

OF CURRENT INTEREST

Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World

Félic Álvarez Sagredo, C.M.

1. Introduction

For some time I have had this desire to write about the laity in the Church and in the world. Whenever I have thought about evangelization or the present situation of the Church or, more specifically, the present situation of the Church in Europe as reflected in statistics regarding Sunday worship and other criteria that allow one to evaluate the impact of faith on the life of believers... whenever I have considered these realities, the theme of the laity has always been a part of my reflection.

There are many reasons that motivate me to write these reflections. On the one hand, there is the Word of God where the presence of the laity and their responsibility in the ministry of faith are continually highlighted. On the other hand, we have the Church's teaching which, at least on a theoretical or doctrinal level, has developed the theology of the laity as it has dealt with such themes as the identity of the laity, their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world, their full participation in the evangelizing ministry of the Church, the value of their presence and their proper and indisputable witness in the family, the workplace, and other social situations and, finally, their inescapable commitment to life, to progress, to human development and to the whole of creation.

Now, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, there is an invitation to read anew its primary documents and the great messages that are contained in its constitutions, decrees and declarations... all of which have been enriched and confirmed by many personal and ecclesial experiences that have taken place during the past fifty years. In this sense the fourth chapter of the dogmatic constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, and the decree, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, have great significance. Even though my space here is limited, it is absolutely necessary to make some reference to the pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et spes*, and to the apostolic exhortation of John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*.

Nevertheless, we are not only dealing with reasons and arguments, but there are also positive attitudes and states of mind that create dif-

ferent expectations as we contemplate the global panorama from the perspective of faith and as we also contemplate this reality from the perspective of reason. The faith perspective opens the mind and the heart to horizons and goals that are in harmony with the identity and the dignity of men and women, with their transcendence and their ultimate purpose. In fact, the pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et spes*, states: “*The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of the human person take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals men and women to themselves and makes their supreme calling clear... For by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man and woman... Such is the mystery of the human person, and it is a great one, as seen by believers in the light of Christian revelation*” (*Gaudium et Spes*, #22).

First, some clarifications before I begin to develop this theme. With regard to the sources that I will use in order to give form to this presentation: the theme seems to imply that the primary sources must be Sacred Scripture, tradition and the Church’s teaching, especially the more important teachings that have occurred during the past fifty years, namely, the Second Vatican Council and the synod of Bishops that dealt with the vocation and the mission of the laity. More specifically, I will refer almost exclusively to the following documents: the fourth chapter of the dogmatic constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, the decree, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, and finally, the apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*.

I want to develop this presentation from a theological perspective rather than from an historical perspective because the objective that I peruse is that of highlighting the laity as qualified agents of evangelization so that they might be recognized and supported in their mission as true protagonists in the different areas that are rightly theirs. If one of the most important challenges of today’s Church is to assure that all its members are fully aware of and take responsibility for the demands of their vocation, then this challenge becomes a priority when dealing with the laity. Imagine the Church with lay people who are fully aware of their dignity and vocation and who are generously committed to the process of evangelization in their personal, family, social, and professional life!

2. Biblical and theological foundation

The first thing that we become aware of is the thematic structure of *Lumen Gentium* as a whole. From the beginning we are presented with the image of a living, complex body that is well-organized and in which all its members have an important function that has to be developed

on behalf of the whole body: “*The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race*” (*Lumen Gentium*, #1). This statement underlines the essential human, social, spiritual and divine elements of this community, of this mystery, of this people of God.

As I reflect on the purpose of this presentation, I find an incredible beauty and value in the references that the dogmatic constitution makes to the universal plan of salvation that was inaugurated by God-Father. The document places the decisive stages of this plan in an historical perspective and we can see how this plan took shape in a definitive and total manner with the event of the Incarnation of the Word and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the community of the disciples and to all people. Without a doubt this Trinitarian perspective provides us with a sound foundation for our reflection on this revealed plan and provides a basis for all future development of this theme.

