



To Cardinal Stanisław Ryłko  
President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity

It gives me great pleasure to send cordial greetings to you, Venerable Brother, and to the cardinals, bishops, priests, people in consecrated life, and most of all to the lay faithful gathered in Yaoundé from 4 to 9 September for this great Congress of the Catholic Laity in Africa. The Congress has been organised by the Pontifical Council for the Laity with the support of the Bishops' Conference of Cameroon, and its theme is: "Witnesses of Jesus Christ in Africa today. Salt of the earth...light of the World (Mt 5:13-14)". The theme is a deliberate reminder of the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus* which had for its subtitle this same quotation from the Gospel of Saint Matthew: "You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world". When I personally considered this important document to the bishops of Africa in Cotonou on 20 November last year, I offered several theological and pastoral guidelines for the Church on this continent.

Your Congress comes at an important stage in the implementation of all that was inspired by the Holy Spirit to the Synod Fathers at the Second Special Assembly for Africa held in October 2009 in Rome. When in Cotonou, I expressed the desire that the exhortation *Africae Munus* should serve, above all, as a guide for the proclamation of the Gospel by all the People of God. It is for this reason that I was very pleased to hear that the Pontifical Council for the Laity is holding a Congress devoted to the African lay faithful. They are being called more than ever in the times that we live in to work even harder in the vineyard of the Lord (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic

Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, no. 2).

On several occasions during my visits to your continent, I said that Africa is called to be a “Continent of Hope”. These were not simply words expressed for those occasions. They point to a luminous horizon that opens out before eyes of faith. Of course, at first glance it might seem that Africa’s problems are serious and difficult to overcome. These include not only material difficulties, but also spiritual and moral obstacles that are also encountered by the Church. Furthermore, it is true that even the most well-grounded traditional values in African culture are being threatened by today’s secularisation. This has brought about bewilderment, a tearing apart of the social and personal fabric, an escalation of tribalism, violence, corruption in public life, the humiliation and exploitation of women and children, and an increase in poverty and hunger. We can add to these the dark shadow of fundamentalist terrorism that has recently been targeting Christian communities in some African countries. However, if we take a closer look and see into the heart of the African people, we discover great spiritual resources that are very precious in our times. There is love of life and family, a sense of joy and sharing and enthusiasm in living faith in the Lord, all of which I have seen on my trips to Africa and which are still engraved on my heart. Never allow the dark mentality of relativism and nihilism that is affecting some other parts of the world to find its way into your lives and milieux! Receive and communicate Christ’s message of joy and hope with renewed vigour, for it is a message that can purify and reinforce the great values in your cultures. This is why, in my encyclical *Spe Salvi*, I presented the Sudanese saint Joséphine Bakhita as a witness to hope (cf. no. 3). This was to demonstrate how an encounter with the God of Jesus Christ is able to transform every human being profoundly, even in the most miserable of situations – Joséphine Bakhita was a slave – so that each person is given the supreme dignity of being a child of God. Indeed, “through the knowledge of this hope she was ‘redeemed’, no longer a slave, but a free child of God” (*ibid.*). The discovery of Christian hope gave her a new and irrepressible desire: “the liberation that she had received through her encounter with the

God of Jesus Christ, she felt she had to extend, it had to be handed on to others, to the greatest possible number of people. The hope born in her which had 'redeemed' her she could not keep to herself; this hope had to reach many, to reach everybody" (*ibid.*). An encounter with Christ gives us the strength to overcome even seemingly insurmountable obstacles. This was the experience of Saint Bakhita, but it is also the experience of many young Africans. They are, through God's grace, the vast majority of the population, and many of them today feel called to faithfully follow the Lord. To make Africa a "Continent of Hope" is an undertaking that should guide the mission of the African lay faithful today, and also guide the Congress that you are holding.

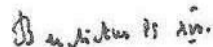
In this perspective, your conference marks a significant stage in the preparation of two ecclesial events of universal scope that are fast approaching: the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelisation and the "Year of Faith". When I was consigning the exhortation *Africae Munus* in Cotonou, I spoke of how "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" (Homily at the Stade de l'amitié in Cotonou, Benin, 20 November 2011). Mission is born of faith, a gift of God to be welcomed, nourished and developed because "we cannot accept that salt should become tasteless or the light be kept hidden" (Motu proprio *Porta Fidei*, no. 3). The priority of faith has a natural sense that is more logical than chronological. Acceptance of this divine gift goes together with the urge to proclaim the Gospel. It is a kind of "virtuous circle" in which faith impels proclamation and proclamation reinforces faith. Indeed, "faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy" (*ibid.* no. 7). Truly, "faith is strengthened when it is given to others!", as expressed by Blessed John Paul II (Encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 2).

Finally, I would like to bring here the words of the Servant of God Paul VI, a faithful interpreter of the Council: "For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all

the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 18). In this task of transforming all of society, a task that is so urgent in Africa today, the lay faithful have an irreplaceable role to play: “Through her lay members, the Church is present and active in the world. Lay people have an important role to play in the Church and in society. [...] Lay men and women, in fact, are ‘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). Women and men, young people, older people and children, families and entire societies, all of Africa today is awaiting the “ambassadors” of the Good News. These are the lay faithful in the parishes, Small Christian Communities, ecclesial movements and new communities, all of them in love with Christ and the Church, full of joy and gratitude for the Baptism that they have received, courageous workers for peace and messengers of authentic hope.

I entrust the Congress to the kind and maternal intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. As it says in your Congress prayer, she is “Our Lady of Africa, Queen of Peace and Star of the New Evangelisation”. I am pleased to impart an Apostolic Blessing on all the participants.

From Castel Gandolfo, 10 August 2012.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Franciscus" followed by a date "10 Aug". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.