ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY

Thursday, 30 October 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Friends,

1. I am pleased to welcome you who are taking part in the 17th plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity. I especially greet the Council's new members and consultors, meeting for the first time since the beginning of their quinquennial mandate. It is also the first plenary assembly for your President, Archbishop James Francis Stafford, with Bishop Stanislaw Rylko as Secretary. I thank you all for your valuable collaboration; I also express my gratitude to those who work in the Council's service in Rome. I would also like to say here that I feel close, in fraternal affection and prayer, to Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, who for a long time directed your dicastery with competence and devotion.

Dear brothers and sisters, you have a particular responsibility: the appointments you have received make you collaborators with the Successor of Peter in his pastoral ministry, to serve the vast and diversified reality of the Catholic laity. I am grateful to you for having accepted this office with generous willingness. You have been called personally: the Council is therefore counting on your Christian experience, on your *sensus Ecclesiae,* on your ability to understand and make known the wealth of Christian life in the diversity of peoples and cultures, the experiences of education, associations and mutual aid in every milieu. Your assembly is an important time for listening and discerning the needs and expectations of the lay faithful, in order to encourage their witness and their actions, and to define better the tasks of the Council which is at their service, in the light of the Church's doctrinal and pastoral Magisterium.

2. Thirty years have passed since the foundation of the Council by Pope Paul VI, in response to what was desired by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. I was once a consultor and I can

testify to both the continuity of the work accomplished during these three decades and to its constant renewal; I give thanks with you.

The Pontifical Council for the Laity takes its inspiration from the essential teachings of the Second Vatican Council: the Church has become more keenly aware of being a mystery of communion and of being missionary by nature; the dignity, co-responsibility and active role of lay people has been better recognized and highlighted. These 30 years give us many reasons for hope: today, the maturity of the lay faithful is shown by their activities in the most diverse communities, institutions and ecclesial services. They participate more intensely in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, the source and summit of Christian life. They desire a systematic and complete formation. Taking into account the plurality of charisms, methods and commitments, one sees the blossoming of a new generation of associations of the faithful, which are producing abundant fruits of holiness and apostolic service, and give new vitality to the communion and mission of the Christian people.

The World Youth Days — we remember the one in Paris, so recent and impressive — have shown that young people are indeed the hope of the Church that is about to enter the third millennium. Young people vigorously express their need for meaning and ideals, their desire for a more human and genuine life: these sentiments are rooted in human hearts and in the culture of peoples, and deeper and more enduring than the nihilistic conformism which seems to overwhelm many minds.

In recent years, the process of affirming the true dignity of woman has met with the Church's active sympathy, because the "feminine genius" increasingly enriches the Christian community and society. Moreover, we must admire the involvement of numerous Christians in the most varied organizations for human and social assistance. They show the constructive creativity of charity and put themselves at the service of the common good in political, cultural and economic institutions. The Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* analyzed these signs of hope in the post-conciliar journey of the Catholic laity. It is now up to you to continue in this direction. The whole Church is counting on an even more active involvement of the faithful in all the outposts of the world.

3. In the framework of preparation for the Great Jubilee, your assembly is taking place during the year dedicated to Jesus Christ (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, nn. 40-43). The Jubilee invites us to remember, in thanksgiving, the presence of the Incarnate Word: it is a question of the living memory of his Presence, here and now, as true and as new as it was 2,000 years ago. A deeper understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation can lead, in the course of the year, "to a renewed appreciation of Baptism as the basis of Christian living" (*ibid*., n. 41). In Paris, during the vigil for World Youth Day, the celebration of Baptism for 10 young people vigorously called the hundreds of thousands of young people assembled there, but also all Christians, to become conscious of the gift of their Baptism and the responsibilities that flow from it.

Today, the greatest challenge is that of a widespread dechristianization. The Jubilee therefore calls for a serious catechetical and missionary commitment. Every person must be able to discover the presence of Christ and the Lord's loving regard for each individual, so that he will again hear his words: "Come, follow me". This is why the world expects a clearer witness from free men and women gathered in unity, who show by their way of life that Jesus Christ offers, in total gratuitousness, an answer that crowns their desire for truth, happiness and human fulfilment. It is therefore essential for the faithful, as the theme of your assembly says, "to be Christians on the threshold of the third millennium", to live their Baptism, their vocation and their Christian responsibility.

Unfortunately, one sees an increasing number of those who are not baptized, even in regions with an age-old Christian tradition. In addition, many baptized persons are led to forget what they have become through the grace they have received, that is, "a new creation" (Gal 6:15), by putting on Christ. These situations need more than ever to be attentively analyzed. Missionary enthusiasm should be revived by offering journeys of Christian initiation for the many young people and adults who ask for Baptism, and a renewal of Christian formation for those who have distanced themselves from the faith they received.

At issue is the capital question of being taught the faith in the faith, at a time when the ability to transmit the faith in continuity with tradition seems to have lost its vigour. I am pleased with the theme chosen by your Council; I have no doubt that your reflections and final recommendations will be most useful.

It is also the duty of your assembly to plan the dicastery’s work schedule for the years to come. I know that the world congress of movements and their pilgrimages to Rome are being prepared. These initiatives have great importance. The two events you are planning for the Great Jubilee will also have special importance: the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate, returning to the tradition of regular meetings which began before the Second Vatican Council, and the Jubilee of Young People on the path of a young Church on the move.

I thank you for coming here today. In prayer, I entrust the work of the Pontifical Council for the Laity to the Lord through Mary’s intercession, and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to all of you present here and to your brothers and sisters in the various particular Churches.

Copyright © Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana