

Thy Kingdom come!

CENTRAL COMMISSION FOR THE REVISION OF THE STATUTES OF REGNUM CHRISTI

THEME FOR STUDY AND REFLECTION No. 1

The Identity and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World

I. The Ecclesial Identity of the Laity

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OBJECTIVE

Pope Francis tells us that “there has been a growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church”; but that “a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 102). In fact, in our day there are quite a few believers who still have a reductionist view of the role of the laity, believing it is limited to receiving the sacraments, listening to homilies, obediently following the teachings of the Church and helping the priests in the parish and with activities. Many are not acquainted with the theological depth of the lay vocation. The Second Vatican Council delved into the riches of the lay vocation, opening up a wonderful spiritual and apostolic panorama which the succeeding Popes have continued to broaden.

Here we want to explore what a *lay person* is, what his vocation and charism is, what his role within the Church is, all in order to be enthusiastic “living stones” of the Church, and to live in accordance with our identity and our vocation.

BASIC LAYOUT

- A. The lay person has a place in the mystery of the Church: the vocation of the lay person is rooted in baptism and finds its sense in the mystery of the Church as “communion”.
- B. Who is the lay person and what are his defining characteristics? the lay person differs from the other members of the Church; he has a specific talent or charism which enables him to enrich others in a specific way.
- C. The lay vocation springs forth from the mystery of Christ and expresses it in a specific way: the lay person participates in Christ’s priestly, prophetic and kingly nature in a particular way.
- D. The mutual ordering between the common and ministerial priesthood: The common and the ministerial priesthood are intimately ordered to each other since they are two forms of participating in the one priesthood of Christ.
- E. The complementarity of the lay state and consecrated life:

Knowing more about the complementarity between the lay and consecrated state of life will help us to live out the various types of dealings between ourselves and consecrated from a profound spirit of ecclesiology of communion.

F. Rights and Obligations of the Laity:

The specific rights and duties of the laity, also in their dealings with priests, religious and consecrated, are laid out in Canon Law. Being acquainted with these rights and obligations will be helpful for the task of setting up suitable structures for the future.

KEY CONCEPTS

Divine filiation

The lay state

Common priesthood

Union of the laity with Christ

Complementarity of vocations

A. The lay person has a place in the mystery of the Church

The Church is the great family of the children of God¹. Christians are adopted children, for in baptism we received from Christ – who is Son in his divine nature – the divine life of grace. We are therefore *sons in the Son*, through his redemption inserted into him like branches into the vine. The life of grace flows through him to us all. Christ is the Head and we are the members of the one Body, living in deep communion with one another. In this way the Church is the mystical body of Christ, prolonging his presence in the world. Like a true family of God in Christ, in which we are all children of God and brothers, it bears witness to the world of the love of God and attracts all to him. The Church is the “sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race”². We can further say that the Church is a mystery in which “communion and mission are profoundly interconnected”³. Our communion with God and with our sisters and brothers in God is an invitation to all peoples to join in this same communion of divine filiation.

The various parts of a body die and do not serve their purpose if detached from the body; they find their fulfillment in being a part of the whole and at the service of all other parts. In the same way everyone who is baptized participates in the life and holiness of the Church, benefitting from as well as contributing to the “communion of the saints”⁴. The different states of life within the Church, the various ministries, the variety of charisms and talents which the members receive, in short, the various vocations within the Church, contribute to strengthening the communion and the mission of the Church as a whole. This is their ultimate meaning and purpose. Christ gives each vocation for the good of the Church and its mission. By *vocation* we mean the call of God to the

¹ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 25b: “The Church is God's family in the world.” Ibid, 19: The Father “wishes to make humanity a single family in his Son.”

² II VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 1.

³ POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 23, and POPE JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 32.

⁴ Cf. 1 *Corinthians* 12: 12-27 and *Christifideles laici*, 17. For more on the *communion of the saints*: cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 946-962.

individual, by which he invites him to complete the mission for which he has created him. This call therefore includes all of the elements of the plan of God, his plan of love for this person so that he might achieve his fulfillment.

