

The Role of the Laity: An Examination of Vatican II and *Christifideles Laici* | Carl E. Olson

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[G.K. Chesterton](#) once observed that the process of "discovering" the Catholic Faith is most enjoyable, "easier than joining the Catholic Church and much easier than trying to live the Catholic life."

How right he was! It did not take much time, as a former Evangelical Protestant, to see that no little confusion existed among many of my fellow Catholics about a variety of issues, including essential matters like the nature of the Church and what it means to be a Christian. And I did not have to wait long to stumble upon an expression of this confusion. Following the Easter Vigil Liturgy in 1997, during which my wife and I were confirmed and received Holy Communion, there was a reception in the parish hall. Jim, a cradle Catholic and a regular extraordinary Eucharistic minister, introduced himself and offered his congratulations. Upon discovering that both my wife and I were converts from Protestantism and that our families had been less than pleased about our decision to become Catholic, he shook his head sympathetically and offered this thought: "I look at it like this: everyone in the world is in a different boat on the ocean of life, but we are all going to the same place, regardless of which boat we are in." He was visibly pleased with his analogy, apparently missing the irony of his remark. If what he said was true, why did I bother even becoming Catholic? And what was the point of being Catholic?

Subsequent conversations with various Catholics have revealed that this sort of sincere indifferentism is not only common, but is apparently considered by many to be a good thing, the result of some strange entity called "the spirit of Vatican II." Although most Catholics are bothered when their children or relatives leave the Church, many see it as "none of our business" and carry on, perhaps puzzled but quietly accepting the "private decisions" of those involved. Most would never contemplate talking about the matter with the ex-Catholic; fewer still would consider talking about their Catholic beliefs with non-Catholics.

Simply put, far too many Catholics have bought into the modern perspective that insists religious beliefs are private and the sharing of such beliefs should not take place in public. According to this sentiment, discussions of such "personal" matters in public are not only insensitive, they are also raw displays of arrogance which decent people cannot tolerate. And this view, quite common in American parishes, is even held by some as the official stance of the "post-Vatican II" Church.

Paralleling this indifferent attitude towards those outside the Church is an increased insistence on lay involvement in the liturgy and in "ministry." Being an extraordinary Eucharist minister is no long "extraordinary"; instead it has become absolutely commonplace. In some parishes lay people give homilies, grant blessings and even-- with the priest's approval-- stand around the altar during the consecration. While some of the abuses are obvious to even nominal Catholics, most of the laity seem content to go with the flow, limiting their public expression of faith to Sunday Mass and keeping silent the rest of the week. It would seem that they should be doing more with their faith in the "real" world--but exactly what?

What is the problem?

The Second Vatican Council repeatedly outlined and clarified the role of the laity. But one hears very little, if anything, about it at a parish level. The average lay person, it appears, vaguely perceives Vatican II as a Council which opened the doors of the Church to the spirit of modern world, especially in the areas of liturgy and ecumenism. While there is some truth to this, the Council did much more. But first it is instructive to read the warnings of the Council Fathers and Pope John Paul II regarding an essential element at stake in this matter of the role of the laity: our salvation.

[*Gaudium et Spes*](#), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, makes a clear and serious connection between the laity's life as Catholics in the world and their eternal destination:

This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation. Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age. . . . *The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation.* (GS 43, emphasis added).

Two common errors are highlighted and discussed here: the shirking of responsibilities by those who would focus on their heavenly home at the expense of

earthly duties, and those who, due to a legalistic understanding of their faith, divorce it from their everyday life. It hardly takes a sociologist to observe how common these problems, particularly the latter, are in Catholic parishes in North America.

This second problem, along with a newer and equally serious concern, was addressed by John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation [*Christifideles Laici*](#), written immediately after the 1987 Synod of Bishops. The late Holy Father stated:

At the same time, the Synod has pointed out that the post-conciliar path of the lay faithful has not been without its difficulties and dangers. In particular, two temptations can be cited which they have not always known how to avoid: the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world. (CL 2)

The reference to an unbalanced focus by the laity on "Church services and tasks" is directed, at least in part, at the often hotly contested issue of "ministry." While Vatican II encouraged the laity to participate in ministry, the misuse and abuse of the term meant that a serious admonition and clarification was in order:

In the same Synod Assembly, however, a critical judgment was voiced along with these positive elements, about a too-indiscriminate use of the word "ministry", the confusion and the equating of the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, the lack of observance of ecclesiastical laws and norms, the arbitrary interpretation of the concept of "supply", the tendency towards a "clericalization" of the lay faithful and the risk of creating, in reality, an ecclesial structure of parallel service to that founded on the Sacrament of Orders. (CL 23)

In some circles the word "ministry" has taken on a quality strongly resembling the all-encompassing and ambiguous use of it by certain Protestants. The desire to be associated with--or to even compete with--the ordained ministry has led to an abundance of "ministries" among the laity. What is particularly noteworthy is how so many of these ministries are focused on those people already *in* the Church and how so few look outward to those who are *outside* of the Church. With so many lay ministers alongside the priest it was inevitable that the lines between the priesthood common to all believers by virtue of baptism and the ministerial, ordained priesthood would become blurred.

And while Vatican II and the 1983 Code of Canon Law allowed, in cases of serious need, lay involvement in such acts as distributing Holy Communion, such involvement instead became the norm and, in some parishes, a seemingly sacred right.

For example, a priest recently told me about his experience while filling in at Mass at a local parish. A few minutes prior to Mass the priest was approached by a layman who matter-of-factly stated that *he* was the "Eucharistic minister" and would be up at the altar with the priest. When the priest flatly told him that he was not, in fact, a "Eucharist minister"--only the priest can claim such a title--and that he would not be needed (since the parish was fairly small), the man left in fit of anger!

Episodes such as this reflect an inadequate, distorted or even nonexistent understanding of the laity's proper role within the Church. Unfortunately, many Catholics who desire to somehow be involved in their local parish immediately single out "ministries" that are visible and "up front", perceiving them to be the singular means of involvement available in their parish. In light of this it is little surprise to hear of small parishes where the number of extraordinary Eucharist ministers is quite disproportionate to the number of people in the pews. Meanwhile, those who remain outside of a "ministry" are left with the impression that there exists only a certain number of such positions and since those are filled, they are out of luck. Resigned (perhaps happily) to not having such a position and commitment, they incorrectly believe that weekly attendance of Mass is "good enough." But this is not the case at all, according to the Holy Father, since a "new state of affairs today both in the Church and in social, economic, political and cultural life, calls with a particular urgency for the action of the lay faithful. If lack of commitment is always unacceptable, the present time renders it even more so. It is not permissible for anyone to remain idle" (CL 3).

The necessary context

If the laity are called to be active, but there exists only so many positions within a parish, what are they to do? What is their role? In order to answer this question the identity of the laity must first be seen within the contexts of four important realities: the Eschaton, the Church, the true nature of ministry, and vocations.

The eschatological principle

When we step back and view history and eternity from the perspective given by divine revelation and the Church, we see there exists two cities, or kingdoms: the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. The Christian is a citizen of both and as such has responsibilities to both. He is a member of the Church, which is the "on earth the seed and beginning of that kingdom" (CCC 541), that is, the kingdom of God. And he is also a human being, born into time and space and living in the kingdom of man. So the Christian lives in a certain tension, knowing his final end is with God but strongly aware of how real and serious life is in the temporal order.

But this temporal order will eventually pass away at the *eschaton*, the end of time, when the kingdom of God will at last be fully revealed. The relationship between the temporal order and the eschatological character of the Church is one of tension, but not of conflict. Because Christians are citizens of both kingdoms their actions in the temporal order have results and meaning for the eschatological end of the Church. Thus *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, asserts the importance of the laity's life and work within the temporal order in relation to eternity:

But by reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. They live in the world, that is, they are engaged in each and every work and business of the earth and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, constitute their very existence. There they are called by God that, being led by the spirit to the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially by the witness of their life, resplendent in faith, hope and charity they must manifest Christ to others. It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer. (LG 31). The laity are called to work in the temporal order in a specific manner befitting their "secular character." The word "secular" is used by the Church to recognize that the laity are "in the world" and have--as members of the Church--a specific and unique role in the kingdom of man, as John Paul II explained:

To understand properly the lay faithful's position in the Church in a complete, adequate and specific manner it is necessary to come to a deeper theological understanding of their secular character in light of God's plan of salvation and in the context of the mystery of the Church. Pope Paul VI said the Church "has an authentic secular dimension, inherent to her inner nature and mission, which is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Word Incarnate, and which is realized in different forms through her members". The Church, in fact, lives in the world, even if she is not of the world (cf. Jn 17:16). She is sent to continue the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which "by its very nature concerns the salvation of humanity, and also involves the renewal of the whole temporal order". Certainly all the members of the Church are sharers in this secular dimension but in different ways. In particular the sharing of the lay faithful has its own manner of realization and function, which, according to the Council, is "properly and particularly" theirs. Such a manner is designated with the expression "secular character." (CL 15).

