



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

**MEETING WITH THE REPRESENTATIVES
OF THE CATHOLIC LAY PEOPLE OF AMERICA**

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Cathedral of Saint Mary, San Francisco
Friday, 18 September 1987*

"To him whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine—to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus through all generations..." (Eph. 3, 20-21).

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Dear Catholic Lay People of America,*

1. I am grateful to you for your kind welcome and pleased *to be with you* this morning in glorifying the Father, "in the Church and in Christ Jesus", through the working of the Holy Spirit. I also wish to thank you for the informative presentations which have been made in the name of the Catholic laity of the United States.

The Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians has a deep meaning for the life of each one of us. The text movingly describes *our relationship with God* as he reveals himself to us in the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Saint Paul reminds us of two fundamental truths: first, that our ultimate vocation is to glorify the God who created and redeemed us; and secondly, that our eternal and highest good is to "attain to the fullness of God himself" - to participate in the loving communion of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit for all eternity. God's glory and our good are perfectly

attained in the Kingdom of heaven.

The Apostle Paul also reminds us that *salvation*, which comes as a free gift of divine love in Christ, is not offered to us on a purely individual basis. It comes to us *through and in the Church*. Through our communion with Christ and with one another on earth, we are given a foretaste of that perfect communion reserved for heaven. Our communion is also meant to be a *sign or sacrament* which draws other people to Christ, so that all might be saved.

This gift of the Redemption, which originates with the Father and is accomplished by the Son, is brought to fruition in our individual lives and in the life of the world by *the Holy Spirit*. Thus we speak of the gifts of the Spirit at work within the Church- gifts which include the hierarchical office of shepherding the flock, and gifts given to the laity so that they may live the Gospel and make their specific contribution to the Church's mission.

The Council tells us that " everyone in the Church does not proceed by the same path, nevertheless all are called to sanctity and have received an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God (Cfr. *2Petr.* 1, 1). And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, dispensers of mysteries, and shepherds on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, 32). *Through a great diversity* of graces and works, the children of God bear witness to that *wonderful unity* which is the work of one and the same Spirit.

2. Dear brothers and sisters: it is in the context of these mysteries of faith that I wish to reflect with you on your role as laity in the Church today. What is most fundamental in your lives is that *by your baptism and confirmation you have been commissioned by our Lord Jesus Christ himself to share in the saving mission of his Church* (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 33). To speak of the laity is to speak of hundreds of millions of people, like yourselves, of every race, nation and walk of life, who each day seek, with the help of God, to live a good Christian life. To speak of the laity is to speak of the many of you who draw from your parish the strength and inspiration to live your vocation in the world. It is to speak also of those of you who have become part of national and international *ecclesial associations* and movements that support you in your vocation and mission.

Your struggles and temptations may differ according to your various situations, but all of you cherish the same basic hope to be faithful to Christ and to put his message into practice. You all cherish the same basic hope for a decent life for yourselves and an even better life for your children. All of you must toil and work and bear the sufferings and disappointments common to humanity, but as believers you are endowed with faith, hope and charity. And often your charity reaches heroic dimensions within your families or among your neighbours and co-workers. To the extent that your resources and duties in life permit, you are called to support and actively to participate in Church activities.

It is within the everyday world that you, the laity, must bear *witness to God's Kingdom*; through you the Church's mission is fulfilled by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Council taught that *the specific task of the laity* is precisely this: to "seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God" (*Ibid.* 31). You are called to live in the world, *to engage in secular professions and occupations*, to live in those ordinary circumstances of family life and life in society from which is woven the very web of your existence. You are called by God himself *to exercise your proper functions according to the spirit of the Gospel* and to work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven. In this way you can make Christ known to others, especially by the witness of your lives. It is for you as lay people *to direct all temporal affairs to the praise of the Creator and Redeemer* (Cfr. [*Lumen Gentium*](#), 31).

The temporal order of which the Council speaks is vast. It encompasses the social, cultural, intellectual, political and economic life in which all of you rightly participate. As lay men and women actively engaged in this temporal order, you are being called by Christ to sanctify the world and to transform it. This is true of *all work, however exalted or humble*, but it is especially urgent for those whom circumstances and special talent have placed in positions of leadership or influence: men and women in public service, education, business, science, social communications, and the arts. As Catholic lay people you have an important moral and cultural *contribution of service to make to the life of your country*. Much will be required of the person entrusted with much" (*Luc.* 12, 48). These words of Christ apply not only to the sharing of material wealth or personal talents, but also to the sharing of one's faith.