“The vocations to the lay life, to the ordained ministry and to the consecrated life can be considered paradigmatic, inasmuch as all particular vocations, considered separately or as a whole, are in one way or another derived from them or lead back to them.”⁵ “The various vocations are like so many rays of the one light of Christ,”⁶ and are “at the service of one another, for the growth of the Body of Christ in history and for its mission in the world.”⁷

All the baptized are “living stones”⁸ in the Church, a spiritual building, the house of God on earth. We are all called to be Church, to build it up with the holiness of our lives and to contribute to the fulfillment of her mission⁹. At the same time, we are not all called to fulfill this responsibility in the same way, though, for God has given a variety of vocations so that communion is possible and authentic¹⁰. Each person has to listen to the voice of God to discover what his vocation is, that is, what God expects of him and what the best way is for him to contribute to the communion and mission of the Church.

In the body of the church, God calls the vast majority of its members to the lay state. Within the common vocation which all laity share he also calls each person to live it in a specific way. Without the laity the Church would not be the church that Christ established.

B. Who is the lay person and what are his defining characteristics?

1. Categories of the faithful

The word *laity* derives from the Middle English *laite*, which ultimately stems from the Greek *laikós* (λαϊκός), meaning *common* or *(one) of the people*. The related word *lay* stems from the Greek *laós* (λαός), meaning *people*. In the Church the word *laity* designates those believers who have not received the sacrament of orders and as a result are those who are not clerics (ordained ministers). From this point of view one can divide believers into clerics and the laity, depending on whether or not they have received the sacrament of orders.

There are however some lay people and some clerics, who without ceasing to be such, commit to living the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. In a way they live according to the way of life which Jesus himself followed while on earth. They will not be able to live the virtues with the same perfection but they seek to make Christ present through their way of life. These believers consecrate themselves to God in a special way, which sets them apart from

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, 31.

⁶ Idem, 16.

⁷ Idem, 31.

⁸ 1 *Peter* 2, 5.

⁹ II VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution *Lumen gentium*, Chapter V: The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church; as well as IDEM, Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 2: “In the Church there is a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission”.

¹⁰ Cf. 1 *Corinthians* 12: 4-28; *Christifideles laici*, 20, and POPE FRANCIS, Homily on the Solemnity of Pentecost (May 19, 2013): “the Holy Spirit would appear to create disorder in the Church, since he brings the diversity of charisms and gifts; yet all this, by his working, is a great source of wealth, for the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity, which does not mean uniformity, but which leads everything back to *harmony*. In the Church, it is the Holy Spirit who creates harmony [...].He is indeed harmony. Only the Spirit can awaken diversity, plurality and multiplicity, while at the same time building unity”.

those lay people and clerics who do not. The laity who do not consecrate themselves are in this sense simply *the laity*, and the clerics who do not consecrate themselves are known as the *secular clergy*. All believers are consecrated to God by reason of their baptism and confirmation, but not all the faithful receive this new and special consecration¹¹. The sacrament of Holy Orders also consecrates the person that receives it, making him a sacred minister, but this is not the “new and special” consecration being discussed here either. For this reason, in current usage within the Church, the term *consecrated* refers exclusively to those believers who have consecrated their lives to God in a new and special way. This usage does not deny that we are all consecrated to God by means of baptism and confirmation and that some of the faithful are also consecrated to him by means of Holy Orders. As part of their specific vocation these *consecrated* faithful have gifts as well as responsibilities which exceed those proper to the lay or clerical vocation as such. Not only do consecrated members of the Church welcome the Kingdom of God into their own lives, but they put their entire existence at the service of this cause, leaving behind everything in order to imitate closely the way of life which our Lord led¹². Some of these consecrated believers profess to live according to the three evangelical counsels by means of public vows within the heart of a religious institute, in which they live a common life and separate themselves in a particular way from the temporal affairs of the world. These are the so-called *religious*. One could consider them a sub-group of the more general grouping indicated by *consecrated*.

