



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO A GROUP OF BISHOPS FROM AUSTRALIA ON THEIR «AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM» VISIT

Friday, 11 November 1983

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. We have come together, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to reflect on our pastoral mission as Bishops. And we do so within the context of the whole mystery of the Church of Jesus Christ which we are called to serve. When speaking last July to other Bishops from Australia, I mentioned that “much remains to be said about the laity and their shared responsibility for the proclamation of the Gospel”. And today I would like to pursue this theme of *the laity in the Church*.

2. The Second Vatican Council points out the consoling truth that Bishops “were not meant by Christ to shoulder alone the entire saving mission of Christ” (*Lumen Gentium*, 30). Like the priests and the religious, the laity have a distinctive role to play, a specific contribution to make to this saving mission of Christ, which he shares with his Church. But their contribution depends on their living the mystery of the Church. For this reason it is so important *that the laity should have an awareness of the greatness of their vocation*, a sense of being an essential component of the ecclesial community, a sense of living in union with Christ. They must understand ever more the implications of Saint Paul’s words: “And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (*Gal. 2, 20*). Indeed, the Council sees the success of the lay apostolate as depending “upon the laity’s living union with Christ” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 4).

3. For the Council, the whole spirituality of the laity is *a sacramentally based and oriented spirituality*, because the lay apostolate is conceived as a participation in the saving mission of the Church, to which the laity are commissioned by the Lord himself through Baptism and Confirmation (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 33)).

At the same time the Church recognizes *the secular quality of a great part of the laity's activities*; she esteems their specific contribution to the renewal of the temporal order and proclaims the special part they have to play in "the birth of a new humanism, in which man is defined first of all by his responsibility towards his brothers and sisters and towards history" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 55).

4. The Church acknowledges this *distinctive Christian responsibility* of the laity in many fields, including politics, the professional world, the social, economic and military spheres, the world of culture, science, the arts, international life and the extremely influential area of the mass media.

The laity are able to exert *a great influence on culture* and make a special contribution to its evangelization. This they can do particularly in the fields of science, literature and art. And if we take into account the words of Paul VI - "The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time" (*PAULI VI Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20) - then we can realize just how much the laity share responsibility for the Gospel and how much they can contribute to its advancement.

In all of this, the Church wishes *to show her confidence in the laity's specific charisms* and in their ability to exercise them for the benefit of the entire community. In this sense, the Synod of 1971 spoke of "the laity's maturity, which is to be valued highly when it is a question of their specific role" (*The Ministerial Priesthood*, Part Two, I, 2). In all their temporal activities, the laity find the support of faith and immense strength in the relevant exhortation of Saint Paul: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (*Col. 3, 17*).

5. The gamut of the activities whereby the laity proclaim the Gospel by word and deed and advance the Kingdom of God on earth is very extensive. By reason of their vocation as lay people in the world, *their secular activities have deep value in the eyes of God*.

The entire sphere of human activity is sanctified by the grace of the Creator and Redeemer. Every worthy human labour falls under the principle that I enunciated in my Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*: "By enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, man in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity" (*IOANNIS PAULI PP. II Laborem Exercens*, 27). The laity play a major role in defending the value of human work and in ensuring that the correct concept of human work is applied in the social and economic policies of nations.

6. The response of the laity to the challenges placed before them has been expressed in many splendid ways in Australia. The laity deserve *honour and gratitude* for their commitment in the area of education, for their involvement in promoting justice and peace and for their long and sustained contribution to charitable and relief work. But whether their worthy activities are *religious or secular in nature*, they all powerfully promote the Kingdom of God to the extent that they are motivated by charity and express the truth of the lay state, which is entered through Baptism. Every action performed by the laity that is consonant with their vocation and supported by grace is a sanctifying

action, an authentic expression of the life of the Church. Christ is active in his members. The Father continues to love his Son, who is alive in his Body, the Church.

