

# Laity in the Church Today

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## Introduction

The title of this presentation covers a vast area: “*Laity in the Church Today.*” And yet the diversity of your origins, your commitments, your situations and your local options make the task all the more difficult! I also had to choose from among the themes for our reflection. I had to keep the topic fairly broad hoping that your group work would allow you to share your experiences. Therefore I will propose some overviews that seem important for the vocation and mission of the laity in today’s world and Church development. I will develop my remarks around five points:

1. Laity in the Church-Communion
2. Laity impassioned for humankind: a call to proclaim the Gospel to the poor
3. Laity impassioned for God: a call to holiness
4. Working with the Church, collaborating with people of goodwill
5. The need for formation

Before starting our reflection, I would like to stress two points that seem important to bear in mind during our discussions:

The first is the interest Vincent showed for the place of the laity in the mission of the Church. We recall that the first of his foundations was that of the Charities. He brought the laity together in order to serve the poor. This theme will be taken up again later. The second point is the concern we should have, not only for the “authorized” Vincentian laity, but also for all laity throughout the world who, explicitly or not, lay claim to Vincent de Paul, and who may have no intent of becoming a constituted branch of the Vincentian Family. They too, alone or with others, serve the poor.

## 1. Laity in the Church-Communion

**1.1. What Church?** First, I invite you to reflect, for a moment, on the Church in which the baptized live out their vocation.

Since Vatican II, reflection on Church union has been widely developed. We find ourselves at the heart of the mystery of the Church: a Church coming from a Triune God, that is a God who is unity himself. A Church whose members must

live in union with this God who calls them and sends them, a communion with God where union among members ensues. Finally, as a result of what is at the deepest part of her being, this Church received the mission to strive towards union of all peoples among themselves and with God.

Three important images express and complete this mystery of Church union: the images of the Church as the People of God, the Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit.

**a. Church as the People of God:** The Church is a people that comes from God, lives through God and belongs to God. What is essential is being together as Christians above any distinction of function, services or ministries. Naturally, this does not exclude the necessity that the people of God, like everyone, has leaders taken from among its members. But we need to go a little further for there is a great risk that these people will close in on themselves and exclude those who are not part of the group. This is what we could call the “sectarian” risk. The Church is a people sent on mission with and by the Holy Spirit. A people open to all the world, inviting them to form together the one People of God. We know well the beautiful passage from *Lumen Gentium*, often quoted in the teaching of the Magisterium: “... the Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament — a sign and an instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all peoples” (*LG* 1).

**b. The Church as the Body of Christ:** These last few years perhaps, we have spoken of the Church more often as the “People of God,” undoubtedly to avoid having a pyramidal view of the Church. Yet, the image of “the people” does not completely describe the mystery of the Church. It must be articulated through other images, first through this essential image of the Church as the Body of Christ. This image expresses the profound unity of the Church with Christ and, at the same time, her dependence in his regard, he who is head of the body. This image also shows the unity and diversity of the Church. All are members of the Church but not all have the same function (cf. Saint Paul, 1 Cor 12:12-30). Within the Church there are diversity and complementarity of vocations and lifestyles, ministries, charisms and responsibilities. Moreover, this image of the Body is important in order to understand the mission. For if the body is what allows us to enter into relationship with others, the Church, as the Body of Christ allows Christ to concretely enter into relationship with men and women of all time and all cultures.

**c. The Church as the Temple of the Spirit:** Lastly, the third image, aligned with the two preceding images, is that of the Church as Temple of the Spirit. It is this same Spirit that is the dynamic principle for the variety and unity of the Church and within the Church. It is the Spirit of communion, union that gathers the Church in all the diversity of her members and who creates one people and

one Body. The Church is the Temple of the Spirit because the Church is constructed and built by the Holy Spirit while at the same time being constructed and built by Christians. The Spirit is the source of all charisms, gifts confided to all Christians for the benefit of the Church and her mission. This also signifies that while all the baptized have received the Holy Spirit, they all have the right to speak within the Church and the right to be heard. This can be referred to what is called “*sensus fidei*,” that is, the supernatural sense of faith that belongs to the entire people (cf. *LG* 12).

If there is time, we should also mention here the common priesthood of the faithful that is not a priesthood of the laity but that of all the members of the Church, a common priesthood given to all through the Holy Spirit (cf. *LG* 10).

