

STUDY

Religious and Laity: A Common Mission in the Church and in Society*

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I. The Common Mission of the Church¹

1. A word about the laity in the New Testament

For us today, who live in a rather hierarchical Church, it is difficult to gauge the importance of the role of the laity in the Church at its beginnings, and especially the role of laywomen. Reading the New Testament from this perspective, we become aware that there were many men and women who were deeply committed to proclaiming Jesus Christ and his message of salvation for humankind.

A quick perusal of the New Testament brings to mind various persons who, on meeting Jesus of Nazareth, chose to collaborate with him and continue his mission. On reading John's gospel, we find that it was not Peter, John or any other apostle, but Mary Magdalene who was the first to announce to the apostles themselves: "I have seen the Lord" (Jn 20:18).

The New Testament mentions many other lay people, men and women, who joined together for the sake of a common mission: to

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¹ For this first part I have made good use of two unedited articles of Fr. Robert Maloney, the Superior General of the CM: "The Role of the Laity in our Vincentian Family" and "The Profile of a Lay Vincentian in the 21st Century."

proclaim Jesus Christ and the project of the Kingdom. In the Acts of the Apostles (9:36), we come across Tabitha “who was always doing good and helping the poor.” There is Mary, the mother of John Mark, whose house in Jerusalem was used as a meeting-place for prayer (Acts 12:12). The Acts of the Apostles also tell us of Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira (Acts 16:14), in whose house Paul and Silas met with the Christians of the city. There was also Phoebe, whom Paul described as a deaconess and whom he praised for having been a great help to many people, including himself (Rom 16:1-2).

Reading the New Testament from the perspective of the laity in the life of the Church will lead us to discover their active presence. Perhaps the best example in the whole of the New Testament is Paul’s statement about Prisca and Aquila, declaring that all the churches of the Gentiles owed a debt of gratitude to this couple.² It would be difficult to find a greater compliment than this. In the eyes of Paul and Luke, they were exceptional missionaries. They appear in the letter to the Romans (16:3), the first letter to the Corinthians (16:9), chapter 18 of the Acts of the Apostles (18:2; 18:26), and the conclusion of the second letter to Timothy (4:19). They were, together with Paul, the founders of the church of Ephesus. Priscilla, whom Paul calls Prisca, is mentioned before her husband, which seems to indicate that she occupied a more important role than he in the missionary activity of the early Church. Taking these facts into account, it will be easy to discover how collaboration was evident. Whatever their situation (as married persons, celibates or young “presbyters”), all considered themselves to be Church. Transformed by Jesus, they were committed in all simplicity to proclaiming the message of salvation, which is Jesus himself. They were all united in a common Mission.

Through 20 centuries of history, the role of the laity has had its ups and downs. Especially in the last millennium, the hierarchy of the Church has taken the leading role in the tasks and the mission of the Church, to the detriment of the role of the laity and their collaboration in the work of redemption. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that there have been many lay men and women who have wielded great influence in many of the great spiritual movements in the Church’s history. In the third and fourth centuries, the majority of the fathers and mothers of the desert was lay people. In the mystical tradition of the 12th and 13th centuries, many laywomen, like Julian of Norwich, played a fundamental role. In France in the 17th century, an epoch of saints like Francis de Sales and Vincent de Paul, Madame Acarie, a mother of six children, was

² Rom 16:4.

one of the persons most sought after as a spiritual guide. We could point out many other men and women who have been examples of commitment and dedication in the course of history.

2. Five convictions that form the basis of collaboration between laity and religious

The action of the Holy Spirit has led the Church to adopt new ways of living out Jesus Christ's project of life in the midst of the world. Lay people and religious communities consider themselves to be Church and grow each day in a greater awareness of carrying out the mission in collaboration. And in this way, they share their own wealth in common and allow it to be converted into a transforming power in the midst of the world.

