

Congress Concluding Message: to the Lay Faithful of Africa

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ in Africa!

To all of you who live in the vast Continent of Africa and who profess the same faith in Jesus Christ that the Apostles have given us and that the Catholic Church has transmitted to us;

To all of you who through the Sacrament of Baptism have received the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit and adoption as sons and daughters of God, and thus have become living members of the One Body of Christ and are nourished by the same invincible hope in eternal life;

In a particular way to those of you who live out faithfulness to the Risen Lord in conditions of poverty, war, violence, injustice and lack of fundamental freedoms;

Before all of you, we express our deep gratitude to the Lord for having been able to take part, in your name, in the *Pan-African Congress for Catholic Laity* held in Yaoundé, Cameroon, from September 4th - 9th 2012, under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for the Laity and with the help of the local Churches.

More than three hundred of us have taken part in the Congress, with delegates from all of the Bishops' Conferences of Sub-Saharan Africa and from the international associations, ecclesial movements and new communities active in Africa. Our work has been on the theme "Being Witnesses of Jesus Christ in Africa Today: 'Salt of the earth ... light of the world' (Mt 5: 13 and 14)".

We have endeavoured to listen together to what the Spirit is saying to the Church in Africa (cf. Ap. 2:8) in this magnificent and crucial time in history, at the beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era.

The first reason for our gratitude is the spiritual proximity that Pope Benedict XVI expressed to us through the Message sent for the opening of the Congress. In it he set out authentic paths for hope, paths upon which we are called to set out immediately: "Making Africa a 'Continent of Hope' is a commitment that should guide the mission of African lay-faithful today, just as it should the Congress that is currently taking place". Indeed the Pope recognised this Congress as an important step for the development of the fundamental teachings of the Synod for Africa, drawn together in *Africae Munus*, as well as being a providential preparation for the major events that the Universal Church will soon celebrate: namely, the Bishops' Synod on the New Evangelisation and the Year of Faith.

For us this Congress has been a special Epiphany of the Church in Africa. We have rediscovered the Church in its beauty and in its multiformity. We have learned to love it still more deeply. The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has invited us to recognise Africa as a

“Continent of Hope” and a “spiritual lung for humanity”. This is at the same time a joy and a responsibility, and we welcome it as a “yoke that is easy and a burden that is light” (cf. Mt 11:28). For us, this is a call to deepen our understanding of the vocation of the lay faithful and to live *worthily the call we have received* (cf. Eph 4:1-2).

The Church in African is young, just as many of the participants in this Congress are young. Our youthfulness brings with it joy and enthusiasm: the same joy and enthusiasm that Pope Benedict XVI says he observed so clearly during his visits to Africa and carries in his heart. We do not wish to dissipate the talent of our youthfulness, but rather to use it for serving the mission of the Church, making of ourselves Christians who are mature and rooted in Scripture and in Tradition. For this reason, we are grateful to the Holy Father for having instituted the Year of Faith. It will be a valuable opportunity for us to learn more and to deepen our vocation. During these days we discovered once again that the heart of every Christian formation is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

In our societies, the members of the Church are often a minority. From this Congress we take with us the conviction that this does not make us irrelevant, because indeed *Christians are in the world what the soul is to the body* (letter to *Diognetus*, chapter 5). We must become more and more those creative minorities that give flavour to our societies and bring the light of the Gospel to our cultures. It is indeed true that our countries need the unique word of Salvation, and we do not have the right to deprive them of the Gospel. The words of Blessed John Paul II echo within us: “If lack of commitment is always unacceptable, the present time renders it even more so. *It is not permissible for anyone to remain idle.*” Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, no. 3)

Illuminated by the Word of God and the importance accorded to the lay faithful by the Council Vatican II, as Christian lay faithful we hear the particular call to a commitment in society: in schools, in the workplace and in civic society. These are the places where we live and where we desire that our testimony should shine out. We truly desire to be “ambassadors of Christ” (2 Cor 5:20) in the public sphere, in the heart of the world!” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*, no. 128). We know that, faced with the challenges of the world, humanity is not alone: God is present. For this reason we refuse to accept any ideology that goes against the dignity of human beings and the natural law, and we want to contribute in concrete ways to building up a society that is more respectful of the dignity of human beings and of their fundamental rights in solidarity with the weak and the poor.

We have also learned to know the Church through the difficulties lived by our brothers in many countries across our dear continent. We are preoccupied by the many wars that spill blood on our earth, and by increasingly widespread violence, as well as by the growing shadow of terrorism in many areas. Faced with all of this we wish, once again, to affirm that violence is never a true response, and that living together in dialogue is always possible and is always necessary.

In some countries, Christians are once more being martyred: but we must not forget their testimony of faith and hope. These days have been a time for rediscovering the Christian hope which the African saints have brought us: from the Ugandan Martyrs who have accompanied us in prayer, to Josephine Bakhita whose life was redeemed by the Gospel. Christian hope makes an unquenchable desire well up inside us: “the hope born in her which had “redeemed” her she could not keep to herself; this hope had to reach many, to reach everybody” (*Spe Salvi* no. 3).

In these days together we have felt like the Apostles, together in the upper room at Pentecost, and we have seen Christ’s promise happen: “You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit who will come down upon you and you will be my witnesses unto the ends of the earth” (Acts 1: 8). We have been able to appreciate the important contribution that the Small Christian Communities (SCC’s) make to the Church’s mission in Africa and we have realised the gift that the Holy Spirit has made to the Church through the birth of ecclesial movements and new communities. The Church in Africa can only benefit from promoting these new charisms, and from an ever greater openness to this valuable sign of the hope that it so needs.

Filled with the joy of having lived such days of intense communion, we desire to send this message of hope to all our African brothers and sisters: in particular to those who are living in difficulty and despair we say that you are not alone and you have not been abandoned. Christ is with you! The Church is with you!

Once more, we have discovered the beauty of being Christians and, at the conclusion of these days together, we feel that “everyone who has received this marvellous gift of faith, this gift of an encounter with the risen Lord, feels in turn the need to proclaim it to others (Benedict XVI, Homily, Amitié Stadium, Cotonou, November 20th 2011)

As these days together draw to a close, we receive a new call to announce his Word in our dear African continent, and we feel that the words addressed to the prophet Jeremiah are said again to us: “Do not say ‘I am too young’. You will go to those to whom I send you. You will say what I command you to say. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to protect you” (Jer.1: 7-8).

May the Lord put his words on our lips (cf. Jer 1: 9) and grant us the strength and the courage to truly be salt of the earth and Gospel leaven for the countries of Africa.