



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PAN-AFRICAN CONGRESS
FOR CATHOLIC LAITY**

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

I am glad to address my cordial thoughts to you, Venerable Brother, to the Cardinals, Bishops, Priests and consecrated people, and in particular to all the lay faithful gathered in Yaoundé from 4 to 9 September for the important Congress for lay Catholics of Africa, organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity with the support of the Bishops' Conference of Cameroon on: "Witnesses of Jesus Christ in Africa today. Salt of the Earth... Light of the World (Mt 5:13, 14)". The theme intentionally refers to the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*, whose subtitle is the same citation from the Gospel according to St Matthew: "You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world". In personally presenting this important document to the Bishops of Africa in Cotonou, on 20 November last year, I wanted to offer you some theological and pastoral ideas for the Church's journey on the Continent.

Your Congress is an important step in realizing what the Holy Spirit inspired in the Synod Fathers during the Second Special Assembly for Africa, celebrated in Rome in October 2009. In Cotonou I expressed the wish that the Exhortation *Africae Munus* might serve as a guide for the proclamation of the Gospel through the commitment of the entire People of God. For this reason I learned with pleasure of the Pontifical Council's project to convoke a Congress that would be dedicated to the lay faithful of Africa, called especially in our day to ever harder work in the Lord's vineyard (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, n. 2).

During my Journeys on the Continent I have said on various occasions that Africa is called to be the "Continent of Hope". These were not chance words but indicated the shining horizon that unfolds to the gaze of faith. At first sight, of course, Africa's problems appear serious and difficult to solve. This is not only because of material difficulties but also on account of the spiritual and moral obstacles that the Church also encounters. Furthermore, it is true that even the soundest traditional values of African culture are threatened today by secularization, which causes

confusion, tears the personal and social fabric, exasperates tribalism, gives rise to violence, to corruption in public life and to the humiliation and exploitation of women and children, as well as increasing poverty and hunger. In addition, a shadow is cast by fundamentalist terrorism, which has recently targeted the Christian communities in certain African countries. If, however, we look more deeply into the heart of the African peoples, we discover a great wealth of precious spiritual resources for our time. Love of life and of the family, the sense of joy and sharing, the enthusiasm of living faith in the Lord, which I have been able to note on my Visits to Africa, are still impressed on my heart. Never let the sombre relativistic and nihilistic mind-set, infecting various parts of our world, make a breach in your reality! Welcome and spread with fresh strength the message of joy and hope that Christ brings, a message that can purify and reinforce the great values of your cultures.

It is for this reason that in my Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, I wished to present St Josephine Bakhita, the Sudanese saint, as a witness of hope (cf. [n. 3](#)) in order to show how the encounter with the God of Jesus Christ can transform every human being in depth, even in the poorest conditions — Bakhita was a slave — to give him or her the supreme dignity of being a child of God. Rightly, “through the knowledge of this hope she was ‘redeemed’, no longer a slave, but a free child of God” (*ibid.*) And the discovery of Christian hope inspired in 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.*).

The encounter with Christ gives the drive to surmount even those difficulties which seem the most insurmountable. This was the experience of St Bakhita, but it is also the experience that many young Africans — thanks be to God, the majority of the population — are called to live today as they faithfully follow the Lord. To make Africa the “Continent of Hope” is an undertaking that must direct the mission of African lay faithful today, as well as the Congress you are celebrating.

In this perspective, your meeting is a significant moment in the preparation of two ecclesial events of world importance that are now at hand: the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization and the Year of Faith. In Cotonou, in presenting the Exhortation *Africae Munus*, I said: “all those who have received this marvellous gift of faith, this gift of the encounter with the Risen Lord, also feel the need to proclaim it to others” (*Homily*, Mass in Friendship Stadium, Cotonou, Benin, 20 November 2011). Mission is in fact born from faith, a gift of God to be welcomed, nourished and deepened, for “we cannot accept that salt should become tasteless or the light be kept hidden” (*Porta Fidei*, [n. 3](#)). The priority of faith naturally has a logical rather than chronological significance. In fact, the acceptance of this divine gift goes hand in hand with dynamism for Gospel proclamation, in a sort of “virtuous circle” where faith is an incentive to proclamation and proclamation strengthens faith: in fact, “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.*, [n. 7](#)). Truly, “faith

is strengthened when it is given to others!” (Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 2).

Lastly, I would like to recall some words of the Servant of God Paul VI, a faithful interpreter of the Council: “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*, n. 18). The lay faithful have an indispensable role in this work of transforming the whole of society, which Africa so urgently needs today: “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*, n. 128). Women and men, youth, elderly people and children, families and entire societies, today the whole of Africa is expecting “ambassadors” of the Good News, lay faithful from parishes, the *Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes* [living ecclesial communities], ecclesial movements and new communities who love Christ and the Church, and who are full of joy and gratitude for the Baptism they have received, courageous peacemakers and heralds of authentic hope.

As I entrust the Congress to the attentive and motherly intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who as the prayer of your Congress says, is “Our Lady of Africa, Queen of Peace and Star of the New Evangelization”, I willingly impart the Apostolic Blessing to all who are taking part.

From Castel Gandolfo, 20 August 2012.

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