



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF PAUL VI
FOR THE FIRST PAN AFRICAN AND MALAGASY
MEETING OF THE LAITY**

Wednesday, 11 August 1971

Dears sons and daughters,

Here you are gathered together in Accra for the first Pan African and Malagasy Meeting of the Laity, a meeting organized on the initiative of Our Council for the Laity and presided over by two of its members, Mr. John Nimo and Mr. Joseph Amichia, the latter recently named Ambassador of the Ivory Coast to the Holy See.

We have pleasure in greeting among your number, together with Cardinals Paul Zoungana and Maurice Roy, the high civil authorities of the country which is welcoming you, and various representatives of the Holy See, among whom We wish to make special mention of Our close collaborator, Archbishop Bernardin Gantin, Associate Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

Their presence speaks eloquently enough of the importance of your meeting. You have come from nearly thirty countries, and you are aware that you are representing in this place the immense multitude of those who have delegated you and with whom you have taken an active part in preparing the work of this Assembly. Through you We wish to tell all of them of Our great happiness at an event which demonstrates so strikingly the vitality of the Church in your continent. It is to them as well as to you that We address this message, which you will pass on to them as an appeal to go forward and to make of this meeting in Accra the point of departure for a fresh and vigorous missionary effort.

You all remember the conciliar text which is, so to speak, the charter of the lay apostolate in the "missionary activity of the Church". It will suffice to remind you of the opening sentences:

“The Church has not been truly established, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among men, unless there exists a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy. For the Gospel cannot be deeply imprinted on the talents, life, and work of any people without the active presence of lay persons” (*Ad gentes divinitus*, 21).

This expresses the scope of the research which you are undertaking. Dear sons and daughters, may you be able to approach, in a spirit of founders and witnesses, and in the light of Christ’s Gospel, the theme proposed to you by your worthy Preparatory Committee: “The layman’s part in the growth of the Church and the full development of Africa”.

The choice of this theme is of itself highly significant. It invites you to make a joint study in depth of the vocation proper to the laity. It is a vocation to “seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God” (*Lumen gentium*, 31).

You are committed to the growth of the Church because you are members of the People of God; you are committed to the development of Africa because you are members of the earthly city. This double commitment must be one single thing for Christians, who reject any arbitrary dichotomy between their life and their faith and who strive to “collaborate in the temporal earthly progress of men as well as in their eternal destiny, in the harmony of a unified thought and life” (*The Missionary Role of the Laity*. Document of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples).

As you can see, it is above all through the medium of your awareness as lay people that the false dilemma “Development or Evangelization” can be resolved, a dilemma that We rejected last year on the occasion of the World Mission Day.

This being so, what are you, dear sons and daughters, to do for ensuring through your Christian activity the simultaneous realization of the progress of Africa and the progress of the Church? What are you to do to ensure that, while you cooperate in the development of your countries with your brothers and sisters of other beliefs and ideologies, with full respect for their consciences, the witness of the Gospel may be borne?

Have no doubt that this will be “by giving your apostolate an Africanized form”, to use the expression recently used in Rome by Archbishop Gantin, echoing our own conviction: “By now you Africans are missionaries to yourselves” (Talk at the Symposium of Bishops of Africa, at Kampala). You will keep this constantly in mind as you take up, in your work of group discussion, the various objects of your study: the economic, social and political evolution of your regions, the family, education and training, the laity in the life of the Church and, finally, the action to be undertaken.

But to give the lay apostolate its African character you will not for all that hesitate to draw from the Church’s experience what has universal value and what reflects the great missionary teachings of

the Old and New Testaments. It is fitting to make special mention of the deeply evangelical insight of the late Cardinal Cardijn, which has made it possible for a genuine body of lay people to spring up and develop in very many countries, in the most widely differing social contexts. From that insight the Council's reflections upon the vocation of the laity benefitted greatly.

Africa has not been the least in drawing inspiration from that discernment; and is it not also very noteworthy that it reflects in some way the traditional procedure still sometimes followed by the elders of your villages for seeking the paths to justice and peace? When something happens, a gathering is held beneath the "palaver tree"; everyone is allowed to speak, so that the full truth of the facts may be learned, that the facts may be judged as correctly as possible in accordance with the community's conscience and finally that a course of action may be decided upon.

But if it is a question of the laity's missionary activity in the Church, what dimensions this ancestral wisdom is called upon to assume, a wisdom which is animated, upheld, consecrated and made holy by the Spirit of God, among those who are enlightened by God's Word and nourished by the Sacraments!

It is not just certain people, but all-children, youth and adults, men and women-who are called upon to consider their daily lives as consecrated lives, as the human history of a people from which God wishes to fashion the Sacred History of his People. All are called to reflect upon the events of which this history is made up, in order to discover therein the human values proper to each social group, to discern therein what is already the action and the presence of God, and to uncover also the temptations and the sin which are so many appeals to look towards the one Saviour. All, finally, are called upon to translate into actions the light thus received and so to enable the Church to attain her goal:

"Through her work, whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also healed, ennobled, and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil, and the happiness of man" (*Lumen gentium*, 17).

Dear sons and daughters, there is no need to remind you that such action of the laity in your Churches, such a full exercise of the priesthood of the laity in Africa, will not be possible without a close and permanent communion with the hierarchy, and in trusting and fraternal exchange with the priests whose mission is inseparable from yours. To those priests who are among you, and to all their brethren in the priesthood, We wish to say how much We count upon them and how much confidence We place in their role as educators in the faith, revealers of the Word of God and ministers of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. The conciliar decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* recalled this in forceful terms:

"Ceremonies however beautiful, or associations however flourishing, will be of little value if they

are not directed towards educating men in the attainment of Christian maturity. To further this goal, priests should help men see what is required and what is God's will in the great and small events of life".

Dearly beloved sons, whether you be priests native to the place in which you work or from other lands, help one another to work in this direction, and do not fail to associate in this essential task of promoting the laity the Religious Brothers and Sisters whose irreplaceable action, which complements your own, you have experienced for so long.

The Church is a communion, an exchange and a harmonious growth, in the fidelity of each vocation to the gift received from Christ: "And to some, his gift was that they should be apostles; to some, prophets; to some, evangelists; to some, pastors and teachers; so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ" (*Eph. 4, 11-12*).

Dear sons and daughters of Africa and of the Islands of the Indian Ocean, be witnesses-each and every one of you-in your lands and, more than ever in our time of intense movements of population, "to the ends of the earth" (*Act. 1, 8*).

For this great mission We invoke upon you, your families, your apostolic groups and your different countries the grace of the Lord, and in his name We give you with deep affection Our Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, August 5, 1971.

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