

PAN-AFRICAN CONGRESS FOR CATHOLIC LAITY
(Yaounde, 4-9 September 2012)

**MESSAGE BY H.E. PAUL BIYA,
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON**

*(Read by his Personal Representative René Emmanuel SADI,
Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralization.)*

- Your Eminence, Cardinal Stanislaw RYLKO, Chairman of the Pontifical Council for the Laity,
- Your Eminences, Cardinals,
- Your Excellency, the Apostolic Nuncio,
- Your Excellency, the Archbishop, Chairman of the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon,
- Your Excellency, the Archbishop of Yaounde,
- Your Excellencies, Bishops,
- Honourable Ministers,
- Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
- The Government Delegate to the Yaoundé City Council,
- Dear Delegates,

First and foremost, permit me to extend to the Holy See my most profound gratitude for choosing my country to host this Pan-African Congress for Catholic Laity under the theme “Being Witness of Jesus Christ in Africa Today”.

We appreciate the honour done our country all the more as over the last ten years, Cameroon has played host to some landmark events organized by the Holy See such as the publication of the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, and the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the second African synod, the World Day of the Sick, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Congress and the World Congress on Prison Pastoral Care.

I wish you all a warm welcome to Cameroon, a melting pot of civilizations, land of dialogue and tolerance where all believers live side by side in harmony.

I also wish you a pleasant stay in Yaounde, the city of seven hills.

- Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Church and the State are separate and autonomous institutions in their functioning and activities. However, such secularity leaves room for sound collaboration with established religions, in the domains of education, moral and spiritual growth of peoples and the socio-economic development of the country. How could it be otherwise? Beyond the principle of separation, the State and religious bodies have the same human resources and work towards uplifting the same peoples in their specific spheres.

Such necessary collaboration, as well as our major political options, namely peace, unity, democracy and promotion of moral values are also the concerns of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI as expressed in the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus* (No. 81).

I am pleased to underscore that your Congress is of prime importance for the African continent. I hope that your proceedings will make significant contribution towards building an African continent where public and private actions are guided by moral conscience.

Your meeting is a follow-up to the Second Vatican Council, which was held 50 years ago and which was the first council attended by a layman, the French philosopher Jean GUITTON. By inviting an un-ordained faithful to an assembly traditionally reserved for high-ranking clerics, the Church wanted to show that the laity are an integral part of God's people. Since that council, the laity have ceased being the silent masses.

During that historic council, whose premonitions are yet to be fully exploited, the dignity, vocation and role of the laity were clearly recognized and recorded in documents which, I believe, will certainly guide your proceedings. Such thinking has been maintained. The idea developed at the Second Vatican Council has been translated into reality. I am referring in particular to the creation of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, the organizer of this Congress. I also have in mind the new code of canon law which has systematized the contribution, place and role of the laity in the Church and society. Lastly, I am referring to the first synod of the laity and the Apostolic Exhortation *christifideles laici* (1988) that emerged from it.

In the words of the Council, a lay Christian is a witnessing force of the Church to the World. It is left to him or her to give substance to the spiritual and moral values taught by the Church, *Mater et Magistra*, to mankind.

As underscored in the Apostolic Exhortation *christifideles laici*, since they belong to Christ, the lay faithful share in the kingly office of Christ and have a part to play at the service and in the spread of God's kingdom throughout the World. They experience Christian royalty by destroying the reign of sinfulness

within themselves and devoting themselves to serving, in charity and justice, Jesus himself who is present in all his brethren (No.14).

Furthermore, we should bear in mind that your congress is taking place in a global context of secularization and profound changes also affecting the Church and Africa. Therefore, I believe there is a need for you to reflect more deeply on the place of the laity and their role in the Church's mission of evangelization in Africa.

Such considerations give your meeting its full meaning while highlighting its significance and relevance. With this congress, there is every reason to expect the laity to be more involved and more visible in the day-to-day incarnation of the Gospel in the lives of our peoples and societies.

Your congress can therefore be an opportunity for our continent. In any case, it is timely for my country, Cameroon, which I, upon assuming the highest office, set on the path of stringency and moral rectitude, which has proved to be a long haul fraught with pitfalls. Far from being mere political slogans, these concepts are progressively being reflected in actions aimed at improving the running of public affairs. Such actions will be pursued. They are the key to the advent of shared good governance in the running of State affairs. They are also a *sine qua non* for the advent of the exemplary Republic that I yearn for so much.

- Your Eminence, Cardinal Stanislaw RYLKO,
- Your Eminences, Cardinals,
- Your Excellencies Archbishops and Bishops,
- Honourable Ministers,
- Your Excellencies Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
- The Government Delegate to the Yaoundé City Council,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many baptized Christians hold high offices in our society where they live in close union with other believers. We hope that their involvement in the running of the affairs of our States will enable us to improve the quality of our public services.

As the "Salt of the Earth and light of the world", lay faithful must be witnesses of moral rectitude, architects of peace, and promoters of justice and reconciliation. As strongly emphasized in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, lay Christians must "give a shining example either as individuals or as members of groups or in their dedication to the common interest" (Nos. 72 and 75). Those are some of the aspects covered in the Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*, for all those who

have the daunting task of writing the current history of our continent, in short, for all those who desire to leave their mark on that history.

While wishing you every success in your proceedings taking place at *Nkol bisson*, a venue and word which recall the hard and methodical work of ants, it is also my wish that following the Yaounde congress, the laity would have an even keener awareness of their responsibility in society.

Yaounde, 5 September 2012

Paul BIYA