**1.2. For which laity?** It is within this Church communion, Body of Christ, Temple of the Spirit and People of God that I would like to situate the vocation and mission of the laity. Let us recall what Vatican II states in *Lumen Gentium*: “The term ‘laity’ is here understood to mean [...] the faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the people of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world” (*LG* 31). The laity are therefore not defined in relation to priests or religious. They are first of all baptized and who, by their baptism, are entitled to participate in the life and mission of the Church. They are joined with Christ and thereby live life in the Spirit. In other respects, they live in communion with one another forming one same body and one same people. Their mission takes place in the Church and in the world. Note well in the above passage that the laity are not only defined by their presence in the world. They too are responsible for the life of the Church and participate in the Church’s mission.

**a. Lay commitment to the world:** This aspect is greatly developed in the Vatican II texts and those following Vatican II. I will return to this in a moment. We already stated that the lay apostolic vocation does not come from a “mandate” bestowed by the bishop. It is founded on their baptism and confirmation. The texts clearly show that evangelization, the primary mission of the Church, is not only proclaiming the gospel in a direct sense (preaching, catechesis, etc.), it is also in transforming the world to be more in conformity with the gospel. There is also an apostolate that consists of evangelizing the realities of the world by a life of witness and through the word.

**b. Lay commitment to the Church:** Since Vatican II there has been a considerable renewal in this area. The place of the laity in the Church is not reduced to passive assistance nor to liturgical service, in other respects limited enough. Think about the development of lay participation in the pastoral responsibilities within the life of the Church community from the liturgy to

transmitting the faith, catechesis, or their contribution to the various pastoral services and structures. Each region has its own ways of allowing the laity to be active in the life of the Church, according to needs. But in a general sense we note, for example, that the creation of councils and synods allow the laity not only to develop “activities” but also to effectively feel more responsible for the mission of the Church, responsible as lay persons, in union with bishops and priests. In an attempt to avoid a clericalization of the laity, it is necessary for them to participate in the internal life of the Church by the fact of their baptism and confirmation.

In summary, we must return to the words of John Paul II in the apostolic letter *Christifideles Laici*: “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” (33). By the fact of their baptism and confirmation, the laity are therefore fully committed in the mission of the Church. I would now like to develop this a bit further.

## **2. A passion for humanity: laity called to proclaim the gospel to the poor.**

Now I would like to be more specific about the position of the laity in the mission of the Church and especially through their service to society.

The primary lay mission that I will stress first is that they must witness, with their entire life, that faith in Jesus Christ is the fundamental response to the questions and hopes of humanity and society. Committing themselves within the various life sectors in the world, they concretely announce this Good News, that is, salvation in Jesus Christ. It is an essential responsibility confided to the laity in union with all the other members of the People of God. I will not go into the diverse lay missionary commitments, nor the need for an analysis of the human situations and changes of society. You are aware of these within your own countries.

2.1. But within these areas, it seems to me that we Vincentians must be particularly concerned to recall, time and time again, that the laity **have a particular vocation to promote the dignity of all persons** — especially the poorest and the weakest.

A privileged area linked to a commitment in favor of human dignity is being **present in places of poverty and suffering**: assisting the sick, persons with disabilities, the elderly, the sick in the end stages of their illness, and victims of new illnesses, (AIDS and others). Christians who get involved by meeting and understanding people are essential expressions of the love and mercy of Christ and of his Church in regard to those who are experiencing hardships. The heart

of the evangelical message is this Good News: humanity is loved by God! The words and life of each Christian must be a clear sign. The same applies for all that touches the **area of charity and solidarity**, participation in charitable movements of the apostolate or in education, so as to be a more just society where each person finds his or her place and can live in dignity. We Vincentians, especially, must not forget that fighting for justice is an essential element of the mission of the Church — all of this in parishes, various communities, neighborhoods and towns, in collaboration with others with other ways of thinking who direct support or solidarity services.

Another area important for the laity in which to invest themselves is in promoting and defending **respect for life**. This encompasses many areas and it often poses many difficult questions but it must not be abandoned. I am thinking especially of the challenges of bioethical questions.

The diversity of commitments, which I will not go further into here, must allow reaching all the individual and collective dimensions of human existence — from personal and family problems to problems concerning culture, peace and politics, etc. or the need to have a clear understanding of the dignity of work, seen as the fulfillment of the person and the accomplishment of his/her vocation.

2.2. Moreover, generally speaking, in order to come to an authentic change in human relationships and the life of society, it seems important that lay movements be places of **education and support** for those who have political, financial and social responsibilities so as to enable them to accomplish their tasks with integrity, being concerned to give priority for the good of the people and being aware of the human impact of their choices.

2.3. Now, to conclude this point, allow me to reflect upon two dimensions of these commitments that seem essential for the mission today: the quality of the meetings and the universality of the outlook. This is, moreover, what we find widely expressed by Vincent de Paul.