3. Of supreme importance in the mission of the Church is *the role that the laity fulfil in the Christian family*. This role is above all *a service of love* and *a service of life*.

The love of husband and wife, which is blessed and sealed in the Sacrament of Marriage, constitutes the first way that couples exercise their mission. They serve by being true to themselves, to their *vocation of married love*. This love, which embraces all the members of the family, is aimed at forming *a community of persons* united in heart and soul, an indissoluble communion where the love of spouses for each other is a sign of Christ's love for the Church (Pauli VI [*Humanae Vitae*](#), 10).

The service of life rests on the fact that husband and wife cooperate with God in transmitting the gift of human life, in the procreation of children. In this most sacred responsibility, the service of life is intimately united to the service of love in the one conjugal act, which must always be open to bringing forth new life. In his encyclical [*Humanae Vitae*](#), Pope Paul VI explained that in the task of transmitting life, husband and wife are called to "conform their activity to the creative intention of God, expressed in the very nature of marriage and of its acts, and manifested by the constant teaching of the Church".

While "love and life constitute the nucleus of the saving mission of the Christian family in the

Church and for the Church (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 50), the family also performs *a service of education*, particularly within the home, where the parents have the original and primary role of educating their children. The family is likewise *an evangelizing community*, where the Gospel is received and put into practice, where prayer is learned and shared, where all the members, by word and deed and by the love they have for one another, bear witness to the Good News of salvation.

At the same time we must recognize the *difficult situation* of so many people with regard to family living. There are many with special burdens of one kind or another. There are the single-parent families and those who have no natural family; there are the elderly and the widowed. And there are those separated and divorced Catholics who, despite their loneliness and pain, are striving to preserve their fidelity and to face their responsibilities with loving generosity. All of these people share deeply in the Church's mission by faith, hope and charity, and by all their many efforts to be faithful to God's will. The Church assures them not only of her prayers and spiritual nourishment, but also of *her love, pastoral concern and practical help*.

Although, in fidelity to Christ and to his teaching on Christian marriage, the Church reaffirms her practice of not admitting to Eucharistic Communion those divorced persons who have remarried outside the Church, nevertheless, she assures these Catholics too of her deep love. She prays for them and encourages them to persevere in prayer, to listen to the word of God and to attend the Eucharistic Sacrifice, hoping that they will "undertake a way of life that is no longer in contradiction to the indissolubility of marriage" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 84). At the same time *the Church remains their mother, and they are part of her life*.

4. I wish to express the deep gratitude of the Church for *all the contributions made by women* over the centuries to the life of the Church and of society. In speaking of the role of women, special mention must, of course, be made of their contribution, in partnership with their husbands, in begetting life and in educating their children. "The true advancement of women requires that clear recognition be given to the value of their maternal and family role, by comparison with all other public roles and all other professions" (*Ibid.* 23). The Church is convinced, however, that all the special gifts of women are needed in an ever increasing measure in her life, and for this reason hopes for their fuller participation in her activities. Precisely because of their equal dignity and responsibility, the access of women to public functions must be ensured. Regardless of the role they perform, the Church proclaims *the dignity of women as women* - a dignity equal to that of men, and revealed as such in the account of creation contained in the word of God.

5. The renewal of the Church since the Council has also been an occasion for *increasing lay participation* in all areas of ecclesial life. More and more, people are joining with their pastors in collaboration and consultation for the good of their diocese and parish. An increasing number of lay men and women are devoting their professional skills on a full-time basis to the Church's efforts in education, social services, and other areas, or to the exercise of administrative

responsibilities. Still others build up the Body of Christ by direct collaboration with the Church's pastoral ministry, especially in bringing Christ's love to those in the parish or community who have special needs. I rejoice with you at this great flowering of gifts in the service of the Church's mission.

At the same time we must ensure both in theory and in practice that these positive developments are always rooted in *the sound Catholic ecclesiology taught by the Council*. Otherwise we run the risk of "clericalizing" the laity or "laicizing" the clergy, and thus robbing both the clerical and lay states of their specific meaning and their complementarity. Both are indispensable to the "perfection of love", which is the common goal of all the faithful. We must therefore recognize and respect in these states of life a diversity that builds up the Body of Christ in unity.

