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Opening Mass

Greeting and introduction

On behalf of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, I greet all of you, dear brothers and sisters, who are here in Yaoundé to take part in the Pan-African Congress of the Catholic Laity. It is you, the laity, who are the key players in this important ecclesial event! I greet all the cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests and religious who are here with you. I thank you all personally for coming, for many of you have undertaken long tiring journeys in order to be here.

We begin our Congress with a celebration of the Eucharist. It is the Eucharist that gives life to the Church and the strength and courage for our evangelising mission in the world. We entrust to the Lord the work that awaits us in this Congress with confidence in his promise: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses” (*Acts* 1:8).

Let us prepare ourselves to meet Christ in this Eucharistic celebration through sincere repentance for our sins, and we ask for God’s mercy by saying: “I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters...”

Homily

“Ambassadors of Christ” in the heart of the world

(cf. *Africae munus*, n.128)

1. In the Gospel passage that we have just heard, the risen Christ entrusts the apostles with the great missionary mandate: “Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.” (*Mt* 28:19,20). These words are a good introduction to our Congress. You have come here from countries all over the

immense African continent to listen again to Christ's message with renewed zeal and commitment. We are the Church and the Church is missionary by nature and in all the members. Evangelisation is not a secondary activity. It is the deepest reason for the Church's existence. *Redemptoris Missio* tells us that evangelisation is a question of faith. It is "an accurate indicator of our faith in Christ and his love for us" (no.11). "Christ's love compels us" (2Cor 5:14). Those who know Christ have a duty to proclaim him, and those who do not know him have a right to hear that proclamation. Paul the Apostle captured this idea very well when he wrote: "For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1Cor 9:16). This is a missionary concern that should be felt by every baptised person.

At the start of the third millennium of the Christian era, when we look around at our world, we realise that the evangelising mission of the Church is still at the early stages. The evangelical harvest that remains to be collected is still enormous, and we Christians continue to be a minority. That is why the Church sees the urgent need for a "new evangelisation" – new in enthusiasm, new in methods, new in expression (John Paul II). In the apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus*, Benedict XVI said in this regard: "The new evangelization is an urgent task for Christians in Africa because they too need to reawaken their enthusiasm for being members of the Church" (no.171). That is why there are plenty of challenges. Nowadays there are social and cultural situations that are extremely complex, and often completely new, in which we Christians (also here in Africa!) are called to carry out our mission. In the *Lineamenta* for the next Synod of Bishops on the new evangelisation, we read: "The new sectors which call us into dialogue require turning a critical eye towards our manner of life, our thinking, our values and our means of communication. [...] The new evangelization calls us to engage in dialogue with these sectors, not remaining confined to our communities and our institutions, but accepting the challenge to take part in these phenomena so as to speak and bear witness in these sectors, from the inside. This is the form of Christian *martyria* in today's world" (no.7). We shall surely discuss this very much during our Congress.

2. In the evangelising mission of the Church, the lay faithful have a very important role. Because of the "secular nature" of their vocation, they are the "leavening" of the Gospel, the "salt of the earth" and "light of the world", called by Christ to transform the world from within in the light of the Gospel. Here we must quote those lovely words from the Second Vatican Council: "What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature. [...] the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit

of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven..." (*Lumen Gentium*, no.31). Of course, the laity must also play their part in the life and mission of the Christian community in the parishes and dioceses. In Africa we see this, for example, in the service given by so many lay catechists. However, their principal mission – so to speak – is to take the Gospel into the world in which they live, into their families, schools, workplaces, culture and politics. The post-synodal exhortation *Africae Munus* gives a very significant definition of laity: "‘ambassadors of Christ’ (2Cor 5:20) in the public sphere, in the heart of the world..." (no.128). I believe that one of the important aims of this Congress is to help the African laity to discover the importance and beauty of their vocation as "salt of the earth"...

The social doctrine of the Church is a reliable compass that guides the life and mission of the lay faithful. It is not at all of secondary importance. It is an integral part of the evangelising mission of the Church. Blessed John Paul II insisted that: "to teach and to spread social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message [...] The 'new evangelization' [...] must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine" (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 5). Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that "this message of salvation is always transmitted by the Church by joining evangelization and the promotion of humanity" (Homily at the Closing Mass of the 2nd Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, 25 October 2009). This is an implicit call for a visible and incisive presence of the African laity in public life, and for their commitment to justice, reconciliation and peace.

3. In the first reading, Christ assures us: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses [...] to the farthest parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This is the source of hope for every person who evangelises! In reality, we are not the protagonists in this mission. It is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us strength and opens our hearts to the word of proclamation. We are simply poor instruments... In our times, as we proclaim the Gospel, witness of life is extremely important. "People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories" (*Redemptoris Missio*, no.42). For this reason, Blessed John Paul II wrote – while referring to the request to see Jesus made by some Greeks to the apostle Philip (cf. *Jn* 12:21) – : "the men and women of our own day – often perhaps unconsciously – ask believers not only to 'speak' of Christ, but in a certain sense to 'show' him to them. And is it not the Church's task to reflect the light of Christ in every historical period, to make his face shine also before the generations of the new millennium?" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no.16). A Christian is therefore like an *alter Christus*... (another Christ!). The world is in need of authentic witnesses to Christ, and that means that it needs saints. The vocation to the mission is closely connected to the universal vocation to holiness. Holiness is none other than a "high standard of ordinary Christian living" (*ibid.*

no.31). It is to live fully according to our baptism, and therefore it is to be ourselves and to be disciples of Christ.

In our times, distorted images of Christianity are propagated that claim that it is an obstacle to the deep desires for joy, happiness and freedom that lie in every human heart. Nothing could be further from the truth! It is our duty to show the true image of the Christian religion, the one that offers a positive and fascinating life programme, one that guarantees true happiness, true freedom and true joy. Pope Benedict XVI tells us: “There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him. [...] If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed” (Homily at the Mass for the inauguration of the Pontificate, 24 April 2005). We Christians must free ourselves from any kind of inferiority complex as we live in the world. We must be convinced that we possess and can offer to humanity an important message of salvation that none other can give: “Humanity is loved by God! This very simple yet profound proclamation is owed to humanity by the Church. Each Christian's words and life must make this proclamation resound: God loves you, Christ came for you, Christ is for you ‘the Way, the Truth and the Life!’ (Jn 14:6)” (*Christifideles Laici*, no.34).

In our Congress we unite our voices with that of Pope Benedict XVI in calling out: “Get up, Church in Africa, Family of God [...]. Welcome with renewed enthusiasm the Gospel proclamation so that the Face of Christ may light with its splendour the multiplicity of cultures and languages of your peoples...” (Homily at the Closing Mass of the 2nd Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, 25 October 2009).