First, the **importance and quality of meetings**. This is true for all Christian life, but I would like to stress this in the life of today's laity, because often the temptation is to keep to the quality of the doing, of the intellectual content or material of a gathering, of a meeting, of an action, etc. For us, there is certainly something to be deepened in order to live according to the spirit of Vincent de Paul. The laity are the first in line to be able to go “naturally” and in all areas, to meet others in the name of Christ, without being exclusive; to develop encounters for listening to others, helping them grow, taking them seriously, respecting their dignity so that they can fully develop their own human and spiritual vocation. In this perspective, I would also like to add that it is urgent that in our reactions, for our own view of peoples and situations, we have integrated important elements

too such as ecumenical dialogue or interreligious dialogue. Today, these are places of encounters, and therefore of proclaiming the gospel, that we can no longer ignore. If so many misunderstandings exist and unfortunately develop today among people of different religions, it is often due to a lack of true knowledge and a lack of mutual respect for differences.

All of this leads us **to foster universality**, all the more important in our social life as we find ourselves within a context of globalization. You will have occasion to come back to this theme. More and more, in many countries, we are finding the presence of very diverse populations because of their social, cultural or religious origins. We can add to this the rapid development of communication, tourism, etc. It is no longer possible to live tucked away in one's traditional environment. We also know that the discovery of this widening of horizons can give rise to fears with often disastrous results. Here the laity certainly have an unlimited field open to the missionary heart and spirit.

### **3. Passion for God: laity called to holiness**

Now I would like to suggest taking another step in placing the vocation of the laity to the mission in the perspective of a call to holiness, which is, in a way, a result of baptism.

The vocation of the laity in the Church is not pure activism, in the same way that “spiritual things” are not only for priests and men and women religious. The Christian experience of the laity is not reduced to encountering humanity. It takes place at the same time within an intimate encounter with God. The spiritual experience of Vincent de Paul is particularly enlightening on this subject. His experience with Christ cannot be separated from his experience with the poor. In looking for one he found the other, in discovering the poor he met Christ, and the more he discovered Christ in his mystery, the more he was pushed to go to meet the poor, to live with them what he had discovered. The spiritual life that each baptized person is called to develop is not a running away from the world! It is essential to come back to the universal call addressed to all and therefore to each faithful lay person, for this call implants its roots in baptism and is strengthened by the other sacraments. The baptized must therefore be a passionate person of God, steadily advancing on the road of evangelical renewal.

**3.1. The response to the call to holiness** is not an abstract path, lost in the clouds. It is not a far-off and trivial desire. It is a true **searching for the perfection of being**, the fulfillment of the total person, such as God created him/her, such as God desires to see him/her fully develop. It is the search for true goodness for oneself, and also with and for others in a specific way; a goodness, a perfection that is found in authentic union with God and our brothers and sisters. Therefore it is something very concrete that takes a lifetime and

concerns all areas of life, not only what we strictly call spiritual life. In the search for holiness, the Christian want to find his/her full development, his/her full accomplishment in conformity to Christ. The road is not easy. But it is essential to offer it as the heart of the Christian vocation from which all the rest follows, and to show that the journey on this path is not alone but in solidarity, with Christ and with other baptized persons.

3.2. This lay vocation to holiness is expressed in a particular way in the laity's insertion within temporal realities and their participation in the world's activities. This signifies that **the vocation to holiness is intimately linked to the vocation to the mission**. It is everyday life, with all its commitments, in particular in service to others in the Church and in the world, that must become an occasion of union with God and accomplishing God's will. In this way the laity contribute to the building up of the Kingdom of God. In summary, as John Paul II reminds us in his apostolic letter at the close of the Great Jubilee year, to put pastoral life under the sign of holiness is a choice of great consequence. "It implies the conviction that, since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of God's Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31).

#### **4. In a pluralistic society: the need for a work within the Church and collaboration with men and women of good will**

In our society it is necessary take into account the plurality that is being expressed more and more and its consequences for the lay mission. It seems to me that the role of accompaniment of the different groups and movements has great importance within this area.

4.1. In order to do this, it must first be shown that **the Church herself is pluralistic**. As we have already stated, Church unity is a unity of communion among different expressed charisms as modeled in the image of the Trinity. It is a richness that shows both the diversity of gifts of the Spirit and that the Church bears within herself the possibility of bringing together all lived human situations in order to proclaim the gospel and give authentic witness.