Allow me to share with you five convictions that, among many others, form the basis for mutual collaboration:

First: **Mission** is not merely an activity of the Church; it is its very essence. If the Kingdom of God is the fundamental theme of Jesus' preaching, then "mission" is the command given by Jesus to his disciples: Go! Go and proclaim the Kingdom!³ Their mission therefore is to preach the Kingdom. All the members of the Church are missionaries. Already in 1975 *Evangelii Nuntiandi* stated that "anyone who rereads in the New Testament the origins of the Church, follows her history step by step and watches her live and act, sees that she is linked to evangelization in her most intimate being."⁴ And so, it is the whole Church that receives the mission of evangelizing, and each one's work is important for the growth of all. Religious and lay people in the Church therefore share the task of being missionaries in the midst of the world; they proclaim Jesus Christ and make his gospel effective, according to their respective charisms. We could therefore say that there are not different "missions;" there is only one Mission, and it is to proclaim Jesus Christ.

Second: *The laity carry out their mission in the world.* Drawing inspiration from documents such as *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Christifideles Laici* (1988), lay men and women carry out a vast and varied array of ministries in the Church. They act as leaders of local communities, catechists, teachers, animators of prayer, servants of the Word, ministers to the sick in their homes and in hospitals, and servants of the poor. They play an important role in initiatives for peace and justice among the nations. By their vocation lay people are called to evangelize the world of culture, politics, economics, the

³ Cf., Mk 1:15; Mt 28:19-20.

⁴ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 15.

sciences, the arts, international life and the communications media. Today we often find the lay faithful creating web pages on the Internet, and drawing up solid plans for promoting human advancement, culture, and development. Motivated and inspired by the charism of an Institute, they are increasingly sharing their goods as they seek to make their work in the world more effective.

To share the charism of one's religious community with the laity is to bring the gospel through them into the many areas of our world where religious life as such has not been able to penetrate.

Third: *Mission is the path to holiness.* Holiness is the universal vocation of all those who are baptized in Christ. The call to follow Jesus Christ holds true for all the faithful who are incorporated into the life and mission of Jesus. The path of Mission is the path to holiness. *"This charge [the call to holiness] is not a simple moral exhortation, but an undeniable requirement arising from the mystery of the Church."*⁵ Holiness is the perfection of charity, and charity is the fundamental task of the Church by which the Kingdom of God is built. Christians are called to create a culture of solidarity as an expression of love, and to use it as a foundation to build a civilization of love embracing all human beings and all aspects of human life. By sharing a common vocation to holiness, religious and the lay faithful are placed in a position of equality that enables them to advance together as they follow Christ and to work jointly in building the Kingdom.

Fourth: *Families and young people are called to play a special role in carrying out the common mission of the Church.* With regard to families, it is important to recall the beautiful expression used by Vatican II and repeated by *Evangelii Nuntiandi* which describes the family as a "domestic Church."⁶ The family, like the Church, is a place where the gospel is transmitted, especially to the young, and through them is radiated to others, particularly because of their witness of unity and love. On the other hand, both in the New Testament as well as in the other documents of the Church, special mention is made of the young. Timothy and Titus, two of the great missionaries of the early Church, were young men. As a matter of fact, Paul had to advise Timothy: *"Let no one look down on you because of your youth."*⁷ Today 64% of the world's population is under 25 years of age and this fact points to the evangelizing potential in young people. To share the charism of one's Institute with families and with the young is an urgent need today.

⁵ *Christifideles Laici*, 16.

⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 11; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 11.

⁷ 1 Tm 4:12.

Fifth: *At this present moment in which we are beginning the 21st century, the Spirit of the Lord is opening up new avenues for the missionary activity of lay people.* And, on the other hand, the document *Vita Consecrata* reports how religious communities today are living and sharing their charism with the laity.