Before moving on, I want to make an explicit reference to the first appearance of human beings on earth in the book of Genesis. As the name indicates, we are dealing with “the origins” yet at the same time the author describes for us the dignity and the spirit and the gifts that the human person possesses and then specifies the tasks that the human person must accomplish. Men and women were created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) and were entrusted with the responsibility of caring for the earth. Thus, men and women became God’s collaborators, people who were able to develop and to bring to fulfillment the work that God had begun... people who would be animated by the strength of the Spirit. The first blessing that God bestowed upon men and women was pure gift and made them fruitful so that they could transmit life and recreate the world¹.

In this same line of thought the distinct images that the Council presents to us when referring to the Church enrich our knowledge and provide our personal and community experiences with an extraordinary value. I refer here to the images taken from rural and farming life and the image of the spiritual building, and those images that refer to family and spousal relationships. Perhaps there is no more expressive and enlightening image than that of the Mystical body of Christ.

It is incredible to see the various types of references that are found in chapter four of *Lumen Gentium*, a chapter that is entitled, “The Laity”. We find references to the image of the mystical body of Christ, references taken from the writings of Saint Paul to three

¹ *Father, by your plan man and woman are united, and married life has been established as the one blessing that was not forfeited by original sin or washed away by the flood, Rite of Marriage, Catholic Book Publishing Co, New York, Nuptial Blessing [A], p. 16.*

different communities (1 Corinthians 12:1-12; Romans 12:4-5; Ephesians 4:15-16). There are very few images and/or expressions that are as enlightening and able to clarify the reality and the profound identity of the people of God.

The apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, comments on some of these biblical images and highlights the allegory of the vine and the branches (John 15:1-10) and the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). We read: “*Vatican Council II has invited us to contemplate the mystery of the Church through biblical images which bring to light the reality of the Church as a communion with its inseparable dimensions: the communion of each Christian with Christ and the communion of all Christians with one another. There is the sheepfold, the flock, the vine, the spiritual building, the Holy City. Above all, there is the image of the Body as set forth by the Apostle Paul. Its doctrine finds a pleasing expression once again in various passages of the Council’s document*” (*Christifideles Laici*, #19).

We have referred, in passing, to the image of the spiritual building. I believe that in the theology of the laity this image has an exceptional attractiveness and power. When we speak about witness and the worship that the laity are invited to offer to God through their union and communion with Christ, we can begin to understand the profound significance of this image.

In this section I would like to make reference to another gospel passage that focuses our attention on the conditions that Jesus established for those who wish to follow him. These could be described as characteristics of the true disciple... others prefer to speak about the effort that is demanded in the school of discipleship. This passage is found in the three Synoptic gospels, even though the more interesting passages are those that are found in Luke and Mark (cf., Matthew 16:24-26; Mark 8:34-37; Luke 9:23-27). The introductory phrase speaks for itself: “*He [Jesus] summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them: Those who wish to come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. For those who wish to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it*” (Mark 8:34-35).

Jesus’ words were spoken in response to the disciples’ profound misunderstanding of something as important as his true messianic mission. Jesus, for the first time, had just spoken about the dramatic, violent and paradoxical end to his life. Mark states that Jesus began to teach the disciples that “*the Son of man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days*” (Mark 8:32). Peter’s immediate response and his firm decision to prevent such an outcome not only led to the teaching that we have already cited but also provoked some of Jesus’ harshest words. In this passage we find a clear expression of the paradox of the

cross, the true paradox of believers who, obedient to the words of their faith, accept with profound joy the true wisdom and true transformative power of the gospel.

3. The identity of the laity in the Church

The constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, describes the laity with the following words: “*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. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world*” (*Lumen Gentium*, #31).

The foundation that gives origin to the new condition of the laity in the mystery of the Church, that which constitutes their most genuine “features” and serves as the basis for their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world is their “*incorporation into Christ through faith and baptism*” (*Christifideles Laici*, #9). Even though the description is clear, perhaps it would be good to explain one by one each individual word of this phrase so that we can grasp its rich content. The first element that is mentioned is that of the incorporation of the laity into Christ through baptism. Here John Paul II speaks about a new aspect of the grace and the dignity that comes from baptism: “*The lay faithful participate for their part in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King*” (*Christifideles Laici*, #14). The Council used similar words: “*The faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ*” (*Lumen Gentium*, #31).