There also exist other types of consecrated believers who are not religious but rather *secular* consecrated. The adjective *secular* derives from the Latin word *saeculum*, which means (*present*) *age; generation; century*; the *secular* members of the Church are those who are occupied with the temporal affairs of the present age, fully involved in the temporal affairs of the world. In this sense secular consecrated are in fact consecrated since they take on all the elements proper to consecrated life, living according to the evangelical counsels, but they are secular because they remain at the same time fully immersed in the temporal affairs of the world¹³.

A technical question arises: Is a *lay* and a *secular* member of the Church the same thing? In common speech the two terms are used interchangeably, as synonyms to refer to all Christians who are neither clerics nor religious. Actually, though, if we want to be totally precise, a *lay* person is one who is not a cleric, and a *secular* person is one who is not a religious. This is why diocesan priests are technically referred to as *secular clerics*, they are clerics, but not religious.

In ordinary usage, the term *lay person* refers to any baptized Christian who is neither a cleric nor a religious, that is, who has neither received the sacrament of orders nor follows a religious Rule of life.¹⁴

¹¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, 30.

¹² Cf. IDEM, 14.

¹³ The fact that the members of secular institutes are considered consecrated does not take anything away from their being *secular*, involved in temporal affairs. It is true that they do not manifest their consecration in an external fashion. However, they assume the three evangelical counsels in a public manner within the Church, and dedicate themselves completely to temporal affairs without the complications family entailed by family ties. Another case of secular consecrated persons can be found within the new ecclesial movements, when their members assume the living of the evangelical counsels. In general the consecrated people in these movements practice common life while the members of the secular institutes generally do not live in community. However, the consecrated people in the movements do not change their canonical state of life upon assuming the evangelical counsels, whereas members of secular institutes in fact do enter into the consecrated state of life, according to Canon Law.

¹⁴ *Lumen gentium*, 31: “The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church”. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 934: “Among the Christian faithful by divine institution there exist in the Church sacred ministers,

2. *The characteristics proper to lay persons*

What is it then that characterizes a lay person? In the recent teaching documents of the Church the specific *charism* or *talent* through which lay people contribute to the building up of the Church is called the *secular character*¹⁵. This *secular nature* consists in “living in the midst of the world and its concerns” in a Christian manner¹⁶.

Can living in the midst of temporal affairs really be a charism given by the Holy Spirit? Is it not simply a sociological condition? The charism of the lay people—that grace which the Holy Spirit grants to lay people for the building up of the whole Church—consists in the call and the capacity which the Holy Spirit grants them so that they can be present in the world in a Christian manner and imbue temporal affairs with the spirit of the gospel. This secular *character* of lay persons is without doubt a special grace from God, because only a child of God can restore the realities of this world through sanctifying grace so that God can truly find his pleasure in them. It is a charism rooted in the gift of baptism, or better said, the capacities received in baptism develop in a certain way under its influence. With this charism the laity contribute greatly to the building up of the Church, which has the mission of spreading the Kingdom of Christ throughout the earth. Therefore the secular character of the lay people has to be understood as “not simply an external and environmental framework, but as a reality *destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of its meaning*”¹⁷.

Before we can understand what the *Christian identity of the lay person in the world* is, we must first grasp what is meant by the word “world” means in this context. When we speak of the *world* here, we are not here referring to the negative concept frequently found in the theology of Saint John, where the world is traditionally placed in the list of the enemies of the salvation of mankind: *the devil, the flesh and the world*. In this context, the concept of *world* expresses the sum total of all evil realities present in this life which are in opposition to the will of God (such as injustice, etc....). This usage of the term *world* would also cover even the neutral realities of this life, insofar as they often in fact serve to tempt us and pull us away from fulfilling God’s will (one example of this would be *money*, neutral in itself, but which in fact can be used as a symbol of avarice, etc...). The world in this sense is the kingdom of sin, God’s enemy, which resists him and attempts to prevent the salvation of women and men. When understood this way it is valid to say that Christians are in the world but not of the world (cf. *John* 17:16).