And the reasons for sharing the charism are not the dearth of vocations to priestly and religious life, and still less, sociological factors. The reason is basically ecclesial in so far as the Church is a community marked by **communion** and **participation**. On this subject we can recall the enlightening words of the Pope who says: *“The new phenomenon being experienced in these days is that some members of the laity are asking to participate in the charismatic ideals of Institutes. This has given rise to interesting initiatives and new institutional forms of association. We are experiencing an authentic re-flourishing of ancient institutions, such as the secular orders or third orders, and the birth of new lay associations and movements linked to religious Families and Secular Institutes. Whereas at times in the recent past, collaboration came about as a means of supplementing the decline of consecrated persons necessary to carry out activities, now it is growing out of the need to share responsibility not only in the carrying out of the Institute’s works but especially in the hope of sharing specific aspects and moments of the spirituality and mission of the Institute.”*⁸ One of the fruits of the Church as a “communion” is the collaboration and exchange of gifts in order to share more effectively in the Church’s mission. An Institute manifests its charism in two ways: by living it and by sharing it with others.

II. An experience of collaboration: The Vincentian Family

Since we are speaking of lay people and religious engaged in a common mission, let me share with you how the charism of St. Vincent de Paul has been lived out in recent years with regard to the service of the poor in the Church.

The Vincentian charism began with Vincent de Paul at the beginning of the 17th century, and very quickly came to be shared with the French lay faithful of his day. In terms of collaboration, we find that our saint

- believed in the power of the laity;
- created opportunities for the lay faithful to live their faith in the very heart of the world;

⁸ *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 31.

- shared with them his own vision of Jesus Christ and the poor;
- shared his evangelical lifestyle with all classes of lay people;
- had a listening attitude towards the laity and the poor, and learned from them to let himself be transformed by God.

1. The various branches

Let me present to you some of the Associations that were founded by St. Vincent or arose within the Vincentian Family and that, while being faithful to their identity, share a common spirituality and mission.

St. Vincent de Paul believed in the power of the laity and in the evangelizing and transforming role of women in the Church and in society. Because of this conviction, and in response to the needs of the poor, he established **The Charities** in France in 1617. Today they are known as the International Association of Charities, AIC. These groups, principally consisting of women, are present in 52 countries with a total membership of 250,000. They are engaged in implementing projects that promote the poor, denounce injustice, and form pressure groups to combat unjust structures.

Seeking to evangelize the poor and renew the clergy, Vincent de Paul founded the **Congregation of the Mission** or the **Vincentian Missionaries (CM)**. Working in 80 countries and numbering around 4,000 missionaries, they collaborate with lay people in the integral promotion of persons and communities.

In the year 1633 Vincent de Paul together with Louise de Marillac founded **The Company of the Daughters of Charity (DC)**. Present today in 90 countries and numbering around 23,500, they collaborate with the laity, especially with Vincentian associations. They are active in areas afflicted by poverty and war and reach out to the poorest of the poor.

Drawing inspiration from the charism of Vincent de Paul, the young man Frederick Ozanam and his companions from the university established the **Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SSVP)** in Paris in 1833. Its end is: *To help our neighbour, those who suffer and are abandoned, after the example of Jesus Christ and according to the Vincentian tradition.*⁹ This foundation became an excellent means of actualizing the Vincentian charism in response to the concrete needs of the historical moment. Today the Association is present in 133 countries and has about 650,000 members.

⁹ Cf., Mt 25:31-48.

In the wake of the apparitions of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal to St. Catherine Labouré in the year 1830, there arose the **Association of Vincentian Marian Youth (JMV)**. Its end is *to form its members to live a solid faith following Jesus Christ, the evangelizer of the poor*. Living their missionary vocation in the Vincentian style, they work for the promotion of the poor, evangelizing the most neglected communities. They work in close collaboration with other groups of the Vincentian Family. They are present in 62 countries and have 72,000 members.

Again, following the apparitions of Our Lady to Catherine Labouré, there arose the **Association of the Miraculous Medal (AMM)**. Forming part of the Vincentian Family, and with a presence in 30 countries, they dedicate their activity in the Church to the evangelization and promotion of poor families in their own communities, and reach out to the most neglected groups. In all, they have about a million registered members.