The following passages that I will refer to are well-known but they contain a life-giving message and are only understandable from the perspective and the dynamic of the new cult that was inaugurated by Christ who made filial obedience to the Father the center of and the most perfect expression of such worship. We see in the letter to the Hebrews: “*By this ‘will’, we have been consecrated though the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*” (Hebrews 10:10). All the documents, including the conciliar constitution, emphasize the depth and the efficacy of this participation of the laity in the priesthood of Christ as it pertains to their own sanctification and the sanctification of the world. Once again we recall the message of Jesus’ farewell discourse where he speaks about joyfully handing himself over to the Father for the salvation of the world: “*I have made known to them your name and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me, may be in them and I in them*” (John 17:26). This, however, must be concretized

in order to see exactly in what ways the laity participate in the priesthood of Christ.

Therefore, *“the laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne – all these become ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’. Together with the offering of the Lord’s body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God”* (*Lumen Gentium*, #34).

We could cite numerous references not only from the documents that we have already mentioned, but also from the pages of the New Testament, especially from the writings of Saint Paul. The doctrinal outline that Paul followed in his letters to the various communities begins with a presentation of the mystery of Christ which is then followed by words that refer to the incorporation of the believer into that mystery. Thus, for example, in the letter to the Romans, after explaining the transformative and liberating efficacy of baptism as a result of the death and resurrection of Christ and after explaining the life of the Christian in the Spirit, Paul states: *“I urge you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship”* (Romans 12:1)².

The conciliar document highlights the full participation of the laity in the prophetic mystery of Christ: *“Christ, the great Prophet, who proclaimed the Kingdom of his Father both by the testimony of his life and the power of his words, continually fulfills his prophetic office until the complete manifestation of glory. He does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in his name and with his authority, but also through the laity whom he made his witnesses and to whom he gave understanding of the faith (sensu fidei) and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life”* (*Lumen Gentium*, #35). The document then goes on to say: *“This evangelization, that is, this announcing of Christ by a living testimony as well as by the spoken word, takes on a specific quality and a special force in*

² The note in the *Jerusalem Bible* states: the Christian community has taken the place of the Temple in Jerusalem and the indwelling of the Spirit gives a new intensity to the presence of God among his holy people (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). This is also the inspiration of a new spiritual cult for believers are members of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:15-20) who has become in his crucified and risen body the dwelling place of a new presence of God and a new cult (John 2:19-22; 4:20-21).

that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world” (Lumen Gentium, #35).

All the documents underline the importance and the value of this participation of the laity in the prophetic ministry of Christ. They do so with the same realism and significance that is demanded by the realities of life today, by life “in the marketplace” and in the various “secular situations” where the message of the gospel must be made present in the way that Paul VI said: “*Evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new*” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #18).

In order to understand the profound significance of the participation of the laity in the mystery of Christ it would be good to recall some of the principles outlined in the pastoral constitution of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*. I would mention first of all the autonomy and the value of created things. The Council affirmed: “*If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values which must be gradually deciphered, put to use, and regulated by men, then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy*” (*Gaudium et Spes*, #36). Thus we have an admirable description of the legitimate autonomy of created reality and their orientation toward the integral goal of men and women and toward their ultimate end (Genesis 1:29-31; 1 Corinthians 3:21-23). Besides this principle, however, there are other important principles: the principle of the common good (so often alluded to in the conciliar document) and the principle concerning the secular nature and the character of the laity.

Finally, I want to refer to the present awareness of the Church and her attitude before the world and society: the Church is wholly convinced that if she wants to be a valid instrument of evangelization then she needs to live in a state of constant reform and renewal, she must engage in dialogue and place herself at the service of humankind. There are two parables in the gospel that reveal the authentic significance of solidarity, two parables that Jesus places before us with great mastery: the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29ff) and the judgment of the nations (Matthew 25:31ff)... “*Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me*” (Matthew 25:40).