The distinction between the two kingdoms is essential for a proper understanding of the unique nature of the ordained priesthood and the ministry of priests. Priests, by

virtue of their ordination, are a living witness to the sacramental realm and the reality of the Incarnation. In addition, priests and religious give witness to the eschatological character of the Church, as John Paul II also discussed:

In turn, the ministerial priesthood represents in different times and places, the permanent guarantee of the sacramental presence of Christ, the Redeemer. The religious state bears witness to the eschatological character of the Church, that is, the straining towards the Kingdom of God that is prefigured and in some way anticipated and experienced even now through the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. (CL 55).

So while the ministerial priesthood is focused upon the sacraments and, together with the religious, shows forth the eschatological, or supernatural, character of the Church, the laity are to be focused on the temporal order in keeping with their "secular character."

But doesn't this threaten the laity's status in the Church? How can the laity be important to the Church if their work is supposed to be mostly *outside* of it?

The context of the Church

It seems that not a few Catholics view the Church--as they know it in the form of their local parish--as a sort of companion piece to the schools, the clubs, and the various institutions they involve themselves in. For example, a priest who was asked to fill in at a mission parish (where the only Mass was on Saturday) during the Fourth of July weekend, tells of this experience: as he prepared for Mass a lady approached him and kindly informed him to not expect much of a crowd. "Why?" he asked. "Well, there's a special Fourth of July baseball tournament and fireworks display and many of the parishioners will be there" she replied. "But this is the only Mass around here this week!" he exclaimed, "How can they miss it? Where are their values?" She did not know what to say, but admitted that she "hadn't thought of it like that"!

This compartmentalized view of the Church, which often relegates one's duties as a Catholic to the same sphere as sporting events and social activities, is hardly uncommon. The local parish (and by extension the universal Church) is seen as a "community"--but in what sense? The Church *is* a community, but what *kind* of community and for what purpose does it exist? The Second Vatican Council answers these questions in many places, including in *Gaudium et Spes*, which states:

While helping the world and receiving many benefits from it, the Church has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass. For every benefit which the People of God during its earthly

pilgrimage can offer to the human family stems from the fact that the Church is "the universal sacrament of salvation", simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God's love for man. (GS 45).

Seeing the Church as "the universal sacrament of salvation" (a reference to *Lumen Gentium* 48) and those in the Church as participants in the salvation of the world should cause us to consider the implications. Does this mean that being the "People of God" might not be quite as comfortable as we would like? Could it be that attending Mass once a week might not be enough? John Paul II noted that this fact about the Church carries great responsibilities, for "all the members of the People of God--clergy, men and women religious, the lay faithful--are laborers in the vineyard. At one and the same time they all are the goal and subjects of Church communion as well as of participation in the mission of salvation. Every one of us possessing charisms and ministries, diverse yet complementary, works in the one and the same vineyard of the Lord" (CL 55).

It is understandable that people lose sight of the bigger picture in the midst of their daily lives. It is easy for us to set aside this evangelistic mission of the Catholic Church because we have a difficult time relating it to our particular parish. But the late Pontiff stated that for "an adequate participation in ecclesial life the lay faithful absolutely need to have a clear and precise vision of the particular Church with its primordial bond to the universal Church" (CL 25). The parish is not some fragment of the universal Church, nor is the universal Church the sum of all the parishes added together.

Rather, the Church--at both the parish and universal level--is a communion with Christ and each member of the Body whose totality can never be seen in the sum of its parts. And it is this mystery which must be encountered and entered into in order for the role of the laity can be further clarified: "Only from inside the Church's mystery of communion is the 'identity' of the lay faithful made known, and their fundamental dignity revealed. Only within the context of this dignity can their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world be defined" (CL 8). This mystery of the Church is rich and dynamic, demanding full and active participation. As [*Apostolicam Actuositatem*](#), the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, explains, "the organic union in this body and the structure of the members are so compact that the member who fails to make his proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the Church nor to himself" (AA 2).