The **Lay Vincentian Missionaries (MISEVI)**: This is a Vincentian association that arose in 1999 and whose aim is: to live the missionary dimension of the Vincentian charism with passion. For this reason, after receiving a solid formation in human and Christian living, and some technical or professional training, they go to the missions “ad gentes” and devote a part of their lives (from two to ten years) to the promotion of the poor. Their projects are carried out in collaboration with the works of the Daughters of Charity or with the Vincentian missionaries themselves. They have permanent lay missions in Mozambique, Bolivia, Honduras, and Spain.

There are many other associations and institutes who drink from this common well which is the Vincentian charism,¹⁰ for example, the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul who are here with us, but, for the purpose of this presentation, I have limited myself mainly to the collaboration among the above-mentioned groups.

All these associations or institutes share the same charism because:

- they recognize St. Vincent as the one who founded or inspired them;
- they have the same mission: the evangelizing service of the poor;
- they have, in some way, the same concrete way of serving the poor;

¹⁰ A recent study speaks of 267 communities that have appeared in the course of history; of them 167 exist in the world today. Cf., BETTY ANN MCNEIL, D.C., *The Vincentian Family Tree*, Vincentian Studies Institute, 1996.

- they share a common spirituality of incarnation: Christ, incarnate in the poor;
- they share a secular character.

2. Some elements pertaining to our juridical structure

All of the associations mentioned above are recognized by the Holy See. The AIC has an ecclesiastical assistant appointed by the Church, and the same is true of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Curiously enough, by a disposition of the Holy See, the Vincentian Marian Youth, the Association of the Miraculous Medal, and the Vincentian Lay Missionaries all have the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission for their Director General. All these associations have a lay president elected by their members. The Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul and the Congregation of the Mission enjoy a close family relationship and a solid interaction among them based on mutual respect. They have come together for formation and also undertake common projects of service and evangelization of the poor.

3. Experiences of collaboration

The Vincentian lay and consecrated persons who work in 135 countries of the world, motivated by their charism and by the appeals of the Church and the world today, have begun some common projects. Here are some of them:

They have drawn up programs for *formation in common*. Encouraged by the words of the Pope, “*Dear sons and daughters of St. Vincent: today more than ever, seek out the causes of poverty with boldness, humility and competence and foster effective, flexible, and concrete solutions for both the short- and the long-term. In doing so, you will help the Church and the gospel to be credible.*”¹¹ In each country they have initiated programs for the continuing formation of the lay faithful, the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission. There are programs of common formation in Vincentian spirituality and in the social teaching of the Church.

One of the programs of direct service to the poor is called “**The Globalization of Charity: The Fight against Hunger.**” During their annual meeting in 2001, at the beginning of the new millennium, the leaders of the different branches of the Vincentian Family chose **hunger** as their focal point for the following two years and suggested

¹¹ John Paul II to the General Assembly of the CM, 1986, in *Vincentiana* XXX (1986) 417.

that all the energies of the various associations be channelled towards combating this scourge. Two types of action were put into place: the immediate procurement of food and programs to overcome the causes of hunger, for example, education, creating awareness, community involvement and solidarity, and joint efforts with public authorities.

Every year there is a **Meeting of the International Leaders of the Vincentian Family**. Eight branches of the Vincentian Family come together to share their experiences and projects in the service of the poor. There are also moments of reflection and formation, prayer and joint implementation of common projects.

There is also an **Annual National Meeting of the different branches of the Vincentian Family**. To celebrate the feast of St. Vincent, the various associations and Vincentian groups come together every year in each country. It is an opportunity for prayer, sharing and formation in our own spirit and also to formulate more effective responses to the forms of poverty in our surroundings.

In many countries there is a **Coordinating Commission** that organizes common formation programs, apostolic projects, and times of prayer in which the different branches of the Family participate.