7. In the face of all the problems that affect the world, the laity are called to manifest the faith of the pilgrim Church with confidence and joy. Amidst the difficulties of daily living their voice expresses *the serenity of the Church*, who knows that the Lord is with her: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear” (*Ps. 27, 1*). In a thousand and one ways the laity are involved, even to the point of oppression, in the problems that afflict humanity, and in the dramatic search for means to alleviate the human suffering caused by the evils of the world. And yet they remain a people of strong hope.

By reason of their exposure, *the laity are particularly vulnerable to suffering*: when individuals and families are disturbed by ideologies opposed to the values of the Gospel; when inroads of drug abuse are made into communities; when social and economic problems cause loneliness, discouragement and alienation; when the effects of sin in the world weigh heavily on human hearts.

8. By reason of their position in the Church and because of their secular involvement, the laity have a special calling *to defend the whole moral order by their conduct*. Only through their corporate application of the principles of charity, justice and chastity can the members of the Church offer to the world a convincing witness to the teachings of Jesus, which will always be contested. The splendour of Christ’s Church is revealed in the life of the laity. The power of God’s grace is effectively attested to by the laity as they endeavour to apply the word of God to the situations of real life. They glorify God in rejecting the forces of secularization and in listening humbly but confidently to what the Apostle says: “Do not be conformed to this world” (*Rom. 12, 2*).

9. Although the laity have secular pursuits, they also belong to the one ecclesial community of which they are the greatest part. And this community is *a community of worship and praise*. Indeed, the Council declares it is *as worshippers that the laity consecrate the world to God* (*Cfr. Lumen Gentium, 34*). The aspect of worship is central to an understanding of the full dignity of the laity as an essential category within the whole Church.

On the occasion of another *ad Limina* visit, I called attention to this fact: “When our people . . . realize . . . that they are called to adore and thank the Father in union with Jesus Christ, an immense power is unleashed in their Christian lives . . . When they realize that all their prayers of petition are united to an infinite act of the praying Christ, then there is fresh hope and new encouragement for the Christian people” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Allocutio ad Episcopos Foederatarum Civitatum Americae Septentrionalis, occasione oblata eorum visitationis ad limina coram admissos, 3, die 9 iul. 1983*: vide *supra*, p. 47). Yes, *worship and prayer* are both *a right and a responsibility* for the laity and constitute the strength of their lives.

10. Any reflection on the laity must include a reflection on *the need for adequate formation of the laity*. Much has been done in this field since the Ecumenical Council, and yet much remains to be done. It is important to open ever wider to the laity the treasures of faith: the word of God as it is embodied in the Scriptures and in the full teaching of the Church, as well as in her sacramental life. This further formation will necessitate special educational projects - special initiatives - but we must never forget the *incomparable value of systematic catechesis given in the parish* through the faithful and persevering preaching of the word of God. Through a life of prolonged personal contact with God's people, through the witness of their lives of faith, all priests have an excellent opportunity to help introduce the laity ever more in to the divine mysteries, including the special place that the laity occupy in the plan of God and in the heart of Christ.

11. Needless to say, in the pastoral spirit of our episcopal office, we must show a special interest in *lapsed Catholics*, searching them out with the aid of the laity and striving to help them have once again a vital share in the life of the Church.

12. As Bishops we have the great privilege of serving the laity and of *proclaiming their dignity* in the community of God's people. Ours is a ministry of pastoral love, which includes support possible from the laity in the cause of the Gospel, but we know that this can happen only if they are *living the mystery of the Church* and are aware of their great Christian dignity. We join Leo the Great, whose feast we have just celebrated yesterday, in extolling the dignity of our people: *Agnosce, Christiane, dignitatem tuam* (S. LEONIS MAGNI *Homilia in Nativitate Domini*, 21, 3).

This is *our aim*: to reinforce Christian conviction, to foster new attitudes, so that in the profound awareness of their identity our people will exclaim: "We are strong in the name of the Lord our God" (*Ps. 20, 8*). This is *our prayer*, offered through Mary the Mother of Jesus: that all the faithful will experience what it means to be a people of worship, a people of hope - the People of God: "For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God" (*1 Tim. 4, 10*), through Christ our Lord.