

# *Being Catholic Today*

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## **Lecture 4: The Vocation of the Laity**

### *Recap*

Catholic life is constituted by faith and baptism. It is a commitment to Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, as Lord of one's life. Faith says Yes to Christ as one experiences him through his Word. It says, "Jesus Christ is Lord" and addresses him, "My Lord and my God." Catholic religion is founded on this encounter with the person of Jesus, however one experiences him. A Catholic is one who "falls for" Christ's message, accepts him on his terms. Even those who have never heard of Christ have an implicit commitment to him insofar as they follow their own conscience and seek to order their lives according to a higher truth. Those who have heard of Christ and have accepted him as Lord and savior signify that acceptance by receiving baptism which makes them members of a visible community, members of the body of Christ. Through baptism they receive a share in the divine life, becoming "sons in the Son," united to the Father and to their brothers and sisters by the Holy Spirit. Catholicism is a sharing in the life of the holy Trinity.

That commitment to Christ needs to be ongoing. It is not made once and for all. By faith you surrender your life to him, accept him as the principle of a new life which leads to a new behavior. Your life is gradually penetrated and taken over by his life in you. In Blessed Theresa of Calcutta's words, Christ must be free to

live his life in you. This life does not destroy your own individual life but enhances and perfects it, lifts it up to a supernatural level while developing your personal gifts in their fullness. Each Christian is a unique way of living the infinite life of Christ.

Each day we can ask, "Is Jesus Christ really my Lord and God, have I subjected my whole self to him, allowed him to live his life in me so that there is no resistance? Am I transformed in Christ? Am I participating fully in the sacramental life of the Church as the nourishment of my life in Christ, my lifeline? Do I draw strength from sacramental grace? Am I growing in unity with the Church in all its members, clerical and lay?" Growth for a Catholic means a deepening awareness of being one with Christ, a living member of his body, united to Father and Son by the Holy Spirit poured out on us. As we accept this new life we slowly come to recognize how much of ourselves still needs to be transformed by him, how much of the "old man" which tries to take the place of God, is alive and kicking in us. My failure to surrender to God's active love in me is what we mean by sin. I become aware that my conversion is incomplete, I am not wholly living by Christ's life in me but want to be in charge, prefer my own way to God's, do not want to submit to his life in me.

Prayer is mindfulness of Christ and his presence, invoking it against selfish thoughts and instincts when they arise. We have to cooperate with the new life within us by relying on it and activating it by constant prayer. By ourselves we can do nothing, but by invoking Christ's life in us we can do all things. "There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the one who gives me strength" (Phil 4:13). Early

monks often described these sinful pulls away from God as demons, which they might well be, but what is important is that they work through tendencies that are in us. Already in the fourth century Christians had classified these sinful “thoughts” or “passions” into seven categories: gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, sloth, envy, and pride. Christ is not completely free in us; we have to cooperate with his grace in putting to death selfish drives. We should be growing toward full charity: love of God with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, our whole strength, and love of neighbor as ourselves, or as Jesus has loved us, that is, even to death, to laying down our life. The Catholic Church has produced many models of this kind of holiness or participation in the life of Christ and continues to do so. We are the Church “Militant” because we still have to fight against Satan, sin, the “flesh,” the “world,” the false self that wants to play god. The basic sin can be called lack of trust, failure to accept God’s transforming love for us in Jesus, unbelief.

Catholics need time daily to pray, to recall the presence of Christ in their lives, to recall that they are branches on the Vine that is Christ. They need to call on Christ to help them in their struggles, to illumine them as to God’s will, to give them strength, the virtues of patience, love, goodness, kindness, gentleness, hospitality, cheerfulness, etc., to protect them, to fortify them, etc. This was our subject in the previous lecture.

### ***The Vocation of the Laity***

All that has been said so far applies to every Catholic. But lay Catholics (those who are neither priests nor in consecrated

religious life) have their own particular vocation in the Church, one neglected in the past but coming to the fore in the twentieth century. Since the Council of Trent and its reform of the Church after the Protestant Revolt, the Church was identified with the hierarchy; the Church was a pyramid with the pope at the top, the bishops next, then priests, and at the bottom the laity. According to Saint Pius X (1906), the laity “have no other right than to let themselves be guided and so follow their pastors in docility.” But already in the 17th century Saint Francis de Sales saw that all vocations were to be vitalized by the Christian spirit: “Just as every sort of gem, cast in honey, becomes brighter and more sparkling, each according to its color, so each person becomes more acceptable and fitting in his own vocation when he sets his vocation in the context of devotion. Through devotion your family cares become more peaceful, mutual love between husband and wife becomes more sincere, the service we owe to the prince becomes more faithful, and our work, no matter what it is, becomes more pleasant and agreeable”

*(Introduction to the Devout Life)*. With the advance of secularism, the Church began to realize that whole segments of “the world” were being lost to Christ, voided of Christian principles. Groups of so-called Catholic Action developed in Europe in the early 20th century to bring Christian principles into play in political and social life. The great champion of Catholic Action was Pope Pius XI, who in 1927 defined Catholic Action as the “participation of the laity in the apostolate of the Church’s hierarchy.” Lay people were now viewed as aids to the hierarchy in championing Christian values in the world.