The meaning of ministry

What of the term "ministry"? We have already seen that the 1987 Synod of Bishops was concerned with the sloppy and ambiguous manner the term was (and is) being

used, often due to a specific agenda (CL 23). It is apparent the bishops recognized that there exists a lacking comprehension of the eschatological principle and the difference between the priesthood common to all believers--realized in the sacrament of baptism--and the ministerial priesthood found only in ordained men and rooted in the sacrament of holy orders. Whether due to lack of knowledge or an overt agenda, this blurring of lines leads to disorder since a false structure of authority based in a sloppy understanding of "ministry" can develop and even result in opposition to the legitimate authority found in the hierarchical structure of the Church. Some of those involved in opposition incorrectly see everything within the context of "power," again demonstrating their skewed understanding of the Church and her authority. This "structure of parallel service" usually shows itself in abuses centered on the Mass, with lay people acting the part of the priest in a variety of ways, often with the permission or encouragement of the priest!

Most lay people who do such things have little understanding or interest in the Church's "single intention" of salvation for all of humanity (GS 45). They see, in their local parish, a certain number of actual or potential positions (including that of the priest) and believe they have as much of a right to such positions as any other person. Because they do not appreciate the difference between the sacramental and secular realms they miss how those in the ordained priesthood and those in the common priesthood compliment one another in their respective states and should be working together towards the common goal. This complementarity is not a side effect, but is an imperative for the Church:

In Church Communion the states of life by being ordered one to the other are thus bound together among themselves. They all share in a deeply basic meaning: that of being the manner of living out the commonly shared Christian dignity and the universal call to holiness in the perfection of love. They are different yet complementary, in the sense that each of them has a basic and unmistakable character which sets each apart, while at the same time each of them is seen in relation to the other and placed at each other's service. (CL 55).

In his critique of the situation, John Paul took both the laity and clergy to task, demanding care, attention and wariness in the difficult but necessary task of rightly defining ministry and how any particular ministry should be exercised:

Precisely to overcome these dangers the Synod Fathers have insisted on the necessity to express with greater clarity, and with a more precise terminology, both the unity of the Church's mission in which all the baptized participate, and the substantial diversity of the ministry of Pastors which is rooted in the Sacrament of Orders, all the while respecting the other ministries, offices and roles in the Church, which are rooted in the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. In the first place, then, it is necessary that

in acknowledging and in conferring various ministries, offices and roles on the lay faithful, the Pastors exercise the maximum care to institute them on the basis of Baptism in which these tasks are rooted. It is also necessary that Pastors guard against a facile yet abusive recourse to a presumed "situation of emergency" or to "supply by necessity", where objectively this does not exist or where alternative possibilities could exist through better pastoral planning. (CL 23).

The vocation crisis isn't just for priests!

We often hear about the "vocation crisis" and how it could potentially be solved in a number of ways: ordaining women, allowing priests in the Roman rite to marry, or allowing lay people do even more, such as actually presiding over Mass. Although there is a real crisis in regards to the number of priests, there is an equally grave--and related--crisis in area of lay vocations. The very fact that many Catholics do not know they have a vocation (or if they do know, they have no idea how to find out what it is) is proof of the problem.

A teaching and emphasis of the Second Vatican Council often ignored or pushed to the side is the call--the vocation--to holiness. A continual emphasis on holiness as the essential basis for the Christian life permeates the writings of the Council and is summed up well by the Holy Father:

We come to a full sense of the dignity of the lay faithful if we consider the prime and fundamental vocation that the Father assigns to each of them in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit: the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity. Holiness is the greatest testimony of the dignity conferred on a disciple of Christ. The Second Vatican Council has significantly spoken on the universal call to holiness. It is possible to say that this call to holiness is precisely the basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the gospel. (CL 16)

This vocation to holiness orients the laity towards their proper role: working in the temporal order for the kingdom of God. It is their duty to engage in a sort of sacred subversion by which they, grounded in holiness and filled with the Holy Spirit, change the world from the inside, permeating it with truth and light, just as *Lumen Gentium* indicates:

But by reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. . . . It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer. (LG 31)

Again, this engagement of the laity with the temporal order is not an option, but an appointment given by God, who desires all men to come to salvation. It is also the way in which the laity fully realize their true place and role in the Church. By bringing the Church to the world, the laity brings the world into contact with the Church, the Body of Christ:

The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church. Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself. Moreover, by the sacraments, and especially by the Eucharist, that love of God and man which is the soul of the apostolate is communicated and nourished. The laity, however, are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth. Thus, every lay person, through those gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church itself "according to the measure of Christ's bestowal." (LG 33)

In light of this, one does not have to look far to see that matters are often not as they should be. Almost inevitably, the person who states "I want to do something for the Church" will look to do something *in* the local parish--not *out* in the daily grind of work, home and family. Certainly there is nothing wrong with being involved in the life of the parish. But the common assumption is that by being involved in various parish activities a lay person has done their duty and has, perhaps, even gone beyond the call of duty. But have they? Have the laity endeavored to do what John Paul II exhorted them to do?

It is no exaggeration to say that the entire existence of the lay faithful has as its purpose to lead a person to a knowledge of the radical newness of the Christian life that comes from Baptism, the sacrament of faith, so that this knowledge can help that person live the responsibilities which arise from that vocation received from God. In arriving at a basic description of the lay faithful we now more explicitly and directly consider among others the following three fundamental aspects: Baptism regenerates us in the life of the Son of God; unites us to Christ and to his Body, the Church; and anoints us in the Holy Spirit, making us spiritual temples. (CL 10)

The laity also need to recognize that ignoring the call to holiness and the specific, personal vocation which comes from it contributes to the crisis in vocations to the priesthood. Growth in holiness means aligning and ordering one's whole being to the divine life given to us at baptism. Without such an ordering of the heart, soul and mind, one cannot begin to discern the will of God or be open to his call, including the call to the priesthood or the religious life. Holiness leads to wholeness, and true vocations are based in the wholeness of recognizing *who* we are and *whose* we are: "Above all, each member of the lay faithful should always be fully aware of being a 'member of the Church' yet entrusted with a unique task which cannot be done by

another and which is to be fulfilled for the good of all. . . . Such an individual form of apostolate can contribute greatly to a more extensive spreading of the Gospel, indeed it can reach as many places as there are daily lives of individual members of the lay faithful" (CL 28).

Call, Renewal, Evangelization

Building upon what has been examined so far, the role of the laity can be summarized in a three-part statement: *The laity are called to the vocation of holiness for the purpose of renewing the temporal order by means of evangelization.*

Called to the vocation of holiness

The Second Vatican Council consistently emphasized holiness, as noted above. At the heart of the Church's encounters with modernity, with other religions, and with her own identity is the reality of holiness--and the call of *everyone* in the Church to the vocation of holiness: "Therefore all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the apostle's saying: 'for this is the will of God, your sanctification'" (LG 39). It is in holiness that the members of the Church become who they are called to be, and it is in holiness that all are equals:

Everyone in the Church, precisely because they are members, receive and thereby share in the common vocation to holiness. In the fullness of this title and on equal par with all other members of the Church, the lay faithful are called to holiness: "All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity"(43). "All of Christ's followers are invited and bound to pursue holiness and the perfect fulfillment of their own state of life." (CL 16) Holiness is the building block fashioned in the waters of baptism and meant for the good of the Body of Christ. The Church, in baptism, works as the "sacrament of salvation" and makes the sinner holy; the newly born child of God is called by that same baptism to build up the Church. This gift and response is at the heart of true community, rooted as it is in the divine life given to us by Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. And the laity, as part of this community of saints, are called to build the Kingdom of God in time and space:

The vocation to holiness must be recognized and lived by the lay faithful, first of all as an undeniable and demanding obligation and as a shining example of the infinite love of the Father that has regenerated them in his own life of holiness. Such a vocation, then, ought to be called an essential and inseparable element of the new life of Baptism, and therefore an element which determines their dignity. At the same time

the vocation to holiness is intimately connected to mission and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful in the Church and in the world. In fact, that same holiness which is derived simply from their participation in the Church's holiness, represents their first and fundamental contribution to the building of the Church herself, who is the "Communion of Saints". The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring laborers who work in the Lord's vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God's grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history. (CL 17).