Both the dogmatic constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, as well as the apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, clearly reveal the meaning of this participation. The conciliar document states: “*The laity, by their very vocation, seek 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 underlined the fact that “*in particular the lay faithful are called to restore to creation all its original value... 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. It is a participation given to each member of the lay faithful individually, in as much as each is one of the many who form the one Body of the Lord” (Christifideles Laici, #14).

4. The apostolate of the laity

The conciliar constitution introduces this theme with some very eloquent statements³ especially when we consider the call to participate in the New Evangelization and the various scenes described in the *Lineamenta* from the last Synod of Bishops and in *Gaudium et Spes*, which also points out some very urgent problems. The laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where the Church can only become the salt of the earth through their efforts. Therefore paths must be opened to them so that, in accord with their abilities and the needs of the present era, they might zealously participate in the salvific mission of Church.

In addition to some other nuances that could be highlighted, I want to emphasize here two clear and demanding affirmations that can be applied to the laity as well as to the other members of the Christian community, especially those persons who have accepted the responsibility of encouraging and planning in those areas related to evangelization and pastoral ministry. Without any hesitation the constitution points out the fact that “*the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth*” (*Lumen Gentium*, #34)... thus the exhortation to open paths for them. Once again I am reminded of the words that Pope Pius XII, on more than one occasion, addressed to the laity: “*The faithful ought to have an ever clear consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church*” (PIUS XII, Discourse to the new cardinals, February 20, 1946). These affirmations are authentic statements that ought to accompany every initiative and every form of collaboration that the other members of the Christian community might engage in.

This theme is developed at length in the conciliar decree, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. Three chapters are dedicated to this development and they are entitled: objectives, various fields of the apostolate and the different forms of the apostolate. The apostolate of evangelizing

³ See *Lumen Gentium*, #33 the end of paragraph b and d; see also the compendium at the beginning of the second part of the pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, #46 which mentions the following urgent problems: marriage and family, culture, economic and social life, politics, the solidarity of peoples and peace.

and sanctifying men and women, the Christian renewal of the temporal order and charitable action (distinctive characteristics of the Christian apostolate) form and shape the purposes that have to be achieved⁴. Benedict XVI wrote about this with admirable precision when he stated: “*The Church’s deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (kerygma-martyria), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia), and exercising the ministry of charity (diakonia). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being*” (BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #25a).

Before examining in greater detail the various areas and forms of the lay apostolate, it is interesting to listen to what the Council says with regard to the witness of life and its impact on human structures. Such evangelization, that is, the proclamation of Christ, through the witness of life and through word, acquires a specific characteristic and a unique efficacy as a result of the fact that all of this is done in the ordinary circumstances of the world. Commenting on the impact of the evangelization process on human structures, the constitution states: “*By their competence in secular training and by their activity, elevated from within by the grace of Christ, let them vigorously contribute their effort, so that created goods may be perfected by human labor, technical skill and civic culture for the benefit of all men according to the design of the Creator and the light of His Word*” (*Lumen Gentium*, #36).

5. The various field and the different forms of the apostolate

These sections of the conciliar decree, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, are most significant and cannot be passed over lightly. I will attempt to present a summary which incorporates the primary elements and which therefore, will facilitate the future study of some other fundamental aspects related to this theme.

Among the various fields of the apostolate, we find reference to church communities, the family, young people, the social environment and the apostolate on the national and international level. We also find here a reference to the importance and the greater participation of women in the various areas of the apostolate. The parish and the diocese are called to be the center of unity and a point of convergence for the various charisms and personal gifts. Thus, the exhortation to cultivate a sense of belonging without losing sight of the urgent needs of people who live outside the boundaries of the local and/or diocesan community. Today it is possible to engage in international collabora-

⁴ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, see the titles given to the various sections of chapter two of this document.

tion through the human and technical means that are now available to so many people.

