

THE LAY MEMBERS OF CHRIST'S FAITHFUL PEOPLE
Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness John Paul II
December 30, 1988

The Lay Faithful and Their Secular Character

15. The newness of the Christian life is the foundation and title for equality among all the baptized in Christ, for all members of the People of God: "As members, they share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ, they have the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection. They possess in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity." (*Lumen Gentium*, 32) Because of the one dignity flowing from Baptism, each member of the lay faithful, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility for the Church's mission.

But among the lay faithful this one baptismal dignity takes on a *manner of life which sets a person apart, without, however, bringing a separation* from the ministerial priesthood or from men and women religious. The Second Vatican Council has described this manner of life as the "secular character": "The secular character is properly and particularly that of the lay faithful." (Ibid., 31)

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 in 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." (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 5)

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 manner is designated with the expression "secular character."

In fact the Council, in describing the lay faithful's situation in the secular world, points to it above all, as the place in which they receive their call from God:

“There they are called by God.” (*Lumen Gentium*, 32) This “place” is treated and presented in dynamic terms: the lay faithful “live in the world, that is in every one of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very fabric of their existence is woven.” (Ibid.) They are persons who live an ordinary life in the world: they study, they work, they form relationships as friends, professionals, members of society, cultures, etc. However, the Council considers their condition not simply an external and environmental framework, but as a reality *destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of meaning*. Indeed it leads to the affirmation that “the Word made flesh willed to share in human fellowship....He sanctified those human ties, especially family ones, from which social relationships arise, willingly submitting himself to the laws of his country. He chose to lead a life of an ordinary craftsman of his own time and place.” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 32)

The “world” thus becomes the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation because the world itself is destined to glorify God the Father in Christ. The Council is able then to indicate the proper and special sense of the divine vocation which is directed to the lay faithful. They are not called to abandon the position that they have in the world. Baptism does not take them from the world at all, as the Apostle Paul points out: “So brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God” (1 Cor 7:24). On the contrary, he entrusts a vocation to them that properly concerns their situation in the world. The lay faithful, in fact, “are called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the Gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like a leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially in this way of life, resplendent in faith, hope and charity they manifest Christ to others.” (*Lumen Gentium*, 31) Thus for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well. In fact, in their situation in the world, God manifests his plan and communicates to them their particular vocation of “seeking the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.” (Ibid.)

Precisely with this in mind the Synod Fathers said: “The secular character of the lay faithful is not therefore to be defined only in a sociological sense, but most especially in a theological sense. The term *secular* must be understood in light of the act of God the creator and redeemer, who has handed over the world to women and men, so that they may participate in the work of creation, free from the influence of sin and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in a family, in a profession, and in the various activities of society.” (*Propositio 4*)

The lay faithful’s *position in the Church*, then, comes to be fundamentally defined by their *newness in Christian life* and distinguished by their *secular character*.

The images of salt, light and leaven taken from the Gospel, although indiscriminately applicable to all Jesus’ disciples, are specifically applied to the lay

faithful. They are particularly meaningful images because they speak not only of the deep involvement and the full participation of the lay faithful in the affairs of the earth, the world and the human community, but also and above all, they tell of the radical newness and unique character of an involvement and participation which has as its purpose the spreading of the Gospel the brings salvation.

The Life of Holiness in the World

17. The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their *involvement in temporal affairs* and in their *participation in earthly activities*. Once again the Apostle admonishes us: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (! Col 3:17). Applying the Apostle’s words to the lay faithful, the Council categorically affirms: “Neither family concerns nor other secular affairs should be excluded from their religious program of life.”⁴⁵ Likewise the Synod Fathers have said: “The unity of life of the lay faithful is of the greatest importance: indeed they must be sanctified in everyday professional and social life. Therefore, to respond to their vocation, the lay faithful must see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ.”⁴⁶

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 which is derived simply from their participation in the Church’s holiness, represents their first and foremost contribution to the building of the Church herself, who is the “Communion of the Saints.” The eyes of the faithful 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.

Holiness, then, must be a fundamental presupposition and an irreplaceable condition for everyone in fulfilling the mission of salvation within the Church. The Church’s holiness is the hidden source and the infallible measure of the works of the apostolate and the missionary effort. Only in the measure that the Church, Christ’s Spouse, is loved by him and she, in turn, loves him, does she become a mother fruitful in the Spirit.

Again we take up the image from the Gospel, the fruitfulness and the growth of the branches depends on their remaining united to the vine. “As the branch cannot

bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:4-5).....

At the end of these reflections intended to define the lay faithful’s position in the Church, the celebrated admonition of St. Leo the Great comes to mind: “Acknowledge, O Christian, your dignity!”⁴⁸ St. Maximus, Bishop of Turin, in addressing those who had received the holy anointing of Baptism, repeats the same sentiments: “Ponder the honor that has made you sharers in this mystery!”⁴⁹ All the baptized are invited to hear once again the words of St. Augustine: “Let us rejoice and give thanks; we have not only become Christians, but Christ himself....Stand in awe and rejoice, we have become Christ.”⁵⁰

The dignity of a Christian, the source of equality for all members of the Church, guarantees and fosters the spirit of *communion* and fellowship, and, at the same time, becomes the hidden dynamic force in the lay faithful’s apostolate and mission. It is a *dignity*, however, *which brings demands*, the dignity of laborers called by the Lord to work in his vineyard: “Upon all the lay faithful, then, rests the exalted duty of working to assure that each and every day the divine plan of salvation is further extended to every person, of every era, in every part of the earth.”⁵¹

