

SALT, LIGHT, AND LEAVEN

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A surprising statement appears in the beginning of Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation on *The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*. He says there is a strong temptation for the laity to watch out for, "the temptation of being so strongly interested in church services and tasks that some fail to become actively involved in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural, and political world." He returns several times to the vocation of the laity, "to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God;" "to be salt, light, and leaven;" "their own field of evangelizing activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society, and economics as well as the world of culture, of the sciences and arts, of international life, of the mass media."

These reminders of the lay vocation should give plenty of material for discussion in fraternity meetings. To what are the Secular Franciscans called in their town, state, nation? Fraternities can become communities of discernment where the members come to grips with the need for salt and light and leaven around them. They can help each other discern what each other's gifts are for such evangelizing. They can animate and support each other for action.

Secular Franciscans are deeply involved in binding up the wounds of people in society; manning soup kitchens, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and prisoners, caring for AIDS patients. This is one half of social action. The other half is more difficult. It is to help change the situations that cause the woundedness in society. We have an example in the life of St. Anthony of Padua. It was common in his day that debtors were put in prison. Visiting the prisoner and helping the man's family to eat and be clothed are acts of social service. But Anthony went further and persuaded authorities to abolish the law that imprisoned debtors. That is action for social change. And more of that is needed in our society. We need a more equitable tax system; we need a comprehensive health system; we need greater protection for the right to work, to home, to family, to culture, and especially to life. And we need the kinds of legislators who will promote changes that are needed.

Followers of St. Francis are blessed in many ways for this task. They have the inspiration and guidance of the spirit of St. Francis. They have a fraternity structure where they can pray and study and strategize together. Together they can look critically at their nation and their world in the light of the Gospel and papal teachings. They can become communities of conscience and of conscientious action. Pope John Paul says, "The Lord renews his invitation to all the lay faithful to come closer to him every day, and with the recognition that what is his is also their own (Phil 2:5), they ought to associate themselves with him in his saving mission."