

THE WORLD CONSULTATION AT ROCCA DI PAPA..

Holy Father,
Dear Archbishops and Bishops,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

I have been invited to address you today on "The World Consultation of the Laity at Rocca di Papa" (21-25 May, 1987). It was the first time that there had been this type of meeting immediately prior to a Synod and including long sessions with the bishops of the Council of the Secretariat of the Synod. It was a unique experience of lay consultation and responsible participation. The meeting was organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity and took place with the repeated encouragement and direct participation of the Holy Father.

More than two hundred and thirty men and women came together from all continents, from different cultures and walks of life, and from a wide variety of ways of witnessing to their Christian vocation in the Church and in the world. They came so that they could exchange and communicate experiences to one another, share reflections and freely express their concerns and hopes.

We could almost feel the breath of the Holy Spirit, up there at Rocca di Papa as we prayed together and listened intently to one another and especially to the voice of the Holy Spirit. The atmosphere was one of hope, of communion, of commitment and of joy.

The Spirit was blowing, as one after the other dropped their 'masks' as it were, and with great simplicity and trust, shared their personal experiences in dialogue sessions.

While the Instrumentum Laboris was present in our discussions as a reference point, our major concern was to relate our experiences and the consultations in our countries over the last three years to an overall theme we all felt to be vital for the Synod and its aims, namely: "A new evangelization for the building of a new society".

For this purpose we grouped ourselves into thirteen workshops under three sub-themes:

- 1) Enacting the mission of the Church by participating in the dynamism of history;
- 2) Presence in the world while seeking the kingdom;
- 3) Vocation and mission of the laity - apostolic dynamism and personal relationship with God.

The Pontifical Council for the Laity is making available to everyone here a publication that gives a good account of the Rocca di Papa Consultation and which conveys something of its flavour.

I shall only highlight a few major points that kept surfacing in our discussion and that struck me most.

1) The centrality of Jesus Christ

The first point is to state unequivocally and insistently that the model of Jesus Christ in the Gospel, for all Christians, and his living presence within the community of his disciples today, needs to be restated and re-emphasized.

Whatever comes from the Synod, this truth needs to be declared much more forcefully than was the case in the Instrumentum Laboris.

The Lord's call to each one of us is a special vocation to holiness in a communion of love. We spoke of holiness, Christian holiness, which is the imitation of Jesus in the Gospel and that is to serve as He did.

Each lay Christian needs to believe more strongly than is so often the case that this call is real and personal for him or for her.

It is this holiness which gives the people of God strength to look beyond immediate situations and to try to build the future on the foundation of the power of grace. The utopia of living according to Jesus is the only answer to the many questions arising today in the Church and in the world.

From the experience of my husband and myself in Malaysia both with basic Christian communities and with lay associations, I know from experience that if Christ is not effectively at the centre of what we are trying to do then we make little progress and the group tends to fall apart.

2) The second major point was: Christians as bearers of the Good News

This is the heart of Christian vocation and mission: because we are united to Christ, because his Spirit moves in the depths of our being, we become signs and bearers of the Good News.

We need to be able to share with people that it really is Good News, genuinely life-giving, bringing joy, hope and peace, even when the stand for truth and for justice brings attacks and suffering on those who give witness to the Good News.

At the Rocca di Papa Consultation men and women from enormously different situations agreed that being a lay Christian today means struggling together with our priests and bishops to do what John XXIII tried to do in his Encyclical "Pacem in terris" and the Council tried to do in "Gaudium et spes", namely to try to read the signs of the times and discern our response to them, the commitment that is demanded of us in the light of the Gospel.

Please do not feel I am just mouthing abstract theories. My own work, besides being a wife and a mother of three children, is as the Deputy Director of a Catholic Research Centre and as a religious news journalist in Asia. Trying to read the signs of the times while getting to know Christ and his Gospel better is my daily bread.

Examples of where the Christian community has to attempt to discern its response to the times are all around us.

The world of work is undergoing profound changes following industrialization and the new possibilities opened up by technology and information processes. It was said at Rocca di Papa that lay Christians must give a lead in re-thinking the concept of work, of employment and unemployment, and in searching for adequate social responses.

