

## STUDENT ESSAY

## The Mission of the Laity as Priest, Prophet and King

### I. Introduction

The Second Vatican Council sought to uphold the fundamental right of the laity to express in freedom their charisms in the Church and in the world. In acknowledging the inherent dignity of the common priesthood of the baptized



the council called for collaborative ministry between the clergy and the laity, originating from Christ and guided by the Spirit (Rosato 237). This development opened a new understanding of the theology of the laity.

The Church as the People of God is made up of bishops, clergy, religious and the laity. As one body of Christ, the Church is about building the Kingdom of God. The role of the laity in the mission of the Church is special and indispensable. “The Church can never be without the lay apostolate; it is something that derives from the layman’s very vocation as a Christian” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* [AA] 1). There is the need therefore for their identity and presence to be recognized in the Church and in the world. This essay will consider the definition of the laity, their mission as priests, prophets and kings, and a call on the need for their formation.

### II. Definition of the Laity

The Second Vatican Council lifted the concept of the laity out of the negative status of non-priests and set them positively among the faithful people of God sharing fully in the salvific mission of the Church. The Council thus defined the laity as the faithful who, though not in Holy Orders and not belonging to a religious state approved by the Church, are incorporated into Christ by baptism and placed in the People of God (*Lumen Gentium* [LG] 31). The laity belong fully to the Church and to its mystery, and are the presence of the

Church in the world, not as some second arm of the Church (Foley 13). They derive their life and fruitfulness from Christ.

The laity are therefore defined by their active membership of the Church as the people of God, ensuring that the Church's mission on earth is accomplished. Indeed, the destiny of the whole Church is thus placed in their hands as well. They are also defined as non-clerical and non-office-bearer, which is not to discriminate them in the Church, but to emphasize the uniqueness of their vocation in the Church and the mutual complementarity they share with the clergy. They participate in the total mission of the Church in a non-hierarchical way, their role given by charism not by office. In addition, they are contrasted with those in religious life, since the laity are not in a life committed to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. The laity exercise their call to holiness often in terms of their marriage and family life. And though those in religious life might undertake some secular activities, the laity are more present to the world than they are. Thus, they have a Christian relationship with the world through their everyday activities of family, work, learning and play that make up the good of human society.

The position of the laity in the Church is marked by the new life in Christ received in baptism and confirmation and distinguished by their secular character. Their secular character is not to be defined only in a sociological sense, but most especially in a theological sense. "The term *secular* must be understood in light of the act of God the creator and redeemer, who has handed over the world to women and men so that they may participate in the work of creation, free from the influence of sin and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in a family, in a profession, and in the various activities of society" (*Christifideles Laici (CL)* 15).<sup>1</sup> Their involvement in the life of the Church is also essential since through the Church they are able to receive the proper formation to then evangelize the world.

Undeniably, the laity are the face of the Church in the world. Not only do they belong to the Church, they are the Church (*CL* 9). They have been called to "the enjoyment of our inheritance as sons of God; but they have to pursue and attain this end without cutting down their involvement in the activities of the world, in the realities of the primal creation, in the disappointments, the

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<sup>1</sup> While "sacred" is reserved for holy things or the things of God, God made the whole world good and gave men and women dominion over it. Thus "secular" is not the strict contrary to "sacred" because the human being, made in the image of God and for communion with God, is meant to order all of life in this world to God's glory. Our ability to fulfill this calling was certainly damaged in the fall. But not only was this calling not lost, it was redeemed and renewed in Christ who lived his human life in perfect relation to God his Father.

achievements, the stuff of history” (Congar 18). Thus, they are called to be in the world but not of the world.

### **III. Mission as Priest, Prophet and King**

The mission of the laity has its roots in Jesus commissioning the “seventy-two others” to bring the message of the Kingdom of God to the world (Luke 10:1-11). The word “others” in verse 1 shows that the seventy-two are a number distinct from the twelve apostles which can thus be referred to as the laity in our present context. The need for the service of the laity in carrying out the mission of Christ is emphasized when Christ said in verse 2: “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.” The New Testament affirms the spontaneous and fruitful character of the activity of those who were not apostles in the early days of the Church (cf. Act 11:19-21; 18:26; Rom. 16:1-16; Phil. 4:3).

Fundamental to the mission of the laity is the universal call to holiness. Inasmuch as they are called to personal holiness, they are also called to sanctify the world, with their holiness being a sign and instrument of grace and reconciliation for others. In his General Audience of Wednesday, 13 April 2011, Pope Benedict XVI explained that “the true simplicity and greatness of a life of holiness is the encounter with the risen one on Sunday [going to mass on Sundays]; contact with God at the beginning and at the end of the day; following, in decisions, the “signposts” [the ten commandments] that God has communicated to us which are but forms of charity” (3). These principles are to be encouraged in the life of the laity in their path to holiness as they seek to accomplish their mission as priests, prophets and kings.