Then in 1943 came a revolutionary encyclical of Pius XII: *Mystici Corporis*, on the Mystical Body of Christ. Pope Pius took advantage of decades of biblical, patristic, and liturgical studies that recovered original and ancient understandings of the nature of the Church. All Christians have an incomparable dignity through their baptism into Christ: each one functions as a member of the body of Christ with his own special gift to contribute. The Church was not primarily a hierarchical institution but a living organism with the Spirit of the risen Christ as its vitalizing principle. Each Christian made Christ present in the world.

Twenty years later the Second Vatican Council developed this teaching, particularly in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* (1964). Building on the ancient self-understanding of the Church, the document taught that through the Incarnation of the Son of God all creation has been sanctified. The material world and all of human culture is to be taken into the body of Christ. The development of secular knowledge and technology is part of the world which the Son of God took on when he took flesh, and it is to be transformed by his Spirit. The Church was deepening its understanding of the Incarnation as it had done many times in the past. The material world is not something to turn our backs on in a purely spiritual religion but something to be transformed by the Gospel.

The document is divided into eight chapters. Chapter One presents “The Mystery of the Church” in the light of God’s plan to draw mankind into intimate union with himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The communion of believers in Christ is examined with the help of

biblical images: the sheepfold, the vine or plantation, the temple or city, the bride of God, and especially the body of Christ. But the Council’s preferred image for the Church is reserved for a separate chapter, Chapter Two, “The People of God,” in which the Church is seen as the sacrament or sign of God’s plan to make mankind his very own people. The Council said in a famous sentence: “God has gathered together as one all those who in faith look upon Jesus as the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, and has established them as the church, that for each and all she may be the visible sacrament of this saving unity” (9). The Church is the visible communion of those united with Christ, not simply an institution for the salvation of souls, not a pyramid with a pope at the top and laity at the base, but one single people within which are contained special ministries and services.

The first of these ministries, that of bishops, is dealt with in Chapter Three, where the collegial nature of episcopal authority is outlined. Bishops have a triple function: to proclaim and teach the truth about Christ (prophetic office), to sanctify mankind by offering the sacrifice of Christ (priestly office), and to organize and govern the activities of the Church, e.g., establish parishes, assign priests, direct missionary and charitable work, supervise education, etc. (kingly office).

Chapter Four deals with the lay ministry in language that is new in the Church. No longer are the laity viewed simply as auxiliaries of the hierarchy in the Church’s apostolate; rather they have a mission that only they can fill, that of sanctifying life in the world, that is, each walk of life, law, medicine, journalism, entertainment, manufacturing, finance & economics,

politics, family, education, etc. This mission is described in several different ways. It is the vocation of the laity to “seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God” (para. 31). Notice the double perspective that will be found throughout the document: lay people are fully “engaged” in this world yet seek to “order” it by a transcendent principle. They don’t try to escape the world and its demands but shape it in accord with its maker’s plan. “By exercising their proper function and being led by the spirit of the gospel they can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of **leaven**” (31). The Gospel image of leaven shows the relationship between the two perspectives, one enlivening the other. Again, “The layman is closely involved in temporal affairs of every sort. It is therefore his special task to illumine and organize these affairs in such a way that they may always start out, develop and persist according to Christ’s mind, to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer” (31). The more Christians study Christ’s mind in the Gospels, the more they will be able to direct creation according to the mind of God. Finally, “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 she become the **salt** of the earth” (33)—another biblical image for the stimulus given by Christians to the world.

There follow three sections in which the laity are seen to have their own share in the three functions of Christ previously applied to the bishops. The laity are priests: “As worshipers whose every deed is holy, the laity consecrate the world itself to God” (34) and offer their daily activities as sacrifices brought to God in the

Eucharist. Secondly they are prophets: “Christ made the laity his witnesses and gave them understanding of the faith and the grace of speech so that the power of the gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life” (35). Lay people witness to Christ by performing their tasks in the world in the spirit of Christ and by “wrestling against the spiritual powers of darkness in this world,” in the way I described above. Finally, they are kings, a “royal priesthood”: “The faithful must learn the deepest meaning and the value of all creation and how to relate it to the praise of God...In this way the world is permeated by the spirit of Christ and more effectively achieves its purpose in justice, charity, and peace. The laity have the principal role in the fulfillment of this purpose...In this manner, through the members of the Church, Christ will progressively illumine the whole of human society with his saving **light**” (36). The image of light is added to those of leaven and salt. Again the Council says, “Laymen will imbue culture and human activity with moral values” (36), another way of saying they direct worldly affairs according to God’s mind. Their task is the “harmonizing” of their duties as members of the Church with those which they have as members of human society. The chapter ends with a final image cited from the second century *Letter to Diognetus*: “What the **soul** is to the body, let Christians be to the world” (38). Cardinal Newman had said something similar in the 19th century: “Christians in the world must be like the soul in the body, animating, effective and invisible.”