The Council Fathers began chapter four with a general statement: *“The laity can engage in their apostolic activity either as individuals or together as members of various groups or associations”* (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, #15)⁵. The document then goes on to explain: *“There are many forms of the apostolate whereby the laity build up the Church, sanctify the world, and give it life in Christ. A particular form of the individual apostolate as well as a sign specially suited to our times is the testimony of the whole lay life arising from faith, hope, and charity. It manifests Christ living in those who believe in Him. Then by the apostolate the spoken and written word, which is utterly necessary under certain circumstances, lay people announce Christ, explain and spread His teaching in accordance with one’s status and ability, and faithfully profess it”* (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, #16).

The exhortation to work in the parish is always accompanied by an invitation to promote a sense of communion and unity among all its members. In this work the laity should follow the dynamics of their faith and should also be attentive to the movement of the Spirit so that their own problems and the problems of the world can be examined together and solved by general discussion and consensus. The decree mentions the need for a broader outreach that extends to the inter-parochial and inter-diocesan level, as well as the national and international level.

I want to highlight some ideas with regard to the apostolate on the national and international level... and I do so because of its importance at the present time, and also because of the many paths that have been opened to us through modern technology and rapid communication. The decree states that a *“vast field for the apostolate has opened up on the national and international levels where the laity especially assist with their Christian wisdom”* (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, #14). Therefore, there follows an invitation to accept responsibility in various organizations and institutions and to work on behalf of peace and justice, the common good, dialogue and solidarity among people.

A theme that merits explicit consideration is the various organized forms of the lay apostolate. I would like to highlight the following ideas: in the present situation the apostolate calls for the concerted effort of the laity. It is suggested that more emphasis be given to unity and integration and insertion into the different areas of social life. There should be some good reason when considering the creation of a new

⁵ *“Whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life”* (John 4:14); *“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who remain in me and I in them will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5).

association and at the same time we must avoid prolonging in some artificial way the life of those associations that are outdated and/or dying. This means that we use some common sense criteria and apply them when evaluating these groups and when discerning the path to be followed when working with these same groups.

6. The spirituality of the laity

A good starting point is found in the following affirmation of the Council: *"It is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society"* (*Lumen Gentium*, #40). We see here a clear expression of the fundamental demand of every Christian vocation, namely, the universal call to holiness. John Paul II underlines this idea when he states: *"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"* (*Christifideles Laici*, #16). This reference is all the more significant because it is formulated from a Trinitarian perspective which is, of course, a logical consequence of belonging to this Church, a mystery of communion in which the identity and the unity dignity of the laity is revealed.

A spirituality of communion: the ecclesiology of communion is a central and fundamental idea in the documents of Second Vatican Council. Paul VI explained this in an admirable way when he stated: *"The meaning of the Church is a communion of saints. 'Communion' speaks of a double life-giving participation: the incorporation of Christians into the life of Christ, and the communication of that life of charity to the entire body of the faithful, in this world and in the next, union with Christ and in Christ, and union among Christians, in the Church"* (PAUL VI, General Audience, June 8, 1966). Both the Council documents, as well as later Church documents, refer to Paul's image of the body of Christ and the dynamism of the charisms. *Lumen Gentium* states: *"The messianic people, although it does not actually include all men, and at times may look like a small flock, is nonetheless a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race"* (*Lumen Gentium*, #9).

We find this same idea expressed by John Paul II when he quotes the Council: *"The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple. In them he prays and bears witness that they are adopted children. Guiding the Church in the way of all truth and unifying her in communion and in the works of service, he bestows upon her varied hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns her with the fruits*

of his grace. By the power of the Gospel he makes the Church grow, perpetually renews her, and leads her to perfect union with her Spouse” (Christifideles Laici, #20).

A spirituality rooted in the newness of baptism: This sacramental reality, with its various dimension and dynamisms, has appeared in many different sections of this reflection. In light of the reality of a new birth, believers experience themselves enlightened by the Word and strengthened and animated by the Spirit who shares with them various gifts/charisms. They understand that this newness has made them effective participants in Christ’s priestly, prophetic and regal mission. They have acquired a sense of belonging to the ecclesial community and a commitment of service that involves them in the human, social, political and religious realities and structures.