It is worthy to note that “though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ” (LG 10). The ministerial priest acts in the person of Christ, makes Christ present in the Eucharist, and offers a sacrifice to God in the name of all the people whereas the laity joining in the offering of the Eucharist “exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity” (LG 10). It is Christ who gives the laity a share in his priestly, prophetic and kingly mission as he intimately links them to his life and mission. He gives them the “understanding of the faith (*sensus fidei*) and attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life” (LG 35). He has also “communicated his royal power to the faithful so that they might be constituted in royal freedom and that by true penance and a holy life they might conquer the reign of sin in themselves” (LG 36). And that

“they might by humility and patience lead their brethren to that King for whom to serve is to reign” (LG 36).

### 1. Priest

The priesthood of the faithful involves two different senses, general sense applied to the order of holiness of life in the offering of oneself to God, and a specific sense applied to the order of sacramental worship, in their participation in the offering of the Eucharist. The lay faithful are sharers in the priestly mission for which Christ offered himself on the cross and continues to be offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Their offering and priesthood are spiritual (Congar 136, 191). They offer daily spiritual sacrifices in union with Christ for the glory of the Father and the salvation of humanity (McNamara 251) and then bring these up in the offering of the gifts to be united with the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Consequently, the laity are united to Christ and to his sacrifice through the offering they make of themselves and their daily activities. St. Paul in speaking of sacrificing one's body writes that: “I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1). This sacrifice is the holiness of life the laity are called to live.

The lay faithful fulfill their priestly mission by their constant endurance of the hardships in life. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, they offer their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily labor, their mental and physical relaxation as spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. These sacrifices are offered along with the body of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist (CL 14). Their offering of the bread and wine to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ is the offering of their labor, lives and the world to God that they may be transformed into Christ's own self. What they can do in the secular world, they can do as an offering to God done in Christian charity which sanctifies it. Their mission begins with the *ite missa est*, so the Mass is ended. Thus, as they worship by their holy actions, they consecrate the world to God (LG 34).

In the marriage milieu, the priesthood of a husband and wife is more than a simple application of the spiritual priesthood of holiness, for there is something instituted about it since it is a sacrament (Congar 203). The parents are able to exercise their priestly mission when they enter into family worship at home – sharing meals at table, grace before and after meals, personal intercessory prayers for their children, Bible reading and praying the Liturgy of the Hours. More so, “the state of being of a husband and wife, inspired by true love and consent that is free and heart-felt, is very properly a state of sacrifice; it is

therefore a priestly state" (Congar 204). There are a lot of sacrifices in marriage in the sense of renunciation and self-giving where husband and wife offer themselves up completely to each other and to their children in love. Also, the command to offer one's body (Rom 12:1) is fulfilled in a unique way in the giving of the spouses' bodies to each other in the conjugal act, and in another sense, of the mother to the child in pregnancy and nursing. These are natural acts of self-giving, but in the sacrament of marriage they also share in the grace of Christ and the mystery of his great nuptial love for us.

## **2. Prophet**

A prophet proclaims the truth about God and man. "The prophetic function of the Church includes all the work of the Holy Spirit in her whereby, in her present state of pilgrimage, she knows God and his purpose of grace, and makes them known to others" (Congar 271). This is what the laity share in as they are given the ability and responsibility to accept the Gospel in faith and to proclaim it in word and deed without hesitating to courageously identify and denounce evil. Through this office, they are sharers in the supernatural appreciation of the Church's faith which cannot err in matters of belief and sharers as well in the grace of the word (*LG* 12; *CL* 14). The magisterium is infallible in matters of faith, and so are the whole body of the faithful when they listen to the magisterium and thus partake of its infallibility (Congar 290).

As those who share in the prophetic office of Christ, the laity are witnesses of the faith, proclaiming the gospel in their everyday family and social lives. They are to be witnesses of truth which is Christ himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). This mission comes from Christ: "you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). "Teaching through witness is not given through words alone; often its more effective form is that of belief translated quite simply into life with no attempt at persuasion" (Congar 303). The laity then are to teach and practice the Church's beliefs.

The laity in their prophetic mission exercise the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very witness of a Christian life and good works done in a supernatural spirit are effective in drawing men to the faith and to God (*AA* 6). This emphasizes what Christ said: "Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father" (Mt. 5:16). Announcing Christ by a living testimony and the spoken word takes on a specific quality and a special force in that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world (*LG* 35; Wuerl 244). The laity then must know that they serve as ambassadors of Christ and his Church wherever they are. Also, with the family being the domestic Church, parents must be the witnesses and primary teachers of the faith to their children. Their prophetic mission is a

penetration of the Gospel into the way they live, which primarily starts in the family.

In the Church communities, the laity are encouraged to develop the habit of working in the parish in close union with their priests, of sharing their challenges with the ecclesial community and discussing questions regarding the faith. They are to support missionary works by providing material means and personal service (AA 10). The young people are to bring the spirit of Christ into their exuberance and exercise their mission with a sense of obedience and love. Adults should enter into friendly dialogue with the young sharing with them their experiences and giving them sound advice and practical help (AA 12). In their patriotism and fidelity to their civic duties, the laity should feel bound to promote the true common good, making their convictions which are influenced by the faith so influential in the society (AA 14).

