

## **“Pastors and Lay Faithful Called to Walk together”**

Conference for Bishops and Referents of Episcopal Commissions for the Laity

*New Synod Hall, Vatican City, February 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> 2023*

### **Topic: Dialogue on the Co-responsibility of the Lay Faithful**

*Presented by Ms. Helen Oa (Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands)*

Our current pastoral vision in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands to be “Salt of the Earth and Light of the World” flows from the words of Christ in Matthew 5:13. We are not only called to be successful Christians in living out God’s plan but to be faithful Christians in making Him known to society through our lives.

Our current uncertain and changing social situation in the Pacific calls for a renewed spirit, energy and dedication in living out our faith. It also calls for innovative and more creative ways in proclaiming the Good News.

In the midst of fast growing changes in society, culture and Church, our being truly alive in Christ can be summarized this way: “The work of New Evangelization in particular in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands continues to bear fruit with new members baptized into the Church. Many consecrated religious and lay people, such as ourselves, are committed to offer service in the Church. There are many spiritual groups, lay movements, associations witnessing their spirituality and charisma. The values of community listening, dialogue and respect are maintained and fostered in Basic Christian Communities”. (*CBCPNGSI Conference Pastoral Plan2 par. 4*)

Proof of the interest by the Bishops of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands for the Laity is that they recently wanted to dedicate three pastoral years and three pastoral letters (2019, 2020, 2021) to this vital and vast part of the people of God. Each year had its own theme: *Our Catholic Laity: A Call to Holiness in Today’s World (2019); Holy and Formed for Mission (2020); Holy, Formed and Sent for Service (2021)*.

Over three years, continual formation programs, workshops and seminars were conducted for lay faithful at the parish, diocesan and conference level, to promote the understanding that the Church is Communion and is inclusive of the Laity – We are the Church!

This was followed by the Third General Assembly of the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. It was conducted in April 2022, with the theme: *Salt and Light – The Church in Society*, with 111 participants, majority of whom were laity, from 19 dioceses.

The three-fold aim of the Assembly was:

1. To celebrate the Catholic Faith.
2. To propose a five-year Conference Pastoral Plan.
3. To share the experience of Synodality, at the invitation of the Holy Father Pope Francis.

A Formulation Committee, mostly of lay faithful, was set up to draft and finalize the text of the Conference Pastoral Plan following the sharing at the General Assembly. The Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands “Conference Pastoral Plan 2, *Salt and Light, 2022-'27*” was unanimously endorsed and promulgated by the bishops and is currently in its first-year implementation stage.

Once again, the lay faithful have taken ownership and lead. The plan was created and written by the laity, for the laity.

The work and witness of our laity in the public arena is made manifest among others by:

- The Catholic Professional Society of Papua New Guinea. They advocate, create awareness, hold the government of the day to account through press releases, media conferences, meetings with stakeholders, etc.
- The Church continues to help communities to seek justice and advocate for peace through Caritas and its network, Child Protection officers, and increasing efforts against Gender Based Violence and Sorcery Accusation Related Violence.
- The Catechists and Prayer Leaders take responsibility in remote communities, especially in the absence of priests and consecrated religious.
- The staff in the dioceses and especially at the Bishops Conference headquarters is largely made up of laity, women, and young professionals.

Indeed, there is no lack of issues particularly facing the laity. It remains a challenge to integrate ancestral beliefs, customs and rituals with the Gospel’s message and values. Many Catholics feel confused by the challenges of other Christian denominations against our faith; some can defend it; others lack the necessary formation and knowledge. There is an increase in all forms of abuse and violence, breakdown in family life, teenage pregnancies, growing number of single parents, couples failing to live within the grace of the sacrament of marriage. Lack of discipline and loss of identity in Catholic institutions, corruption at all levels of politics and civil society - occasionally even in the Church - bring shame to individuals and to the body of Christ.

We collectively acknowledge the signs of growth as well as the challenges facing the Church. However, through our collaboration and openness, beginning with the clergy and the religious, we ensure fuller participation by the Catholic faithful to enable them to recognize themselves as active members of a *Church Alive in Christ* (theme of the Second General Assembly in 2013).

Room for improvement is there. But generally accepted practice of listening, dialogue and community discernment allows every person to participate and contribute, as we journey together in the love of Christ in Communion, Participation and Mission.