For the renewal of the temporal order

For some Catholics the Second Vatican Council was an updating of the Church that supposedly resulted in changes to the Church's goals and focus. This is a drastic misreading. The Council was a renewal meant to aid Catholics in reappropriating and rediscovering the Church's goals and focus in a world that had changed dramatically in a short amount of time. The mission of the Church never changes, but our understanding of *how* to best live it in a specific culture does develop and change. That mission, according to *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, is to proclaim Christ and to fill the temporal order with the light and salt of the Gospel; the laity have an essential role in this task:

Christ's redemptive work, while essentially concerned with the salvation of men, includes also the renewal of the whole temporal order. Hence the mission of the Church is not only to bring the message and grace of Christ to men but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel. In fulfilling this mission of the Church, the Christian laity exercise their apostolate both in the Church and in the world, in both the spiritual and the temporal orders. These orders, although distinct, are so connected in the singular plan of God that He Himself intends to raise up the whole world again in Christ and to make it a new creation, initially on earth and completely on the last day. In both orders the layman, being simultaneously a believer and a citizen, should be continuously led by the same Christian conscience. (AA 5)

We cannot overstate the importance and centrality of the laity in this most pressing mission. According to *Lumen Gentium*, it is the laity's "special vocation . . . to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. . . . There they are called by God that, being led by the spirit to the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by

fulfilling their own particular duties. . . . It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer" (LG 31).

The Council Fathers taught that "the laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation," being led by the "light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church and motivated by Christian charity." This involves a permeation of culture, of society and of all aspects of the kingdom of man with the "higher principles of the Christian life" (AA 7). John Paul II wrote that "in particular the lay faithful are called to restore to creation all its original value" (CL 14). This task is not the priority of priests or religious; in fact, they are not qualified for, or capable of, such activity! Only the laity, because of their skills in the marketplace, in the institutions of society and in the everyday activities of men, can properly perform this crucial activity: "The apostolate in the social milieu, that is, the effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which one lives, is so much the duty and responsibility of the laity that it can never be performed properly by others" (AA 13). In other words, the laity need to realize they have important work to do, and the time to start that work is now!

By means of evangelization

Many Catholics readily admit their reticence in sharing their faith and being a witness to non-Catholics--or even to their own Catholic family and friends. But John Paul II stressed repeatedly the need to evangelize, writing that the "The entire mission of the Church, then, is concentrated and manifested in evangelization" and "The lay faithful, precisely because they are members of the Church, have the vocation and mission of proclaiming the Gospel: they are prepared for this work by the sacraments of Christian initiation and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit" (CL 33).

The Holy Father's consistent call to evangelization did not come out of a vacuum--it is a reiteration of the Council's repeated call for the same. *Lumen Gentium* states that the laity "have the exalted duty of working for the ever greater spread of the divine plan of salvation to all men, of every epoch and all over the earth. Therefore may the way be clear for them to share diligently in the salvific work of the Church according to their ability and the needs of the times" (LG 33). Baptized into Christ, we are filled with his life and are called to be little Christs--"anointed ones"--who, being fed by the Eucharist, go into the world and make the Church visible. This is very challenging and forces us to leave our comfort zones, as the Council Fathers indicate:

However an apostolate of this kind does not consist only in the witness of one's way of life; a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith, or to the faithful with a view to instructing, strengthening, and encouraging them to a more fervent life. "For the charity of Christ impels us" (2 Cor. 5 :14). The words of the Apostle should echo in all hearts, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). (AA 6).

This work of evangelization requires formation and training, time and effort: "[T]he laity must be specially formed to engage in conversation with others, believers, or non-believers, in order to manifest Christ's message to all men" (AA 31). It takes many forms, from the silent witness of one's actions to the use of modern media to the ordinary conversations of daily living. Whatever the means, lay people are to "announce Christ, explain and spread His teaching in accordance with one's status and ability, and faithfully profess it" (AA 16).

The lived faith brings life to the world

We can see, in looking at the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the writings of the present Pope (especially *Christifideles Laici*) that the laity possess a specific and unique vocation that they must pursue and fulfill in order for the Church to grow and to permeate the world. This vocation is rooted in the holiness infused into us at baptism and nourished in the Eucharist; it shows us that we are members of the Body of Christ, the Church, and that we belong to the Head of the Body, Jesus Christ. And so while the laity are often called to help the ordained in various ways within the Church, the central focus of the laity must be the temporal world, the culture and society they live in, of which they are an integral part. *If the laity are not changing the kingdom of man, they are failing the kingdom of God*: "Therefore, I have maintained that a faith that does not affect a person's culture is a faith not fully embraced, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived" (CL 59).

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