The laity should everywhere on earth bear witness to Christ and give an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope of an eternal life which is theirs (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).

Just as the sacraments of the New Law, by which the life and the apostolate of the faithful are nourished, prefigure a new heaven and a new earth, so too the laity go forth as powerful proclaimers of a faith in things to be hoped for, when they courageously join to their profession of faith a life springing from faith.... Consequently, even when preoccupied with temporal cares, the laity can and must perform a work of great value for the evangelization of the world. Therefore, let the laity devotedly strive to acquire a more profound grasp of revealed truth, and let them insistently beg of God the gift of wisdom (LG 35).

This shows the eschatological nature of Christian living and also points out the great need for an effective witness to “the life of the world to come” for a world too beholden to secularism and closed to the transcendent. Thus, the laity are to renew their own love for Christ and then share their faith with others who may have drifted away from the faith or who have never heard the Gospel message (Wuerl 241). In the practice of charity, they should know that they are called to heal the broken hearted, to be hope for the poor and feed the hungry at their doors. They are to support private or public works of charity and social assistance movements, including international schemes (AA 8).

### **3. King**

The laity, belonging to Christ who is Lord and King of the universe, share in his kingly mission. The Kingdom of God is promised to them (Mat 25:34) and they are made kings: “You made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and

they will reign on earth" (Rev 5:10). Their kingship role is to be understood eschatologically not politically. It belongs to the life of the laity in the spiritual order. "Spiritual kingship is that which recognizes the divine meaning in things and honors their reference to God, that by which the action of spiritual priesthood is effected" (Congar 234). Thus, the role of the laity as priest and king are intimately connected. The laity are kings of what they offer in the exercise of their priestly role.

The Lord desires that his kingdom be spread by the lay faithful: the kingdom of truth, life, holiness, grace, justice, love and peace (LG 36). The laity exercise their kingship as Christians in the spiritual combat in which they seek to overcome in themselves and others the kingdom of sin (CL 14). "The Christian is king because he triumphs over sin, controls the enticements of the flesh, and rules body and soul" (Congar 235). This is what the laity stand for as kings, and what a challenge that is for them since there is the lost sense of sin among many people in our contemporary world. But the laity are also conscious of the Lord's presence and support to them in the exercise of their mission for Christ said: "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mat 28:20). It must be noted that "by submitting to God's rule man himself rules" (Congar 236). Thus, the laity as followers of Christ share in the kingship and holiness of their Head only by submission to and union with God's will, by adjusting themselves to the divine purpose for all humanity.

The kingship of the laity modeled after Christ is one of service: "the greatest among you must be your servant" (Matthew 23:11). God's wisdom is a wisdom of the cross which is of self-giving. Like the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, the laity work for the good of those whom they serve for the authority of the Church is one of service and not domination (LG 36; CCC 786). The lay person called to spiritual kingship can be "a king without having any authoritative charge, however lowly, even oppressed, he may be...by using his power as a service" (Congar 238). For the laity, a place of power is an opportunity for serving others.

More so, the laity are called to order human ways and processes on earth toward salvation. This mission is about ordering our human endeavors with a supernatural motivation. The first royal power over the world given to humanity is dominion: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth" (Gen 1:28). The laity have dominion as co-creators with the Creator, who has given them the authority to order the world for human good to the glory of God. By working in harmony, they renew the temporal order and make it increasingly more perfect: such is God's design for the world. This temporal order is to be renewed in such a way that, while its own principles

are fully respected, it is harmonized with the principles of the Christian life and adapted to the various conditions of times, places and peoples (AA 7). Also, they are to order the sufferings of this world to the kingdom of God. This involves the laity working for justice and fighting against injustice, so that all that men and women do and accomplish is ordered to the truth and goodness of human dignity, not selfish and exploitative ends which distort and degrade it.

#### IV. Conclusion

With the constant changing face of the world, the diversity in the areas of lay apostolate and for a better understanding and exercise of their mission, the laity must be constantly given human, social, doctrinal, spiritual, and apostolic formation. This formation is received from God, family (domestic Church), parish, schools and Catholic universities, groups, associations and movements. The laity must live in communion with Jesus for that is an indispensable condition for bearing fruit (CL 32; AA 4; John 15:5). Also, there should be an enhancement of collaborative ministry among the hierarchy and the laity where each one's role is respected and supported.

As sharers in the role of Christ the priest, prophet and king, the laity have an active part to play in the life and activity of the Church. Their activity is so necessary within Church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is generally unable to achieve its full effectiveness. This makes their assistance indispensable. Nevertheless, "the unity and the complementarity of the apostolates carried out by both the laity and the clergy are to be safeguarded by the hierarchical communion of priests with their bishops and by the functional union of the laity with the hierarchy" (Rosato 226).

We do well to conclude with the words of Blessed John Henry Newman:  
I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold, and what they do not, who know their creed so well, that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it. I want an intelligent, well-instructed laity.... You ought to be able to bring out what you feel and what you mean, as well as to feel and mean it (390, 391).

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