Furthermore, we are preparing a **book on lay Vincentian spirituality**. This formation material is being put together for the purpose of offering a Vincentian spirituality that is more incarnate in today's reality and drawn from the experience of the lay faithful themselves.

Finally, I would like to mention the **Common Prayer of the Vincentian Family**. With the collaboration of our international leaders we have drawn up and distributed a common prayer to all countries. It serves to unite us in the same spirit and to animate our evangelizing work for the poor. In addition, some of the branches have prepared, or are preparing, their own "book of Vincentian prayers."

III. Some of the challenges that arise from the joint action of religious and laity in the mission

1. Sharing one's charism with the laity

This is the first challenge facing religious life today: the sharing of an Institute's charism for the sake of growth and renewal. "*Today many Institutes have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with the laity.*"¹² It is already taking place and bringing

¹² *Vita Consecrata*, 54.

benefits to both consecrated persons and lay people. On the one hand, consecrated persons radiate their own spirituality; and on the other hand, they receive from the laity a new vision of their own charism, and this gives them an openness to new projects that respond more effectively to today's human situation. *"The whole spiritual and religious world, that oftentimes closes in on itself around insignificant problems, erupts when confronted with the grave problems people face and the natural way in which they put up with hunger, cold, hardships, inconveniences and insecurity for the whole of their lives.... It is a fact that the religious life which enters more deeply into this world... begins to discover the charismatic origins of its consecration.... Religious life has discovered from its lived experience that the poor person is a privileged mediation for the encounter with God."*¹³

Collaboration is the source of the inner renewal of religious communities, now that lay people have come to discover the essential elements of their life and of the charism itself. To share one's charism is to share the gift one has received so that others, lay people, may live their faith committed to the cause of peace and justice in the world. What actions can we take to share our charism, at both the provincial and local levels, and to live our common Mission more effectively?

2. Living one's charism with a spirit of collaboration

Starting out from an ecclesiology of communion and participation, we arrive at an attitude of shared responsibility in the common action of building the Kingdom. To collaborate in carrying out Jesus' project means to be humble enough to step back and to let the laity be in the vanguard in the areas that belong to them, in the Church and in the world. It means to give up our obsolete and self-sufficient attitudes towards the laity, to break with a clerical and elitist mentality. It means to assume attitudes of mutual listening, dialogue and discernment. It is to live in an attitude of openness, ready to give and to be given, and at the same time, to receive and to allow oneself to be transformed. Many saints and many of our own founders themselves went through a profound transformation in their spirituality and charism as a result of God's call through their encounter with lay people and with historical events. Looking at our communities, how do we live this collaboration? What is the dominant mentality?

¹³ V. CODINA - M. ZEVALLOS, *Vida religiosa: Historia y teología*, Ed. Paulinas, Madrid 1987, p. 188.

3. Religious and laity together facing the challenge of formation

Formation is the soul and the driving force of the mission and the commitment to build the Kingdom. The lack of formation is one of the greatest obstacles to the participation of the laity in the mission of the Church. The collaboration between religious and lay people begins with formation. Our mission today, it seems to me, is focused to a great extent on the formation of lay ministers. For integral formation to be at the service of the Church's mission, its starting point must be our concrete reality, and it must also return to this same reality in order to transform it. The Word of God, our present history, world events, and reflection on our charism and the situation of the poor, are the theological loci of formation. This formation is a fundamental challenge for the future of religious communities and of the mission of the laity in the Church. The formation of lay collaborators and consecrated members must be a constant concern for us. What contributions do we allow the laity to make to our formation? What programs do we have for common formation with the laity?

