emphasis must be given to make the Church’s teaching in this matter better known. I expressed my own concerns and reflections in this regard in my Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*. I am certain, too, that the themes of justice and peace will be a central concern in your reflections on the evangelizing role of the Christian laity in Asian society.

The special contribution that lay men and women are called to make to the evangelization of culture takes on a particular character in your great continent. In Asia we find some of the most ancient cultures in the world, and since Christ and his Church cannot be alien to any people, nation or culture, the laity must play their part in continuing to sink the roots of the Church deeply into the spiritual and cultural soil of their respective countries, assimilating all genuine values, enriching them also with the insights received from Jesus Christ, who is “the way, the truth and the life” to all humanity (Cfr. *Io.* 14, 6).

In Asia, where ancient religions have made and continue to make an important contribution to the culture of so many countries, the Church experiences a profound need to enter into contact and dialogue with all these religions. As you gather to consider the evangelizing role of the laity in Asia

I would repeat what I said in Manila just over two years ago: “All Christians must therefore be committed to dialogue with the believers of all religions, so that mutual understanding and collaboration may grow, so that moral values may be strengthened, so that God may be praised in all creation . . . Likewise, the Catholics and the Christians of other Churches must join together in the search for full unity, in order that Christ may become ever more manifest in the love of his followers” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II, *Nuntius ad universae Asiae incolas e Manilensi radiophonica statione «Radio Veritas»*, 5, die 21 febr. 1981: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, IV, 1 (1981) 455).

In the light of what I have said regarding the vocation of the laity in the life and mission of the Church, there is one point that I would wish to emphasize as you begin your discussions.

To achieve all of this *it is necessary to make the adequate formation of the laity a pastoral priority* in each of the local Churches. In the course of your meeting you will be exchanging ideas and experiences in this regard. Let me just say this: before, in God’s Providence, I was called to the See of Peter I was, while Archbishop of Cracow, involved in the work of the *Consilium de Laicis*, the body which preceded the present Pontifical Council for the Laity. I used to come to Rome at least once a year for meetings of that Council. My conviction then was, and is still, that the spiritual, moral and theological formation of lay men and women is one of the most urgent priorities in the Church if we are fully to put the teaching of the Second Vatican Council into effect.

This formations is not something once achieved and definitively completed. Formation is another word for growing and deepening in that discipleship of Christ which is a mark of every member of the Church and which will not be completed until and including the day of our death.

As I think of all those attending this meeting, I think also of all the countries of Asia and commend them to our Father in heaven. My thoughts go especially to those who suffer for the witness they give to their faith, to those who are sick or victims of violence and war. I pray that the consolation and peace of God may be with them. Through the love shown them by the Christians in Asia, may they know the love of Christ.

This brings me to offer one final reflection. The role of each lay man and woman is to give personal witness in the Church and in society to the love of God which has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ and poured out in our hearts by his Spirit. As you assemble in Hong Kong, I commend you and all the participants to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, of St. Francis Xavier, a great apostle of Asia whose memorial will be celebrated during your meeting, of all the martyrs and saints of Asia and indeed of the universal Church, praying that this meeting may be a source of many blessings for the Church throughout the Asian continent. Upon you and all those present, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with deep affection impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 24 November 1983.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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