6. As lay men and women you can fulfil this great mission authentically and effectively only to the extent that you *hold fast to your faith*, in communion with the Body of Christ. You must therefore live in the conviction that there can be no separation between your faith and your life, and that apart from Christ you can do nothing (Cfr. *Jo.* 15, 5). Since union with God in Christ is the goal of all Christian living, *the laity are called to prayer*: personal prayer, family prayer, liturgical prayer. Generations of devout lay people have found great strength and joy in invoking the Blessed Virgin Mary, especially through her rosary, and in invoking the saints.

In particular, the laity must realize that they are *a people of worship called to service*. In the past I had occasion to emphasize this aspect of the life of the laity in the United States: "All the striving of the laity *to consecrate the secular field of activity to God* finds inspiration and magnificent confirmation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Participating in the Eucharist is only a small portion of the laity's week, but the total effectiveness of their lives and all Christian renewal depends on it: the primary and indispensable source of the true Christian spirit!" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Ad quosdam episcopos Civitatum Foederatarum Americae Septemtrionalis occasione oblata ad limina" visitationis coram admissos*, 5, die 9 iul. 1983: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2 (1983) 48. .

7. Every age poses *new challenges and new temptations* for the People of God on their pilgrimage, and our own is no exception. We face a growing secularism that tries to exclude God and religious truth from human affairs. We face an insidious relativism that undermines the absolute truth of Christ and the truths of faith, and tempts believers to think of them as merely one set of beliefs or opinions among others. We face a materialistic *consumerism* that offers superficially attractive but empty promises conferring material comfort at the price of inner emptiness. We face an alluring hedonism that offers a whole series of pleasures that will never satisfy the human heart. All these attitudes can influence our sense of good and evil at the very moment when social and scientific progress requires strong ethical guidance. Once alienated from Christian faith and practice by these and other deceptions, people often commit themselves to passing fads, or to bizarre beliefs that are either shallow or fanatical.

We have all seen how these attitudes have a profound influence on the way people think and act. It is precisely in this society that lay men and women like yourselves, all the Catholic laity, are called to *live the beatitudes*, to become leaven, salt and light for the world, and sometimes a "sign of contradiction" that challenges and transforms that world according to the mind of Christ. No one is called to impose religious beliefs on others, but to give the strong example of a life of justice and service, resplendent with *the virtues of faith, hope and charity*.

On moral issues of fundamental importance, however, it is at times necessary to challenge publicly *the conscience of society*. Through her moral teaching the Church seeks to defend - for the benefit of all people - those basic human values that uphold the good which humanity seeks for itself and that protect the most fundamental human rights and spiritual aspirations of every person.

The greatest challenge to the conscience of society comes from your fidelity to your own Christian vocation. It is up to you, the Catholic laity, *to incarnate without ceasing the Gospel in society* - in American society. You are in the forefront of the struggle to protect authentic Christian values from the onslaught of secularization.

Your great contribution to the evangelization of your own society is made through your lives. Christ's message must live in you and in the way you live and in the way you refuse to live. At the same time, because your nation plays a role in the world far beyond its borders, you must be conscious of the impact of your Christian lives on others. *Your lives must spread the fragrance of Christ's Gospel throughout the world*.

Saint Paul launched a great challenge to the Christians of his time and today I repeat it to all the laity of America: "Conduct yourselves, then, in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear news of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, struggling together for the faith of the gospel, not intimidated in any way..." (*Phil. 1, 27-28*).

8. Dear brothers and sisters, representatives of the millions of faithful and dedicated Catholic laity of the United States: in bringing my reflections to a conclusion I cannot fail to mention the Blessed Virgin Mary who reveals the Church's mission in an unparalleled manner. She, more than any other creature, shows us that *the perfection of love* is the only goal that matters, that it alone is the measure of holiness and the way to perfect communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Her state in life was that of *a laywoman*, and she is at the same time the Mother of God, the Mother of the Church and our Mother in the order of grace.

The Council concluded the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church with *an exhortation* on the Blessed Virgin. In doing so, the Council expressed the Church's ancient sentiments of love and devotion for Mary. Let us, especially during this Marian Year, make our own these sentiments,

imploing her to intercede for us with her Son, for the glory of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 69).

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