4. Promoting a lay spirituality together

For the first Christians the following of Jesus Christ formed part and parcel of their daily life, and both illumined it and transformed it. Their missionary commitment sprung from daily life, and profoundly affected their life, transforming it. A balanced interplay of prayer and action is extremely important in order to open the way to a healthy lay spirituality that is incarnated in the concrete history of the human person and of humanity. The "ora" of contemplation must be blended harmoniously with the "labora" of action, so that our spirituality will unite all the dimensions of human life in an experience of faith. As we set out again on the road to holiness today, we are immersed in a profound communion with God and in a commitment to transform the world. Both religious and laity need to create a spirituality that is centered in Christ and in his gospel. One of the challenges is for our communities to become "*schools of prayer*" for lay people.¹⁴

5. Walking together with a missionary spirituality

The Church is missionary by its very nature. The mission is its essence and its reason for being. It exists in order to evangelize and serve. The Second Vatican Council underlined the fact that the whole Church is missionary and, therefore, every baptized person must feel

¹⁴ Cf., *Nuevo Millennio Ineunte*, 33.

called to contribute to the proclamation of the gospel. For religious life, therefore, the missionary dimension is not something optional but rather essential. The fact that many lay people today are called by God to live the mission *ad gentes* challenges us to create the conditions and the structures needed for them to live their vocation as missionaries. In a globalized world such as ours, there must be a readiness to go wherever our charism is needed, and so we too must have a missionary mentality because only one who is truly a missionary can lead others to share in the mission. The challenge we face is to discover the missionary possibilities of our charism in order to share them with the laity. To accompany them in the mission is also a part of the task of religious communities. How do we live out and transmit this missionary dimension flowing from our own charism?

6. Being with the poorest

We cannot leave lay people with an ambiguous faith and a timid commitment in the face of the world; they need the radicalism of the gospel along with a coherent life. The lived witness of our communities must show clearly “where we stand” and “with whom we stand.” For Christians, baptism is the deepest motivation for turning our commitment to Jesus into a preferential option for the poorest and most abandoned by society. The challenge for religious consists in keeping a real and effective presence in the face of old and new forms of poverty which continue to afflict the world and are a cause of scandal for humanity. War, hunger, social exclusion, sickness, violence and many other realities of this kind continue to call out for a committed presence on the part of those who follow Jesus. In the Church there is an awakening among lay people who seek to be radical in their faith commitment and hope to see a religious life that is more coherent with the gospel and with their own charism. The laity are looking for religious communities that are open, welcoming and that, by a lifestyle marked by simplicity and closeness, show them how to be with the poor.

7. Create “new opportunities” for the mission of the laity in the Church and in the world

One of the biggest challenges facing the Church, and religious life within the Church, is that of creating new opportunities for people to live their faith. Moved by their charism, religious can create new opportunities for lay people to share the life, spirituality and apostolate proper to the community, especially its prayer and its service of the poor. In this area great progress has been made since Vatican II, but there still remains much to be done. A greater

participation of the laity in the Church means reformulating the role of the hierarchy, and, if you will, “relocating” the clergy. The Church’s official documents highlight the secular activity of the laity, but do not limit them only to this area. In 20 centuries of history how far have we advanced along the path of participation and shared responsibility that were present in the early communities in which Priscilla and Aquila exercised a role of primary importance? These same documents also mention the possibility of lay people participating in the Church as ministers. Beginning with our communities, what has been done in practice? The document *Vita Consecrata* urges us to go further: “*It is therefore urgently necessary to take certain concrete steps, beginning by providing room for women to participate in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves.*”¹⁵ What steps should be taken at the level of our religious communities to achieve a more significant feminine presence in the Church and in society?

Conclusion

Collaboration will be profoundly ecclesial to the degree to which there exists a deep conviction in the Church about the universal call to holiness, about the universal call to mission, and about the universal call to create a civilization of love. On the other hand, collaboration will be realized more effectively to the degree that there is clarity and an incarnation and inculturation of the charism of the institutes themselves. And finally, collaboration will spring from the confidence and faith we have in the laity, and from the conviction that they have an increasingly important role to play in the Church today.

¹⁵ *Vita Consecrata*, 58.