The biblical and Christian tradition also contains other meanings for the word *world*. There is for instance the concept of *world* understood as the *cosmos*, the whole created material universe, which as it leaves the hands of God is called *good*. The world in this sense reveals the goodness and beauty of God. Man receives the wonderful task of recognizing this, giving glory to God, and through his actions perfecting it. (cf. *Genesis* 1:28-31; *Wisdom* 11:25; *Romans* 1, 20). *World* in another context is used to refer to the vast expanse of this universe, the entire creation and all peoples who dwell in it, all of whom wait in longing for the revelation of the children of God (cf. *Mark* 16:15; *Mark* 4:26-27; *John* 3:16; *Romans* 8:19). Lay Christians are the ones who bring the gospel into all the distinct areas and circumstances of daily life. As the beautiful, ancient Letter

who are also called clerics in law, and other Christian faithful who are also called laity. In both groups there are those Christian faithful who, professing the evangelical counsels, are consecrated to God and so serve the Church’s saving mission (cf. CIC, can. 207 § 1, 2)”.
¹⁵ Cf. *Lumen gentium*, 31, and *Christifideles laici*, 15.

¹⁶ *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 2.

¹⁷ *Christifideles laici*, 15.

to Diognetus puts it, "they are to the world what the soul is to the body"¹⁸. This world can and should be pleasing to God and give him glory; it was for this everything was created.

Speaking of lay people, we referred to the Christian believer who is set apart from other baptized people through his specific *secular character*. However when we speak of this being set apart we have to remember that:

The ecclesiology of communion has taught us that what characterizes each state of life within the Church should not be considered as something exclusive but rather as something which is meaningful. Each Christian is made into a sign for the other Christians of that which he lives in a more intense way due to his particular charism. It serves as a reminder for all other baptized believers of that element which he lives in a more intense way than the others. It also reminds others of this aspect which they too have to live, though in a different fashion¹⁹.

The whole Church, in all its vocations and states of life, has a secular dimension here on this earth. Christ himself entered into solidarity with all of mankind in this world through his Incarnation, and he willed that the Church as well is *incarnate* in all of creation. Christ sends the Church to the ends of the world to make it present in every aspect of human existence²⁰. It is in fact the lay people who live and bear witness to this secular character in a more intense way, because their lives are so intimately intertwined with their social conditions. For the good of the whole Church and of the world itself they make Christ present wherever they are.

Let us return to a text from the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* which sheds a great deal of light in this regard:

Pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church does not only communicate divine life to men but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth, most of all by its healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which it strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of men with a deeper meaning and importance. Thus through her individual members and her whole community, the Church believes she can contribute greatly toward making the family of man and its history more human²¹.

The entire Church is responsible for making this contribution to the human family, but it is the lay people who occupy pride of place in this task, due to their *secular character* which obliges them with the irreplaceable means proper to them, in the Christian transformation of the temporal order²².

Just because God granted the lay vocation to the vast majority of Christians does not mean that it is less valuable nor less important than the others. To think in this way would be to despise the gifts of God, like throwing pearls to swine (cf. *Matthew* 7:6).

¹⁸ Chapters 5 and 6 of the *Letter to Diognetus* are highly recommendable. .

¹⁹ Antonio BOTANA, *Compartir la espiritualidad en la misión: clave para compartir la vida*, in «Revista Testimonio» 252 (2012), (pp. 30-39), 3rd point.

²⁰ Cf. *Christifideles laici*, 15: "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*[AA 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 a manner is designated with the expression "secular character" [LG 31]».

²¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 40.

²² *Ibid.*, 36.

All vocations are always personal, whether they are granted to an individual or to a group, since God always calls specific persons, and there are no *generic* vocations. Therefore the *lay vocation* is always a vocation given to an individual, who does not exist *generically*. There are as many lay vocations as there are lay people, in the concrete circumstances in which they find themselves. The vocation of the woman differs from that of the man, that of the married person from that of the single person, that of the father from that of the child, that of the sick person from that of the healthy. The journalist has a different role to play than the businessman, the rich person than the poor, the house maid than the politician, the worker than the teacher. The *secular character* of each lay person takes on concrete form in the particular relations with his temporal surroundings. Each lay person has to learn to read these circumstances under the light of faith so as to live his very personal vocation to the full.