That was Chapter Four of *Lumen gentium*. Having discussed the mystery of the Church and the hierarchical and lay ministries, the Council explains in Chapter Five how all members of the Church have one common vocation, namely holiness, the holiness that consists in charity. For the Council this holiness must show itself in our dealings with this world: “By this holiness a more human way of life is promoted even in this earthly society. All of Christ’s faithful, whatever be the conditions, duties, and circumstances of their lives, will grow in holiness day by day through these very situations, if they accept all of them with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father, and if they cooperate with the divine will by showing every man through their earthly activities the love with which God has loved the world” (41). That is the lofty vocation of every Catholic, and therefore of the layman, to show in the context of his daily life the love with which God has loved the world, that is, the love of Christ himself. That is the task we undertake anew each day. We will see in a moment how that vocation is sustained and exercised.

Since there is in the Church a special way of life geared specifically for attaining holiness by certain renunciations, Chapter Six of the document discusses the consecrated religious life. And since this people of God is a pilgrim people whose final home is not here, the document has a chapter on the eschatological nature of church, reminding us to keep our eyes on the goal. One paragraph in particular gives a blueprint for our life in the world: “Christ, having been lifted up from the earth, is drawing all men to himself (Jn 12:32). Rising from the dead, he sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through this Spirit has established his body, the Church, as the universal

sacrament of salvation. Sitting at the right hand of the Father, he is continually active in the world, leading men to the Church, and through her joining them more closely to himself and making them partakers of his glorious life by nourishing them with his own body and blood” (48). Here below Christians enjoy a genuine though imperfect holiness; they groan in longing, watch in hope for the coming of Christ. In spite of the weaknesses and even sins of Church members, saints are being made, the witness of holiness is being given.

The final chapter of the document presents Mary as a kind of summing up of the mystery of the Church: the creature receptive to God, bringing him forth into the world, mother of those who are in him, our mother, the model of Church, a sign of the sinlessness we are all ultimately called to.

How in practical terms are laity to live out this vision of their mission? Priests and bishops can only point the way: you are the ones who have to find out how to do it. What is clear is that you have to stay close to the Eucharist; draw your strength from that, the nourishment for the branches on the Vine. It is the source of your Christ-life: “As I, who am sent by the living Father, myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me” (John 6:57). Secondly, pray daily, spending time with Christ, using the Gospels or other Scriptures as ways of hearing his voice addressed to you today; learn to view the people and issues in your life in the light of Christ, which is to view them in their profoundest reality. Thirdly, develop the habits of calling on the name of Jesus in moments of difficulty or temptation and of thanking him at all times. Fourthly, become expert in your field or secular calling: faith itself calls

you to that. Fifthly seek a deeper understanding of the teaching of the Church. Finally, seek the support of others engaged in the same lay vocation; share experiences and strategies and difficulties, talk about them. The harmonizing of your life in the world with your new Christ life is a task to be taken up anew every day, a kind of extension of the Incarnation into the world of today.

The second major Council document giving insight into the mission of the laity is *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965). This amazing document marked a new stage in the history of the Church's attitude to the world. It recognized that all of modern human life in all its complexity is a terrain where Christ wishes to dwell. A Preface (1-3) states that the purpose of the death and resurrection of Christ was to fashion this world anew, to liberate it from sin, and to enable mankind through the Spirit of God to live in brotherhood. After an Introduction reviewing the "Situation of Men in the Modern World" (4-10), the main teaching of the document is presented in two parts, one laying down general principles, the other examining specific areas of modern life which need to be animated by the Christian spirit.

Part One has four chapters, the first on "The Dignity of the Human Person" (12-22), the second on the human community (23-32). The third chapter focuses on the activity in the world of man as individual and community (33-39). It is in this and the following chapter that we find the richest teaching on the laity. The Council states, "Men are not deterred by the Christian message from building up the world, or impelled to neglect the welfare of their fellows [this was the Marxist

critique of religion as the "opiate of the people"']. They are, rather, more stringently bound to do these very things" (34). The Christ life compels us to make the world more human: "Christ is now at work in the hearts of men through the energy of his Spirit. He arouses not only a desire for the age to come, but by that very fact he animates, purifies, and strengthens those noble longings too by which the human family strives to make its life more human and to render the whole earth submissive to this goal.... He frees all men so that by putting aside love of self and bringing all earthly resources into the service of human life they can devote themselves to that future when humanity itself will become an offering accepted by God" (38). Again, "The expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one" (39).