4.2. **No one, nor any ecclesial group can claim to completely possess this wealth of gifts of the Spirit** that shows the richness and diversity of the gospel. Moreover, it is the gospel in its totality that must be transmitted to the men and women of today. Within this is the expression of an important reality for the life of the Church. Being faithful to the gospel and proclaiming it requires that an authentic communion be lived, not only at the level of the Creed, but in the missionary expression itself. The demands that ensue are of two classifications:

within our Catholic communities themselves, and on the other part, within the search for Christian unity.

To be more specific, it is an essential point within the lay mission. It is its collective, communal, or more simply stated, ecclesial dimension. **The temptation of many groups is to withdraw into themselves!** Many need to have an awareness that the mission they have received, either individually or as a group, is **a mission confided by Christ to his Church** and that the different groups that exist within the Church are the expression of the diversity of charisms. Certainly, for what concerns us presently, it is legitimate to give credence to what we call the Vincentian Family. But this must lead us to a deepening and growth of the Vincentian charism. Already among ourselves, within this Family, we can sense the richness of the different facets of this charism. It is this whole that we must bring to the unique mission of the Church. The closing in on oneself of some ecclesial communities or groups can only lead to an impoverishment of the Church and ultimately an impoverishment of these groups, which will end by dying out or breaking off from the living tree of the Church to enclose themselves in sectarian practices. We are to build a fraternal Church, a community of believers but also a community or communion of communities, an open Church, where each one has his or her place recognized by others, a Church where all are able to collaborate with their differences. We also find there what also should be lived in societies tempted by individualism. By our Vincentian charism, we have the responsibility of **contributing towards making the world a place of sharing and community**, a place of living together well, sincerely open towards others in respecting true differences that are mutually enriching and not rigid boundaries to maintain.

4.3. This leads us to take another step, to broaden our horizons. This is what I will call **the need for a common commitment with people of good will**. The laity find themselves at the heart of these pluralistic societies where a multitude of religious or non-religious, cultural or other trends are expressed. They find themselves directly confronted by these trends in their family life, neighborhood, work, leisure, etc. There, in multiple ways, lies their apostolic commitment. Therefore it is necessary to expose them to all the areas of “religion” or culture that they are most likely to meet. Too often they are not prepared for this — priests are often in the same situation — and it seems important to me that, faced with all the current excesses and manipulation of religions, the laity should be encouraged to meet, work together, and serve society with all people of good will, beyond religious and ideological distinctions. I feel that it is not only in living, one next to the other, that true knowledge or reciprocal appreciation comes about, but from the everyday sharing of life, of a common commitment to the progress of peoples and societies.

## 5. Lay formation

I am coming to my final point which certainly has great importance for you first of all, as accompaniers, but especially in order to strengthen the present vocation and mission of the laity and to assure their future. It is the question of formation.

If we want laity who are mature, aware of their responsibilities within the Church and society, and if we want to broaden the horizon of evangelization, then we must **give the laity a solid human and spiritual formation**. It is about helping them discover and live their vocation, developing a structure that gives unity to their lives. In today's world, which has become complex and demanding, it is essential that Christians, especially those who are involved in movements, be competent, not only materially or technically competent but also, and perhaps above all, spiritually competent in order that the gospel be proclaimed authentically and boldly. Competency in service is a form of respect for the poor. It is essential that the laity be formed to Christian reflection regarding the life and apostolate situations which present themselves. We all know that it is important to have a heart but that is not always enough. At the same time one must also use reason. This is particularly true in the practice of charity, of works of charity where one is often tempted to speak or act purely on emotion.

Without wanting to limit formation to these aspects, I would like to stress the importance of formation in the **social doctrine of the Church** for us Vincentians. It is up to us to be particularly sensitive if we want to put forth a vision of humanity and society that is in keeping with fundamental human values and it is up to us to work to promote respect for the inviolable dignity of all persons, beginning with the poorest and weakest of our society.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to take a passage from John Paul II's Apostolic Letter addressed to the Church at the close of the Great Jubilee year 2000, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: "At the beginning of this new century, our steps must quicken as we travel the highways of the world. Many are the paths on which each one of us and each of our Churches must travel, but there is no distance between those who are united in the same communion, the communion which is daily nourished at the table of the Eucharistic Bread and the Word of Life" (58).

The vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world carries demands as strong as those of other ecclesial vocations. These are not "third-rate" vocations. As accompaniers, we have a special responsibility not only to the groups we accompany, but even more so to the Church, so that all baptized persons become keenly aware of the dignity of their vocation and the consequences that flow from it in their personal and ecclesial life.

(Translation: TRANSLATION CENTER – DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY, Paris)