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27TH PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY

“Finding God in the heart of the city...”

Rome, 5-7 February 2015

MASS

Greeting and introduction

With this Mass we commence the 27th Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity. To all of you – members and consultors of this dicastery – I extend my most cordial greeting and I thank you for accepting our invitation and for coming from different parts of the world prepared to contribute to this important gathering.

In this inaugural Mass of our Plenary Assembly, we give thanks to God who has blessed the many activities of this Council throughout the past year. At the same time, we ask for special help from the Holy Spirit for this Assembly in which we shall deal with a very topical subject: “*Finding God in the heart of the city...*”, that is, to evangelise cities.

Now, in order to worthily celebrate this holy Eucharist, we acknowledge our sins and place our trust in divine mercy...

The heavenly Jerusalem: the fullness of humanity and history...

1. The liturgy of the word in this Mass is a good introduction to our Plenary Assembly. The passage from Mark’s Gospel that we have just heard presents us with the scene where the disciples are sent out on mission for the first time: “[Jesus] summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two...” (*Mk* 6:7). Jesus’ disciples are sent forth to proclaim the kingdom of God. Here we touch on the central point in the life of the Church and the life of every Christian: our

mission! This is the most profound reason for the existence of the Church and of each one of us: to be missionaries. Pope Francis reminds us of this with insistence and passion. His great dream is for a Church that is constantly “going forth” towards the geographical and existential peripheries of the world. He wants to awaken the Church to the “delightful and comforting joy of evangelising, even when it is in tears that we must sow...” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no.10). He has the heart of a pastor, and we see this when he says, “How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelisation full of fervour, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction!” (*ibid.*, no. 261). He wants us all to embark on a “path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are” (*ibid.*, no. 25). Pope Francis is telling all of us that disciples of Jesus Christ are missionaries by nature. Their hearts are always restless when they see the immense harvest awaiting the Gospel... Christians who are not involved, who prefer a quiet and comfortable life (“a Christian in slippers”!) betray their vocation! We are reminded of this in *Christifideles Laici* by John Paul II: “If lack of commitment is always unacceptable, the present time renders it even more so. It is not permissible for anyone to remain idle” (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 3). Every Plenary Assembly aims to reawaken in each one of us – pastors and laity – this missionary concern and passion.

In the Gospel passage that we have just heard, Mark goes on to say that Christ “instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick—no food, no sack, no money in their belts...” (*Mk* 6:8). This is a central aspect of our evangelising mission that goes against our worldly, efficiency-oriented mentality – also common in the Church – in which there is often excessive reliance on material means, structures and methods of guaranteed efficiency. Christ, on the other hand, urged his disciples to give witness of poverty above all else... In this regard, we remember what Pope Francis said just a few days after his election: “How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!” (*Audience with representatives of the media*, 16 March 2013). In a world that idolises money, wealth and power, witnessing to poverty is a challenge and a provocation. However, it is a strong message that touches hearts and that must not fail to be present. In the evangelising mission of the Church, the use of new languages and modern means of communication (internet, TV, radio, press...) is necessary, but we must never forget that, in the end, faith is transmitted “from person to person”, as Pope Francis reminds us (cf *Evangelii Gaudium*, no.127-129), and with the simplicity of the proclamation of the *kerigma* (cf *ibid.*, nos. 160-168).

2. The first reading, on the other hand, taken from the Letter to the Hebrews, introduces us to the theme of our Plenary Assembly: cities as fields of mission. The author of the Letter speaks of the theophanies of the Ancient Alliance that frightened the chosen people who walked through the desert (the burning fire, the darkness, the storm, the sounding of the trumpet...), and then says: “you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, [...] and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.” (*Heb* 12:22-24). This launches our topic of the city. Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “The new

Jerusalem, the holy city (cf. Rev 21:2-4), is the goal towards which all of humanity is moving. It is curious that God's revelation tells us that the fullness of humanity and of history is realized in a city" (n. 71). The celestial Jerusalem, a city, thus becomes an important sign of eschatological hope for Christians. According to Pope Francis, in order to really understand the reality of our cities, we must look at them with a contemplative gaze, one of faith that can see that God lives in the houses, streets and squares, and arouses in the citizens a desire for solidarity, fellowship, goodness, truth and justice (cf *ibid.*).

The Bible also speaks to us of a dramatic opposition between two kinds of city represented by Babylon and Jerusalem. Saint Augustine wrote in this regard, "Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self" (*De Civitate Dei*, Book XIV). We all live in a state of inner tension because we do not have a stable city here below. We are searching for that of the future. All Christians know that they are pilgrims here on earth journeying towards the celestial Jerusalem. We in the earthly city are called to build the "city of God". The author of the *Letter to Diognetes* explains this very well: "Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. [...] To put it simply: What the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, but does not belong to the body, and Christians dwell in the world, but do not belong to the world...". The author concludes, "It is to no less a post than this that God has ordered them, and they must not try to evade it" (chapters 5 and 6, Funk, pp. 397-401). This was written by a second century author... This is the beauty of our Christian vocation. These are the wide possibilities for the relationship of Christians with their cities. It opens up enormous space for our prophetic witness as disciples and missionaries of Christ.