

Card. Stanisław Ryłko  
President  
Pontifical Council for the Laity  
Vatican City

## 28<sup>TH</sup> PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY

### HOLY MASS

*1 Rome, 16 June 2016*

#### *Greeting and introduction*

Dear Friends, I cordially greet all of you, members and consultors of the Pontifical Council for the Laity. With this Eucharistic celebration we are opening our 28<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly – the last our dicastery will hold in its present form. As you know, it is part of the reform of the Roman Curia being led by Pope Francis that there will soon be a new dicastery for the laity with jurisdiction extended to cover matters relating to the family and life.

In this Mass we give thanks to the Lord in a special way for the fifty years of service by the Pontifical Council for the Laity to the great cause of the laity in the Church. This dicastery was established by the explicit will of the Vatican Council Fathers, and it has witnessed the abundant and blessed fruits that the Second Vatican Council teaching has generated in the life and mission of the Catholic laity.

We would also like to recall with gratitude all those who preceded us in this service. We, as a Council, are what we are today because of the generous efforts of past generations of staff, members and consultors. Finally, in this Mass, we entrust to the Lord the mission of the new dicastery which will be inaugurated by the Holy Father Pope Francis.

Dear friends, let us prepare ourselves to celebrate this Eucharist through an act of sincere repentance for our sins:

- \* *Lord, you are the way that leads to the Father – have mercy on us!*
  - \* *Christ, you are the truth that enlightens the peoples – have mercy on us!*
  - \* *Lord, you are the life that renews the world – have mercy on us!*
- May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.*

## Homily

### **The laity: witnesses to the “prophetic flame” in the world<sup>2</sup>**

1. Recently, when speaking about the situation of the Catholic laity, Pope Francis reminded us of a slogan that was widely used immediately after the Second Vatican Council, “the hour of the laity has come” in the Church. But then, in a somewhat provocative way, he added, “it seems that the clock has stopped” (*Letter to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, 19 March 2016*). In this way the Holy Father wanted to warn all of us – laity and clergy – that certain insidious threats and risks can attack the life and mission of the laity today.

For the Holy Father, one of the most frequent threats to the life of the laity, one which must be tackled forcefully, is that of clericalism. What does this refer to exactly? In this case, clericalism means to disregard and betray the deepest identity of lay Christians – their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world. The Pope wrote that “this approach not only nullifies the character of Christians, but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people [...] Clericalism leads to homologization of the laity; treating the laity as ‘representative’ limits the diverse initiatives and efforts and, dare I say, the necessary boldness to enable the Good News of the Gospel to be brought to all areas of the social and above all political sphere. Clericalism [...] gradually extinguishes the prophetic flame to which the entire Church is called to bear witness in the heart of her peoples” (*ibid.*).

So, what can we do in order that that the clock that indicated the hour of the laity in the Church may not come to a stop in our times?

2. Pope Francis speaks of the “prophetic flame” that must animate the entire Church and, in particular, the lay faithful who live in the heart of the world, so that they may be truly the salt of the earth and leaven of the gospel. What is the meaning of the “prophetic flame” spoken of by the Holy Father? We find help in answering this question by the first reading in today’s Liturgy of the Word, taken from the Book of Sirach. We are presented with the Old Testament prophet Elijah: “Until like fire a prophet appeared, his words a flaming furnace [...] you [Elijah] are destined, it is written, in time to come to put an end to wrath before the day of the Lord, turn back the hearts of parents toward their children, and to re-establish the tribes of Israel. Blessed is the one who shall have seen you ...” (*Sir* 48:1; 10-11).

In the lives of the people of God of the Old Testament, the prophets had an extremely important mission. They were special witnesses to God and the loving presence of God among the people ... They were the bearers of God’s word ... God

taught the people through the prophets, also warning and correcting them when they went wrong and turned away from God's commandments. The mission of prophets was never easy. Prophets, like Elijah, were fearless defenders of God's cause in the world and God's Law. They awaken sleeping consciences with their words. People often found them to be uncomfortable and they became signs of contradiction. They were often persecuted and killed because of their preaching. However, in spite of this, the people felt a deep need for their presence. In certain periods of history when they were missing, the people felt alone and abandoned by God. They were confused and lost.

3. The missionary Church, a Church that goes out with courage towards the peripheries of the world, sees the urgent need to rekindle the flame which animated the life of the prophets. In order to do this, lay Christians must rediscover the beauty of their prophetic vocation in the world! They must allow themselves to be inflamed by this fire and missionary zeal which animated the prophets! Already in ancient times, Moses expressed his heartfelt wish: "if only all the people of the Lord were prophets! If only the Lord would bestow his spirit on them!" (*Num* 11:29). In the prophecy of Joel, God promised: "I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and daughters will prophesy..." (*Joel* 3:1).

The Second Vatican Council reminded us that all the baptised share in the prophetic mission of Christ in which "the lay faithful are given the ability and responsibility to accept the gospel in faith and to proclaim it in word and deed, without hesitating to courageously identify and denounce evil. United to Christ, the 'great prophet' (*Lk* 7:16), and in the Spirit made 'witnesses' of the Risen Christ, the lay faithful [...] are also called to allow the newness and the power of the gospel to shine out every day in their family and social life, as well as to express patiently and courageously in the contradictions of the present age their hope of future glory even 'through the framework of their secular life'" (*Christifideles Laici*, 14). It is therefore the task of lay Christians to make the Gospel present in public life, in culture, in the media, the economy, in the workplace and in politics. They need to be properly prepared, competent and motivated by a deep sense of responsibility towards the world in which we live. Pope Francis says that in this mission they do not need a "helmsman-bishop or pilot-monsignor" (cf. *Address at the 68<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference, 18 May 2015*), because this is their vocation, the task entrusted to them by the Lord.

There is so much need today to awaken in the souls of lay Christians this holy zeal for the cause of God in the world, the zeal of prophets! In our times, in order to defend the cause of God in the world, we also have to defend human beings in their inalienable dignity and high calling! Laypeople, men and women, are especially called to be prophetic voices in our world that cry in the wilderness, voices that often go against the current. This uncomfortable voice may not be listened to and may often be rejected, but it is certainly necessary and indispensable! Woe to us Christians if our voices are missing!

To be prophets in the world – we are reminded during this Jubilee Year – means to be witnesses and instruments of the mercy of God, especially for those far away, those in the peripheries and many people wounded by life. The prophets were always the great masters of the corporal works of mercy, and especially of the spiritual (even more difficult!). These include comforting the afflicted, counselling the doubtful, teaching the ignorant, and, in particular, correcting sinners, that is to reawaken moral consciences that are often asleep and anesthetised. There is a need for much courage today to call moral evil and sin by their name wherever they lurk, and to do so clearly! Of course, this should be done always in a spirit of charity and humility, because we are all sinners in need of mercy. In the face of evil, injustice and moral and material poverty in the world, we Christians must not remain indifferent or comfortable or silent, or feel that our consciences are clear. We must not forget that it is here that we show that we are Christians, that is, disciples and missionaries of Christ, witnesses and instruments of God’s mercy in the world!

These were some thoughts that I think can help us enter into the atmosphere of this last plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity as it is currently structured. In this Eucharist let us ask the Holy Spirit to descend on us and enkindle in our hearts the “prophetic flame” that on the day of Pentecost encouraged the apostles to come out boldly from the Upper Room in Jerusalem and to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.