C. The lay vocation springs forth from the mystery of Christ and expresses it in a specific way

Through his *secular character* the lay person is called to imitate Christ in the heart of the world and to make him present everywhere, in the concrete circumstances of his social life as well as in the midst of the difficulties that come with everyday living. The secular character is given by Christ himself, the incarnate Word, who was the first to live the newness of the gospel in the midst of temporal realities so as to make present the Kingdom of God and to renew the world from within the world itself, in accordance with the Father's plan. Jesus defines himself as "he whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world (*John* 10:36). He is the model for every lay person. "The *laity*, by virtue of the secular character of their vocation, reflect the mystery of the Incarnate Word particularly insofar as he is the Alpha and the Omega of the world, the foundation and measure of the value of all created things"²³. The lay person is in the world to bear witness to the incarnation of the Word, making the redemptive work of the Lord who regenerates all of creation present in the world²⁴.

The Christian lay person, incorporated into Christ through baptism as a living member of the Church, also partakes in the lot of the society of which he forms a part. He is fully identified with both Christ and with society. He is like *another Christ* in the world²⁵. The lay person participates in

²³ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, 16.

²⁴ Cf. II VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 43: ("Christians should rather rejoice that, following the example of Christ Who worked as an artisan, they are free to give proper exercise to all their earthly activities and to their humane, domestic, professional, social and technical enterprises by gathering them into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory. Secular duties and activities belong properly although not exclusively to lay people"); *Ibid.*, 45 ("For God's Word, by whom all things were made, was Himself made flesh so that as perfect man He might save all men and sum up all things in Himself. The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the center of the human race, the joy of every heart and the answer to all its yearnings. He it is Whom the Father raised from the dead, lifted on high and stationed at His right hand, making Him judge of the living and the dead. Enlivened and united in His Spirit, we journey toward the consummation of human history, one which fully accords with the counsel of God's love: *To reestablish all things in Christ, both those in the heavens and those on the earth* (Ephesians 11:10)), and *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 5.

²⁵ The reference to the Christian as being *another Christ* (*alter Christus*) can be found in the writings of Saint John Eudes (1601-1680) and more recently in the twentieth century, particularly in the writing and preaching of Blessed Columba Marmion (1858-1923). The idea itself, though, if not the concrete expression, can be traced back to the patristic era and has its roots in the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ found in the writings of St. Paul. Cf. *Christifideles laici*, 17, where expressions employed by Saint Leo the Great, Saint Maximus of Turin and Saint Augustine are included in the main text; Saint Augustine, for example, is quoted as saying, "Let us rejoice and give thanks: we have not only become Christians, but Christ himself... Stand in awe and rejoice: We have become Christ".

the threefold office through which Christ's mission finds its expression, and he is called to continue making this mission present in the concrete circumstances in which his life unfolds. "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 Holy Eucharist" and finds adequate expression in accordance with his secular character.²⁶

"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). "In profound adoration they act in holy fashion in all places, so consecrating the world itself to God"²⁷. They participate in the *prophetic* office of Christ, accepting the gospel into their lives and witnessing to it by word and deed in all circumstances with courage and patience. Their testimony "acquires a specific characteristic and singular efficacy for evangelization by the fact that it is given in the normal conditions of this world"²⁸. The lay people participate in the *royal* office of Christ in that they order all created goods towards the true good of man. This gives back to creation its original value once again through the regeneration worked by Christ beginning with the fundamental tasks of conquering sin in their own lives and sacrificing themselves by serving others in that charity through which God will be all in all (cf. *John* 12:32; *1 Corinthians* 15:28)²⁹.

The Second Vatican Council underlines the role which the laity play in the royal mission of Christ. By virtue of their secular character, the Holy Spirit capacitates them in a special way to establish his Kingdom on earth. "The Lord wishes to spread His kingdom also by means of the laity, namely, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace". In the fulfillment of this mission the laity have pride of place³⁰.

D. The mutual ordering between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood

Jesus Christ is the only priest of the New Covenant³¹. The whole Church, being the mystical body of that same Christ, participates in the priesthood of Christ, its head. By divine institution there exist in the Church two ways of participating in the one and only priesthood of Christ, and they differ essentially one from the other. For the Church to perform its priestly role, though, both forms are necessary, for they are reciprocally ordered to each other³².