The final chapter of Part One discusses "The Role of the Church in the Modern World" (40-45). Images we saw in *Lumen gentium* are developed in this context. "The Church goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does. She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God's family.... The earthly and the heavenly city penetrate each other..." (40). "Christ gave his Church no proper mission in the political, economic, or social order. The purpose which he set before her is a religious one. But out of this religious mission itself come a function, a light, and an energy which can serve to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law" (42). It is in this context that the laity come into their own. "In the exercise of all their earthly activities, they can thereby gather their

humane, domestic, professional, social, and technical enterprises into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory. Secular duties and activities belong properly although not exclusively to laymen. Therefore acting as citizens of the world, whether individually or socially, they will observe the laws proper to each discipline, and labor to equip themselves with a genuine expertise in their various fields....Laymen should know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city" (43). In other words they have the initiative in these matters and need not wait to be told by priests what to do. Part One concludes by citing Saint Paul's great vision of the consummation of human history: "To reestablish all things in Christ, both those in the heavens and those on the earth" (45).

We need not this evening look at Part Two of *Gaudium et spes* which examines the consequences of this teaching in five crucial areas of human life: Marriage and the Family (47-52), the Development of Culture, i.e., the values of a society together with the practices that express them (53-62), Socio-Economic Life (63-72), The Political Community (73-76), and Peace and the Community of Nations (77-90). The document concludes with the same positive viewpoint as it began with: "Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the men of the modern world ever more generously and effectively....Christians have shouldered a gigantic task demanding fulfillment in this world....The Father wills that in all men we recognize Christ our brother and love him effectively in word and in deed. By thus giving witness to the truth, we will

share with others the mystery of the heavenly Father's love" (93). *Gaudium et spes* joins *Lumen gentium* in seeing the Catholic's mission as the revealing of God's love in the world.

In his encyclical of 1975, Paul VI identified this mission of Christianizing the world as evangelization, which he defined as "bringing the good News into all the strata of humanity and through its influence transforming humanity from within" (18). This task belongs in a special way to the layman. John Paul II in his turn devoted his 1988 apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles laici* to the same mission of the laity, relying extensively on the ground-breaking passages of the Council documents.

That is the vision I can present to you. I hope it stirs you as much as it does me. It presents the excitement of the Christian challenge of extending the life of Christ into the world of our time. It is a challenge that will certainly lead to an experience of the cross, insofar as it is a share in the mission of Christ himself, but though we groan for the liberation of humanity from the bonds of death, we are at the same time filled with joyful hope and confidence in our dignity as members of the Body of Christ who is transforming human society through us.

I cannot offer a blueprint for this sanctification of the world, but I can cite three examples of laymen who illustrate the principles we have been speaking of. The first is the patron saint of laymen, Thomas More. In his *Utopia* he imagined himself criticized for taking part in the world of politics. His critic thought such a career incompatible with high principles involving as it did, flattery, dishonesty, and all manner of corruption in the service of greedy princes. More recognized that

political affairs were corrupt but saw that a Catholic had a definite opportunity: “that which you cannot turn to good, so to order it that it be not very bad.” To that goal he devoted himself in the service of Henry VIII. Secondly, a layman who works in finance attends Mass daily in our parish and says that not 15 minutes in the day go by without his being confronted with a moral decision, where his Christian principles must come into play. Finally, I would like to read the testimony of a Catholic lawyer which reveals from the inside the struggles of living in both the heavenly and earthly cities. These are extracts from a speech by Judge Leon Holmes, Chief United States District Judge of the Eastern District of Arkansas, given in May, 2005, to the St. Thomas More Society of Little Rock. Perhaps the judge’s experience as a Christian lawyer will illumine your own vocation.

[read from speech, which can be made available]

Such is the life of the layman in the world. It should also be said that beyond the sanctification of the world through one’s own particular vocation, there is also scope for more explicit contributions of the laity, i.e., teaching catechism, serving on parish councils, fostering respect for human life, bringing relief to victims of disaster, working towards a more equal distribution of the world’s goods, working for peace, promoting the rights of women and minorities, promoting environmental stewardship, etc. There are also new associations of lay people springing up all over the world, oblates or associates of religious orders, prayer groups, the Catholic Worker, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Focolare, the Community of Sant’Egidio, Legatus, Voice of the Faithful, the Manquehue Apostolic

Movement, to name only a few. Each lay person must follow the lead of the Spirit in associating with others to fulfill his or her mission in the world.