In the business world, where money so often becomes the idol, in the world of science where biogenetic engineering raises enormous questions for the future, in the world of the media and the arts where human values can be either strenuously upheld and developed or easily pushed down and trampled underfoot, Christian lay people have to work side by side with other men and women of goodwill and to try to give witness to Gospel values, to build up the kingdom by attempting to transform whatever scene we are involved in.

The fact that there is corruption in the field of politics, of business and all the other areas of life, should not surprise us. The abuse of power, wealth and human relationships are things that the Cross of Christ has stood out against from the beginning. Unfortunately we Christians, like our fellow men and women, have also our share of blame for the corruption that exists.

The Christian answer is not to withdraw from politics and business and the media but for the Church to be visibly present through the visible and courageous living of Christians, witnessing to these Christian values, their Christian faith.

However, widespread passivity and indifference among the laity remains one of the major challenges to the local Churches. Many lay people still have to be made aware of their unique and irreplaceable responsibility, of the opportunity they have to reject the attitudes and values of "the world" and to replace these values with those of the Gospel.

3) Urgency of linking faith and life

One of the major blocks to Christians becoming bearers of the Good News is that many still separate faith and life into separate compartments.

For example, there are Christian politicians in my part of the world, south and south-east Asia, who state quite openly that "politics and religion do not mix".

This is unacceptable as a Christian viewpoint. But in the largely non-Christian environment of Asia, the world's largest and growing continent, we Christians need wisdom and discretion in showing the true relationship of our faith to every sphere of social and political life.

The process of evangelization is long and continuous and calls for great perseverance, great patience, tremendous love and much prayer. But there is also a great urgency because Christians take part in decision-making processes at national and international levels. We need to remember that prayer is a weapon where evil is at work, as Christ experienced it. Prayer is a source of inspiration, purification, orientation and ennobling of action.

In the West, efficiency risks leaving action sterile, the spiritual and contemplative dimensions are becoming more and more limited. And in the East, where Christians live and work side by side with people of other great religions, i.e. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, etc., many Christians find their prayer life insipid, lifeless.

A deeper understanding of the liturgy is a valuable help for spiritual growth. Praying daily the Liturgy of the Hours and other forms of group and individual prayer, for instance, can not only be of great benefit to Christians but could be a sign for non-Christians, especially Muslims, who tend to believe that Christians do not pray! This dichotomy between faith and life in the lives of Christians is a great scandal and a poor example of Christian living.

Yes, we agreed that each Christian, lay, priest or religious, is called to transform the world through a life of sanctity.

What is crucial however is the support which we can give one another through prayers for one another, through sacrifices and penance, through fellowship - the network of personal relationships, the sharing of ideas, sharing of the Gospel, sharing of the joys and sorrows, all these will contribute to the help needed to bear us along in the continuing battle against 'wordly values'.

Small Christian communities, parish and diocesan groups and organizations, lay associations and movements at all levels have a vital role to play and need the positive interest and encouragement of bishops, priests and religious.

4) Mutual dependence and sharing by clergy and laity

The fourth important point that came out strongly at Rocca di Papa was the question of full participation in the life of the Church: a genuine sharing, without confusion of ministry or mission, of both clergy and laity in decision making, a shared responsibility and commitment to the mission of the Church.

It is not just a question of Church structures and legislation, but above all of attitude. It was said at the Consultation that we need more priests, not less. We need holy priests and priests who know how to work side by side with lay people without abdicating their pastoral leadership. But leadership does not mean clericalism.

To give a concrete example repeated in many countries of different continents: a change of parish priest should not mean that the incoming pastor can close down or change practically overnight all that was going on in the

Christian community under his predecessor. Where there are real abuses or aberrations such action is one thing, where it is merely a question of the arbitrary whim or different temperament of the new pastor is another matter altogether. The priest's leadership in the community must be exercised in a spirit of service, of respect for the people he serves and of discerning collaboration with them, since the Spirit pours out his gifts on the whole community.

Rather than being involved in a power struggle that would seriously disfigure the image of Christ in his Church, the Christian community must reflect the communion of love that is at its heart. United in our diversity as brothers and sisters in Christ, we must be able to say with pure hearts "Abba, Father".

As a community we need continually to be involved in a process of reconciliation with one another, laity with other groups of laity, priests with laity, bishops with priests and so on. In a maturing Church, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing in relationships are essential elements. Only then are we able to repeat the words of Christ and say to non-Christians "Come and see". Only then will they experience our churches as welcoming, healing and life-giving communities.