The common priesthood is the participation in the priesthood of Christ and is common to all of Christians. Therefore, all the members of the Church (laity and clerics, secular and religious) are capacitated to make offerings pleasing to God through a holy life, and in this way they sanctify the world. The ministerial priesthood is a participation in the priesthood of Christ reserved for those who have received the sacrament of Orders in the grade of bishop or of priest. Only bishops receive it in its fullness, whereas priests do not. Through the ministerial priesthood, some members of the Church (bishops and priests) are identified with Christ, the head and pastor of the Church. They are invested with a specific grace which capacitates them to consecrate the Eucharist and to

²⁶ *Christifideles laici*, 14, and cf. *Lumen gentium*, 31.

²⁷ *Lumen gentium*, 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁹ Cf. *Christifideles laici*, 14, and *Lumen gentium*, 36.

³⁰ *Lumen gentium*, 36.

³¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1544-1545.

³² Cf. *Ibid.*, 1546-1547.

sanctify, teach, and guide the faithful in the communion of the Church. Deacons receive the sacrament of orders which makes them ordained ministers of the Church, but they do not receive the ministerial priesthood in relation to the Eucharist and the remission of sins. They receive the sacrament of Orders "to offer a service and not to exercise the priesthood", as the Catechism reminds us³³.

The common priesthood is ordered to the ministerial priesthood because it is precisely the holy life of the Christians which are associated with the merits of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. This all becomes one unique offering of the Church to the Father through Christ, with him and in him. In other words, the faithful need the priestly minister so that their good works might be united to Christ and presented to God the Father through him, by means of the sacrifice of the Eucharist. At the same time the ministerial priesthood is ordered to the common priesthood because it is at the service of the life of grace of all the faithful. This service or ministry is the very reason for being of the ministerial priesthood³⁴.

E. The complementarity of the lay state and consecrated life

The lay faithful "can never remain in isolation from the community, but must live in a continual interaction with others, with a lively sense of fellowship, rejoicing in an equal dignity and common commitment to bring to fruition the immense treasure that each has inherited"³⁵.

There has always been collaboration between lay people and consecrated people (religious and secular consecrated) in the history of the Church. In our times, though, this has grown noticeably, both in intensity and diffusion, and the concrete ways in which it takes form have multiplied tremendously³⁶. The growth in this style of collaboration can be seen a *sign of the times*. At this moment in time, "a new chapter, rich in hope, is beginning in the history of the relations between consecrated persons and the laity"³⁷. Consecrated faithful and lay people are joining forces in order to complete their common mission, sharing initiatives and getting involved in each other's initiatives³⁸.

The life of special consecration consists in committing oneself to live the evangelical counsels with the radicality of the gospel. The Lord himself calls some of the members of the Church, moved by the Holy Spirit, "to follow Christ more nearly, to give themselves to God who is loved above all and, pursuing the perfection of charity in the service of the Kingdom, to signify and proclaim in the Church the glory of the world to come"³⁹. This more intimate consecration has its roots in baptism, through which every Christian has already been consecrated to God. Moreover, like everything in the Church such a consecration tends to the perfection of charity, of holiness, to which all Christians are called. Even so it is good to remember that it is in fact a new consecration,

³³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 1548-1571 (the quotation is taken from 1569), and *Evangelii gaudium*, 104.

³⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 874-879 and 1547.

³⁵ *Christifideles laici*, 20.

³⁶ In the present age many new forms of evangelical life are emerging; *Vita consecrata*, 62: "...composed of mixed groups of men and women, of clerics and lay persons, of married couples and celibates, all of whom pursue a particular style of life [...]; their commitment to the evangelical life also takes on different forms, while, as a general rule, they are all characterized by an intense aspiration to community life, poverty and prayer. Both clerics and lay persons share in the duties of governing according to the responsibilities assigned to them, and the apostolate focuses on the demands of the new evangelization".

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 55-56.

³⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 916.

essentially different from the baptismal consecration. Although it has its roots in baptism it is not a necessary consequence of baptism, but rather involves a response to a personal call from God. “The state of consecrated life is neither clerical nor lay”⁴⁰; it is compatible with both the clerical state and the lay state, and “by its very existence in the Church, seeks to serve the consecration of the lives of all the faithful, clergy and laity alike”⁴¹.

The lay people bear witness to the reality that the Kingdom of God must be built up in this world, at the same time knowing full well that this Kingdom is directed to a fullness which will only be reached in eternity. The consecrated members of the Church announce that this Kingdom which even now is being constructed will have its definitive culmination only in eternity. In theological terms one would say that they announce through their very lives the *full eschatological realization* of the Kingdom. Those members of the Church who are both lay *and* consecrated are called to combine both of these aspects in their lives.

Lay people receive a great stimulus through the testimony of the consecrated members of the Church because consecrated life “appears as a sign which can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation”. Consecrated people have to show in a particular way “to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below” and that it is already possible to live the “new and eternal life acquired by the redemption of Christ”. We are already walking towards “the future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom”. They are to live the same way of life that Jesus led when he was in this world, and, through the testimony of their poverty, chastity and obedience, they bear witness to the fact that supernatural goods are superior in beauty and greatness to earthly ones. All Christians are called to bear witness to these supernatural goods, but living the evangelical councils in imitation of Jesus shows this forth in a special way. Consecrated life should be an eloquent testimony to “both the unsurpassed breadth of the strength of Christ the King and the infinite power of the Holy Spirit marvelously working in the Church”⁴².

On the other hand, the consecrated faithful receive very much from the lay people. These “offer Religious families the invaluable contribution of their *being in the world* and their specific service”⁴³. The testimony of lay people living in the world helps the consecrated people to overcome the temptation of a subjective sort of holiness, which isolates itself from others, and which can lead, especially in the case of religious, to a scandalous separation between faith and life⁴⁴.

F. Rights and Obligations of the Laity

The Code of Canon Law, which contains the universal legislation of the Church, seeks in general to guarantee the basic rights of all believers as well as to spell out their obligations. Those canons (laws) related to lay persons in the Church are intended to protect them as well as to create the conditions for them to flourish in the various relationships that arise among themselves and with the other members of the Church.

⁴⁰ *Code of Canon Law*, 588 §1.

⁴¹ *Vita consecrata*, 33.

⁴² *Lumen gentium*, 44.

⁴³ *Vita consecrata*, 55.

⁴⁴ On the danger of this separation, cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 43.

Like all the other members of the Church, with whom they share a true equality in dignity⁴⁵, lay persons have to maintain communion with the universal Church and with the particular church to which they belong, according to the prescripts of Canon Law⁴⁶ and to accept the teachings and prescriptions of the competent ecclesiastical authority⁴⁷. They must direct their efforts to lead a holy life⁴⁸, and they “have the duty and right to work so that the divine message of salvation more and more reaches all people in every age and in every land”⁴⁹. They also are obliged “to assist with the needs of the Church so that the Church has what is necessary for divine worship, for the works of the apostolate and of charity, and for the decent support of ministers” as well as to “promote social justice and, mindful of the precept of the Lord, to assist the poor”⁵⁰. They have the right to receive assistance from their pastors “out of the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the word of God and the sacraments”⁵¹. In addition they are “free to make known to the pastors of the Church their needs, especially spiritual ones, ... their desires” and their opinions “on matters which pertain to the good of the Church”⁵²; to direct associations of charity or piety or for the promotion of the Christian vocation in the world and to hold meetings for the common pursuit of these purposes⁵³, and to receive a Christian education and acquire knowledge of Christian doctrine appropriate to their capacity and condition⁵⁴.

Like all Christians they have the obligation and the right to work so that the divine message of salvation is made known and accepted by all persons everywhere in the world, both on an individual basis or joined together in associations. “This obligation is even more compelling in those circumstances in which only through them can people hear the gospel and know Christ”. As lay persons they have a particular duty “to imbue and perfect the order of temporal affairs with the spirit of the gospel and thus to give witness to Christ”⁵⁵.

