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The Spirit is not the 'property' of the ecclesial hierarchy, writes the Pope in his letter to president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America

Vatican City, 26 April 2016 – On Friday 4 March the Holy Father granted an audience to the participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America (CAL), who met in the Vatican to examine the theme of the "indispensable commitment of the lay faithful in the public life of Latin American countries". On this occasion the Pope made some extemporaneous remarks. On 19 March, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, P.S.S., as president of the CAL, received a text in which the Holy Father continued his reflections on the theme addressed in the plenary assembly, extensive extracts of which are published below.

"To evoke the Holy faithful People of God is to evoke the objective we are invited to look towards and reflect upon. ... A father cannot conceive of himself without his children. ... A pastor cannot conceive of himself without a flock, whom he is called upon to serve. The pastor is the pastor of a people, and the people need him within. ... Looking at the Holy faithful People of God and being aware we are an integral part of it positions us in life, and as a result the themes we consider, in a different way. ... Looking at the People of God is remembering that we all enter the Church as laypeople. The first sacrament, that which seals for ever our identity, and of which we must always be proud, is baptism. ... No-one is baptised a priest nor a bishop. We have been baptised as laypeople and it is an indelible sign that no-one can ever cancel. It is good for us to remember that the Church is not an élite of priests, consecrated people and bishops, but that we all form the Holy faithful People of God. Forgetting this leads to various risks and deformations in our experience, both personal and in the community, of the ministry the Church has entrusted to us. ... The Holy faithful People of God is anointed with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and therefore, at the moment of reflecting, thinking, evaluating and discerning, we must be very attentive to this anointment".

"We cannot reflect on the theme of the laity while ignoring one of the greatest deformations that Latin America must face – clericalism. ... Clericalism leads to a homogenisation of the laity; treating it as an 'emissary' limits the various initiatives and efforts and, I dare say, the boldness necessary to be able to bring the Good News of the Gospel to all areas of social and above all political activity. Clericalism, far from inspiring various contributions and proposals, gradually extinguishes the prophetic flame of which the entire Church is called to bear witness in the heart of her peoples".

"There is a very interesting phenomenon that has emerged in Latin America. ... I refer to popular pastoral

ministry. ... Pope Paul VI uses an expression that I consider fundamental: the faith of our people, its orientations, searches, desires, yearnings, when they are heard and guided, end up showing us the genuine presence of the Spirit. We trust in our People, in its memory and sense, we trust that the Holy Spirit acts in and with it, and that this Spirit is not merely the 'property' of the ecclesial hierarchy. ... I have taken this example of popular pastoral ministry as a hermeneutic key that can help us understand better the action that is generated with the Holy faithful People of God prays and acts. An action that does not remain linked to the intimate sphere of the person but, on the contrary, is transformed into culture; 'An evangelised popular culture contains values of faith and solidarity capable of encouraging the development of a more just and believing society, and possesses a particular wisdom which ought to be gratefully acknowledged'.

"So, at this point we may ask ourselves: what is the meaning of the fact that laypeople are working in public life? It means looking for a way to encourage, accompany and stimulate all attempts and efforts that today are already being made to keep hope and faith alive in a world full of contradictions, especially for the poorest, and especially with the poorest. It means, as pastors, working in the midst of our people and, with our people, supporting faith and its hope. 'We need to look at our cities' – and therefore all the spaces where our people live their lives – "with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares'. ... It is never the pastor who should say to the layperson what he must do and say; he knows well, and better than we do. It is not for the pastor to establish what the faithful must say in various spheres. As pastors, joined to our people, it is good for us to ask ourselves how we are encouraging and promoting charity and fraternity, and the desire for good, for truth and for justice. How can we ensure that corruption does not take root in our hearts".

"Very often we give in to the temptation to think that the committed layperson is one who is engaged in the works of the Church and/or in issues of the parish or diocese, and we have reflected little on how to accompany a baptised person in his or her daily public life. ... Without realising, we have generated a lay élite, believing that committed laypeople are only those who work in relation "priests' matters", and we have forgotten and neglected the believer who very often exhausts his or her hope in the daily struggle to live the faith. ... It is illogical, even impossible, to think that we as pastors should have a monopoly on the solutions to the many challenges that contemporary life presents to us. On the contrary, we must stay on the side of our people, accompanying us in their searches and stimulating that imagination capable of responding to the current problems. This means discerning with our people and never for our people, or without our people. As St. Ignatius would say, according to the needs of the places, times and people. ... Inculturation is a process that we pastors are required to promote, encouraging the people to live their faith where and with whom they are. Inculturation is learning to discover how a specific part of today's people, in the here and now of history, lives, celebrates and announces its own faith".

"Amid our people we are asked to safeguard two memories. The memory of Jesus Christ and the memory of our ancestors. The faith we have received is a gift that has reached us in many cases from the hands of our mothers and our grandmothers. ... It is this faith that has accompanied us many times in the many vicissitudes of our journey. Losing this memory means uprooting ourselves from the place we come from and then not knowing where we are going. This is fundamental; when we uproot a layperson from his or her faith, from that of his or her origins; when we uproot the Holy faithful People of God, we uproot them from their baptismal identity and thus deprive them of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Our role, our joy, the joy of the pastor, resides precisely in helping and encouraging, as many have done before us: mothers, grandmothers and fathers, the true agents of history. ... The laity are part of the Holy faithful People of God, and are therefore the protagonists of the Church and the world; we are called to serve them, not to make use of them".