Baptism, far from alienating people from their brothers and sisters, makes people fully human. Through baptism we died so that, like Christ who by the glory of the Father was raised from the dead, we too might live anew. The pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et spes*, affirms: “*Only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of the human person take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear*” (*Gaudium et Spes*, #22).

The spirituality of the laity is profoundly Christological: Paul’s profession about the centrality of the person and the ministry of Christ in his life and his full incorporation into this mystery, could also be a valid expression for the laity: “*I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself for me*” (Galatians 2:19-20). It is the person of Jesus who attracts the attention of the laity.

For the laity, Jesus’ family, social, and ministerial life, is a prototype and a point of reference in order for the laity to live faithfully in the various situations in which they find themselves. Jesus Christ was a member of a working class family in Nazareth and not a member of the priestly class. From the beginning of his public ministry Jesus was acclaimed as the great prophet who was to come to save the people and as such, he offers the laity a paradigm... indeed, Jesus gave glory to the Father through filial obedience and through the offering of his life on behalf of his brothers and sisters provide people with a sign of the greatest possible love (cf. John 10:14).

The spirituality of the laity finds in the Gospel the living Word of God and finds in the Eucharist its source of authentic inspiration and of solid support for living life in its fullness: In the post-synodal exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, and the encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, we find numerous references to the importance of the Word of God and the

Eucharist in the life of every Christian and therefore, in the life of the laity. We should recall the fact that the Eucharist is the source and the summit of the process of evangelization since its objective is the communion of all people with Christ and in Christ with the Father and the Holy Spirit. *Lumen Gentium* affirms this reality when it states: “Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, they offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with it... strengthened in Holy Communion by the Body of Christ, they then manifest in a concrete way that unity of the people of God which is suitably signified and wondrously brought about by this most august sacrament” (*Lumen Gentium*, #11).

Lay spirituality is genuinely secular, something characteristic of their nature: the laity are sanctified in their home and in the world and in their professional work. In the fullest sense of these words the laity are called to be salt of the earth and light to the world. They experience as their own the affirmations that are made at the beginning and throughout the pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et spes*: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts” (*Gaudium et Spes*, #1).

7. Formation

One of the many experiences, for which I am extremely grateful, is the ten years that I spent in Málaga as a professor at the theological center for the laity. There were night sessions that took place in the bishop’s residence and men and women from distinct social and professional classes (professors, workers, permanent deacons, officials from the public and private sector) participated in those classes. The majority of those people were parents. These were not small groups... quite the contrary. Yet I can still vividly recall their attention and interest and active participation through their dialogue and their sharing the various ways in which they gave witness to their faith.

At the beginning of this section on lay formation, I mention this personal experience because it was there that I discovered an encouraging ecclesial reality... I witnessed a clear expression of the Christian commitment to this formation and I also became aware of a dynamic of fidelity and integrity as people gave witness to their faith.

The conciliar decree dedicates the last chapter to this theme of formation for the apostolate. It insists on the need to take into consideration every dimension of formation: human, spiritual and theological. Formation should also promote the development of authentic human values, collaboration and dialogue. Such formation should be directed

toward every sector of society and toward all people (children, young men and women, adults) and this formation should be continually updated.

The decree refers to the means that are available today – meetings, congresses, retreats, recollections, assemblies, conferences, books, periodicals, etc. It also refers to the establishment of higher institutes that have produced excellent results. This section concludes with the following exhortation: “*Centers of documentation and study not only in theology but also in anthropology, psychology, sociology, and methodology should be established for all fields of the apostolate for the better development of the natural capacities of the laity – men and women, young persons and adults*” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, #32).

A good formation that is internalized will necessarily create in the laity a foundation for their own proper spirituality, will strengthen their hope and lead them to a deeper commitment to the various human and social realities. In the case of the laity, there is also a need to develop processes of on-going formation because such formation will naturally foster fidelity to their identity and spirituality as well as fidelity to their vocation and mission in the Church.