Those who have received the vocation to marriage have a “special duty to work through marriage and the family to build up the people of God”, and as parents have the obligation and the right to “take care of the Christian education of their children according to the doctrine handed on by the Church”⁵⁶.

In normal temporal affairs, they have a right to exercise their freedom and good judgment but should “take care that their actions are imbued with the spirit of the gospel”, “to heed the doctrine set forth by the magisterium of the Church” and “in matters of opinion, ... to avoid setting forth their own opinion as the doctrine of the Church”⁵⁷.

“Lay men who possess the necessary age and qualifications ... can be admitted ... to the ministries of lector and acolyte”, and lay persons in general can fulfill certain other liturgical functions⁵⁸. Those lay persons who possess the necessary qualities and capacities can hold

⁴⁵ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, c. 208.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 209.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 212 §1.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 210.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 211.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 222.

⁵¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 213.

⁵² Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 212 §2 and §3.

⁵³ Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 216.

⁵⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, canons 217 and 229.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 225 §1 and §2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, c. 226.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 227.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, c. 230.

certain ecclesiastical offices and functions, assist the pastors of the Church as experts and advisors and receive a mandate to teach the sacred sciences⁵⁹.

Finally, Canon Law states of those who commit themselves in a special way to the service of the Church:

“Lay persons who permanently or temporarily devote themselves to special service of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation required to fulfill their function properly and to carry out this function conscientiously, eagerly, and diligently.

[...] lay persons have the right to decent remuneration appropriate to their condition so that they are able to provide decently for their own needs and those of their family. They also have a right for their social provision, social security, and health benefits to be duly provided⁶⁰.

These are rights and obligations contained in the universal legislation of the Church, which apply to every lay person within the Church. Those so-called *associative entities*--such as Institutes of Consecrated Life, associations of the faithful, as well as various movements and communities—have particular legislation (such as Statutes, regulations, etc.), in which the general rights and obligations of all Christians and laity found in Canon Law are applied to the specific identity and mission of each association.

ASSIMILATION QUESTIONS FOR TEAM REFLECTION

1. What have I learned through the study of these materials? (share with your fellow team members)
2. What is a lay person? What is characteristic of being a lay person?
3. Which aspect(s) of the mystery of Christ (that is, of his Person, his life and his mission) are better witnessed to by the lay vocation than the priestly or the religious vocation? What aspects of Jesus Christ does the lay person reflect in a more eloquent way?
4. Is being a lay person a Christian vocation or a sociological condition? In what sense can it be called a vocation?
5. How do you live out your lay vocation in the concrete circumstances of your life? (share with your fellow team members)
6. When have you experienced the presence of Christ in the world through the witness of a lay person?
7. What experience have you had of exercising your priestly, prophetic and royal function?
8. What does “living in the world” mean for us? How do we experience and conceive of our relationship with the world? How does it enrich us and how do we enrich it?

⁵⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, canons 228 and 229 §3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, c. 231 §1 and §2.

9. In the Church, the priestly, consecrated and lay vocations are each necessary because they each contribute something specific and necessary to the Church's mission of making Christ present in the world. If we were all priests or all consecrated or all laity, the Church would be incomplete. How is the existence of the laity a source of blessings for the Church? What do we contribute to it? Would something go missing in the Church if all its members received holy orders? What would be lacking?
10. Which benefits do we lay people receive from the priests? Of all these, which do we appreciate the most? What benefits do priests receive from us?
11. Which benefits do we lay people receive from consecrated members of the Church? Of all these, which do we appreciate the most? What benefits do the consecrated members of the Church receive from us?

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nn. 897-913

II VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, nn. 1-17 and 30-42

II VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, nn. 1-3, 11-12, 22, 24-25, 29-39, 41-45 and 47-52

JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, nn. 1-31 and 45-56

FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, nn. 46, 61-75, 87-92, 102-109 and 268-274

JOHN PAUL II, Collection of Catechesis on the Laity, Catechesis 1-10

Letter to Diognetes (2nd century A.D.)

P.R.C. A.G.D.