Sharers in the Priestly, Prophetic and Kingly Mission of Jesus Christ

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, at the beginning of my pastoral ministry, my aim was to emphasize forcefully the priestly, prophetic and kingly dignity of the entire people of God in the following words: “He who was born of the Virgin Mary, the carpenter’s Son - as he was thought to be - Son of the living God (confessed by Peter), has come to make us ‘a kingdom of priest.’ The Second Vatican Council has reminded us of the mystery of this power and of the fact that the mission of Christ - Priest, Prophet-Teacher, King - continues in the Church. Everyone, the whole people of God, shares in this threefold mission.”²¹

With this Exhortation the lay faithful are invited to take up again and reread, meditate on and assimilate with renewed understanding and love, the rich and fruitful teaching of the Council which speaks of their participation in the threefold mission of Christ.²² Here in summary form are the essential elements of this teaching.

The lay faithful are sharers in the *priestly mission* for which Jesus offered himself on the cross and continues to be offered in the celebration of the Eucharist for the glory of God and the salvation of humanity. Incorporated in Jesus Christ, the baptized are united to him, and to his sacrifice in the offering they make of themselves and their daily activities. (cf. Rom 12:1.2). Speaking of the lay faithful the Council says: “For their work, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily labor, their mental and physical relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life if patiently borne - all of these become spiritual

sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Pt 2:5). During the celebration of the Eucharist these sacrifices are most lovingly offered to the Father along with the Lord's body. Thus as worshipers whose every deed is holy, the lay faithful consecrate the world itself to God."²³

Through their participation in the *prophetic mission* of Christ, "who proclaimed the kingdom of the Father by the testimony of his life and by the power of his word,"²⁴ the lay faithful are given the ability and responsibility to accept the Gospel in faith and to proclaim it in word and deed, without hesitating to courageously identify and denounce evil. United to Christ, the "great prophet" (Lk 7:16), and in the Spirit made "witnesses" of the Risen Christ, the lay faithful are made sharers in the appreciation of the Church's supernatural faith, that "cannot err in matters of belief"²⁵ and sharers as well in the grace of the word (cf. Acts 2:17-18; Rev 19:10)/ They are also called to allow the newness and the power of the Gospel to shine out everyday in their family and social life, as well as to express patiently and courageously in the contradictions of the present age their hope of future glory even "through the framework of their secular life."²⁶

Because the lay faithful belong to Christ, the Lord and King of the Universe, they share in his *kingly mission* and are called by him to spread that Kingdom in history. They exercise their kingship as Christians, above all in the spiritual combat in which they seek to overcome in themselves the kingdom of sin (cf. Rom 6:12), and then to make a gift of themselves so as to serve, in justice and charity, Jesus who is himself present in all his brothers and sisters, above all in the very least (cf. Mt 25:40).

But in particular the lay faithful are called to restore to creation all its original value. In ordering creation to the authentic well-being of humanity in an activity governed by the life of grace, they share in the exercise of the power with which the Risen Christ draws all things to himself and subjects them along with himself to the Father, so that God might be everything to everyone (cf. 1 Cor 15:28; Jn 12:32).

The participation of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King finds its source in the anointing of Baptism, its further development in Confirmation and its realization and dynamic sustenance in the Eucharist. It is participation given to each member of the lay faithful *individually*, inasmuch as each is one of the *many* who form the *one Body* of the Lord: in fact, Jesus showers his gifts upon the Church which is his Body and his Spouse. In such a way individuals are shares in the threefold mission of Christ in virtue of their being members of the : Church, as St. Peter clearly teaches when he defines the baptized as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pt 2:9). Precisely because it derives *from Church communion*, the sharing of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ requires that it be lived and realized *in communion* and *for the increase of the communion itself*. St. Augustine writes: "As we call everyone 'Christians' in virtue of

a mystical anointing, so we call everyone ‘priests’ because all are members of only one priesthood.”²⁷

Footnotes

21. John Paul II, Homily at the Beginning of his Pastoral Ministry as Supreme Shepherd of the Church (October 22, 1978): AAS 70 (1978), 946
22. Cf. the 1987 Synod’s *Instrumentum Laboris*, 25.
23. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 34.
24. Ibid., 35.
25. Ibid., 12.
26. Ibid., 35.
27. St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XX, 10: CCL 48, 720.
28. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 32.
29. Ibid., 31.
30. Paul VI, Talk to Members of the Secular Institutes (February 2, 1972), 208,
31. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People *Apostolicum Actuositatem*, 5.
32. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 31.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Cf. *ibid.*, 48.
36. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 32.
37. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 31.
38. Ibid.
39. *Propositio* 4.
40. “Full members of the People of God and the Mystical Body, they participate, through Baptism, in the threefold priestly, prophetic and kingly mission of Christ; the lay faithful express and exercise the riches of their dignity through their *living in the world*. What can be an additional or exceptional task for those who belong to the ordained ministry is the *typical mission* of the lay faithful. *Their proper vocation* consists ‘in seeking the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 31)” (John Paul II, *Angelus* Talk, [March 15, 1987]: *Insegnamenti*, X, 1 [1987], 561).
41. See, in particular, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 5, 39-42, which treats the subject of the “universal call to holiness in the Church.”

42. The Second Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (1985), *Ecclesia sub Verbo Dei Mystera Christi Celebrans pro Salute Mundi. Relatio Finalis*, II, A, 4.
42. The Second Extraordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops (1985)