In this presentation, I believe it is important to refer to the social doctrine of the Church as a significant aspect of evangelizing the contemporary world. I do not intend to develop arguments that validate the affirmations of the Church’s teaching but rather, in a schematic way, I want to highlight two or three reasons. From the time of the Second Vatican Council until the present, the Church has been consistent in her teachings related to social concerns. I would list the following documents as important milestones in this uninterrupted history: the pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et spes* and the encyclicals, *Populorum Progressio*, *Centesimus Annus*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and *Desus Caritas Est*.

All these documents have two essential parts that have been developed and that form the core of their message: an analysis of the social question, a description of the challenges or the priorities that demand our attention and a broad and coordinated response to these challenges.

At no time is the central message of the Gospel put aside. Rather it is this message that shapes the content of each of these documents and is expressed in such themes as the dignity of all people, their inalienable rights, their supreme vocation as well as the development of every aspect of their life, including their spiritual and religious dimension.

After these reflections on the means of formation, I conclude with an experience that occurred when I was studying in the beautiful German city that is located on the banks of the Rhine, Boppard am Rhein. The Goethe Institute housed foreign students with families who lived in the city, and I was housed with a peasant family. After the evening

news there was always a brief biblical-theological reflection on one of the public television stations, a reflection that was presented by some distinguished Christian scholar. When this presentation was concluded the family would comment on the message that they had heard... even though all of this occurred many years ago, that powerful image has remained with me.

8. Conclusion

In light of the invitation to participate in the New Evangelization and also in light of the theology of the laity, I believe that some serious personal and community reflection and discernment are demanded, especially as we consider the strategies and practices that might respond to the urgent needs of our time. Are not the laity agents and indisputable instruments in the Church's evangelizing activity? Do they not have their own proper place in the Church and in society? How can we make our pastoral activity creative so that it opens new paths that can confront that which is routine and/or stagnant? Do we feel the need and the urgency for a new evangelization? What responses are we willing to assume in this regard? Are we willing to put aside outdated methods, expressions and content that say nothing to people today? Are we willing to look for alternatives? When are we going to attempt to initiate dialogue in the matter of faith with other persons and groups in society who are not usually present at our liturgical celebrations? Why, in so many situations, is our outreach so limited?

In our parishes do we give priority to the promotion of lay groups that are well-formed and able to minister in the various spheres of social and pastoral life? Here I am not specifically referring to Vincentian groups but to groups that adhere to no specific form of congregational spirituality but live in a profound manner the apostolic dimension of their Christian lay vocation.

The question is all the more urgent and serious in those provinces where the majority of its members minister in parishes, that is, in provinces whose primary ministry (and in some cases, exclusive ministry) is parish ministry. We must accept and affirm the various lay charisms, ministries and services so that the laity, in full communion with the Church and all its members, engage in this prophetic ministry that renews social and family structures and realities.

No one doubts that we live in a time of change and this reality has to influence and motivate us to clothe ourselves in new attitudes, to view reality in a new light, to make a greater effort to familiarize ourselves with new languages and new situations where these problems are experienced, where these concerns and legitimate desires of humankind are revealed and where the presence of the Church ought to be made manifest through the convincing witness of the laity. They are

the ones who can communicate human, spiritual and gospel values and who can enrich the world by transforming it with the power of the Spirit who inspires them.

The challenge that our communities and ministries confront is certainly great: we must engage in a profound self-analysis and do this in light of the signs of the time, the Gospel and our charism. Rigid conformity and unanalyzed accommodation and superficial reform and renewal have no place here. We must have the ability “to look” and “to see”... and at the same time we must be able “to understand” and “to discover” in order to undertake a permanent commitment that involves on-going renewal.

On the other hand, it is clear that when our parishes are truly Vincentian parishes, this will have positive repercussions on the laity who, in an imperceptible manner for them, but a form nevertheless real and apparent to others, will embrace a lifestyle and values and a spirit that are in harmony with our charism and our mission.

Throughout this presentation I have not mentioned any of the various associations of the Vincentian Family. This was not the objective or the purpose of this synthesis. This could well be the theme for some future study. Indeed, the persons whom we attempt to evangelize and the poor with whom we want to collaborate in this urgent task deserve our recognition, our support and our co-responsible activity.

Translated by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.