



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY**

*Clementine Hall
Saturday, 7 February 2015*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With joy I welcome the Pontifical Council for the Laity gathered for this Plenary Assembly. I thank the Cardinal President for his words to me.

The time since your last Plenary has been a busy period, full of apostolic initiatives. In them you have adopted the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* as the programmatic text and compass to guide your reflection and your work. The year just begun will mark a very important date: the 50th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. In this regard, I know that you are appropriately preparing to commemorate the publication of the Decree on the Lay Apostolate *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. I encourage this initiative, which looks not only to the past but to the present and the future of the Church.

The theme you have chosen for this Plenary Assembly, *Encountering God in the Heart of the City*, is in keeping with *Evangelii Gaudium*'s call to tackle the "challenges from urban cultures" (nn. 71-75). The phenomenon of urbanization has now assumed a global dimension: more than half of the men and women of the planet live in cities. And the urban context has a strong impact on the mentality, culture, lifestyles, interpersonal relations, and the religiosity of people. In this context, so varied and complex, the Church is no longer the sole "generator of meaning" and Christians are absorbing "the languages, symbols, messages and paradigms which propose new approaches to life, often in contrast with the Gospel" (*ibid.*, n. 73). The cities present great opportunities and great risks: they can be magnificent areas of freedom and human fulfillment, but also of terrible areas of dehumanization and of unhappiness. It seems that every city, even those that appear to be more prosperous and ordered, have the capacity of generating within themselves a dark "non-city". It

seems that along with citizens also non-citizens exist: invisible people, lacking means and human warmth; who live in “non-places”, living “non-relationships”. No one looks at these individuals, pays attention or takes an interest in them. They are not just “anonymous”, they are “non-people”. And this is terrible.

But in the face of this sad scenario we should always remember that God has not abandoned the city; He lives in the city. The theme your Plenary has chosen to underline is that it is possible to meet God in the heart of the city. This is very beautiful. Yes, God continues to be present even in our cities that are frantic and distracted! And so it is necessary not to be overcome by pessimism and defeatism, but to have *a gaze of faith on our cities*, a contemplative gaze which sees God dwelling in the homes, in the streets and squares (cf. *ibid.* n. 71). And God is never absent from the city because He is never absent from the man’s heart! In fact, “God’s presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives” (*ibid.*). The Church wants to be at the service of this sincere quest that is in so many hearts and that opens them to God. The lay faithful, above all, are called to go out without fear to meet the men and women in cities: in daily activities, at work, as single people or as families, together with the parish or in the ecclesial movements they belong to, and break down the wall of anonymity and indifference that often reigns in cities. It is about having the courage to take the first step to approach others, to be apostles of the neighbourhood.

By becoming joyful proclaimers of the Gospel to their fellow citizens, the lay faithful discover that there are many hearts that *the Holy Spirit has already prepared* to receive their witness, their closeness and their attention. In the city there is often a more fertile ground for apostolate than many imagine. It is important therefore to attend to *the formation of the laity*: to educate them to have that gaze of faith, full of hope, to know how to see the city through God’s eyes, to see the city through God’s eyes, to encourage them to live the Gospel, knowing that every life lived in a Christian way always has a strong social impact. At the same time, it is necessary to nourish in them the desire to witness, so that they can give to others with love the gift of faith they have received, accompanying with affection their brothers and sisters who are taking the first steps in the life of faith. In a word: the laity are called to live a humble leadership in the Church and to become *a leaven of Christian life for the whole city*.

Furthermore, it is important that, in this renewed missionary outreach to the city, the lay faithful, in communion with their Pastors, are able to convey the heart of the Gospel, not its “appendages”. Even the then-Archbishop Montini, to the people involved in the great city mission of Milan, spoke of the “search for the essential”, and invited people themselves to be “essential”, that is, true, genuine, and to live from what truly counts (cf. *Discorsi e scritti milanesi 1954-1963*, Istituto Paolo VI, Brescia-Roma, 1997-1998, p. 1483). In this way alone can the liberating message of the love of God and the salvation that Christ offers be proposed in its strength, beauty and simplicity. One can only move forward in this way, with an attitude of respect for people; this is offering the essence of the Gospel.

I entrust your work and your projects to the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary, a pilgrim together with her Son in proclaiming the Gospel, from village to village, from city to city, and I wholeheartedly impart my Blessing to all of you and your loved ones. And please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.

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