However, bishops, priests and laity together, we need to remember that forgiveness is based on genuine dialogue, on openness and respect for one another. True dialogue recognises truth - it does not hide it.

Such dialogue and mutual assistance in the deepening of faith, under the guidance of the bishops who must take those decisions necessary for the good and the unity of the local Church entrusted to them, make it possible to avoid confusion of identity, roles and mission between priests and laity, i.e. the clericalisation of the laity and the laicisation of the clergy.

Let me mention briefly another important area where relationships within the community have a considerable impact in the market place where the lay Christian lives side by side with non-Christians or Christians of other denominations. It is the area of transparency and accountability in all that affects the financial position and activities of the Church at all levels, from the smallest ecclesial community to the international level of the Holy See.

We experience repeated attacks in the media and in our personal encounters regarding what is claimed to have been done or not done by Church-related institutions or officials. Without any adequate information from Church sources most Christians can only drop their heads in embarrassment and silence in the face of such attacks. Our young people especially suffer great doubt and confusion whenever such attacks on the lack of accountability are hurled at them.

We love the Church. We want to defend it against unjust attacks. There are lay men and women in the financial world and in the media who want to assist in this area. But we need the information at our disposal that can allow us to show to the world we have nothing to hide. In the words of the Gospel, the truth will make us free.

Formation

From everywhere, from Africa, from North and South America, from Europe, Asia and Oceania, there was tremendous insistence on formation.

We spoke about the call to conversion that lies at the heart of formation, emphasised the role of the Christian community as the place where formation occurs, we spoke of the need for the ongoing formation of every member of the people of God as a priority that needs to be proclaimed loud and clear at this Synod. It then needs to be made a pastoral priority in the effective programmes of the local churches.

Many, many participants, while recognising the need for specialised training of priests and religious, stressed the need for clergy formation to give a deeper knowledge and a stronger awareness of the problems of the modern world and the real life situations of the laity.

I would ask the Synod Fathers to give special attention to this point since future collaboration depends on it: the formation of priests must prepare them for an exercise of their pastoral mission as complementary to that of the laity, in a spirit of sharing, mutual respect and communion at all levels of Church life.

Among the many other points on formation there were, for example:

- the family as the place par excellence for the formation of Christian lay people;

- the need for formation to have a good balance of both intellectual content and life-experience;

- the need for the language used in Church teaching and documents to be accessible to the normal lay person;

- the needs of youth. Young people, it was said, tend to reject dogmatic and moralising language. Instead they need to meet Christians who have a deep faith and whose way of living will lead them to Jesus Christ as their ultimate goal.

6) The role of women

The role of women was of course discussed at length. While they make up more than half the population of the world, they form more than half the number of practising Catholics in a lot of countries.

The role of woman is fundamental for the existence of societies, but it was also observed that woman is the corner-stone of the Christianisation of societies. In the education and formation of Christians, especially of men and of priests, an effort must be made towards understanding and appreciating

women's role in Christian society, especially women's role in home, which is the first agent of evangelization. Through women Christian values can be transmitted from one generation to the next.

At the same time the Church must not be absent from discussions and efforts designed to improve the integration of women in society.

It must be realized that women's desire to participate more actively in the life of the Church does not necessarily include the demand to have access to the ordained ministry. It is rather a desire for recognition of the part that women play in the work of the Church at all levels and the elimination of paternalistic and condescending attitudes.

But it was stated at Rocca di Papa that it is the whole Church that is still suffering from a lack of the presence of women, and even from a lack of femininity.

7) In conclusion let me mention four principles of action that we felt could help every Christian to fulfil his or her vocation and mission in daily life:

- ongoing conversion through acceptance of the cross and of the love of Our Lord;

- constant attention even in the most commonplace actions, such as staff-meetings or telephone calls, to humanizing (i.e. Christianizing) the world. We can never know how far-reaching are the consequences of our actions, and we have to go forward strictly by faith;

- constant sharing of problems and experiences and the support of a community or group, associations or movements at all levels;

- a heart that is continually sensitized by frequent listening and service to the poorest, while we seek light from the Lord.

All of us, priests, religious and laity need conversion.

We are all sinners.

We are all pilgrims.

Inēresa Ee' Chōoi