

On November 18, 1965, His Holiness Pope Paul VI promulgated the decree of the Second Vatican Council on the **Apostolate of the Laity**.  
The following is an analytic summary of articles one to four.

**The apostolate of the laity:**

- (1) derives from the Christian vocation,
- (2) the Church can never be without it,
- (3) the New Testament clearly shows that at the very beginning of the Church it was spontaneous, fruitful.

"Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except the Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and the great number that believed turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:19-21).

"He [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the Synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 8:26).

Many lay apostles are mentioned by St. Paul. For example in the first 16 verses of the 16th chapter of his Epistle to the Romans and at the beginning of the 4th chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians.

**In our own day the apostolate of the laity must be broadened, and intensified. Reasons for this are:**

- (a) increase in population;
- (b) continual progress in science and technology;
- (c) closer relationships between people;
- (d) wider fields of apostolate are for the most part open to the laity alone;
- (e) new problems demand their expert attention and study;
- (f) any areas of human life have become increasingly autonomous;
- (g) departures from the ethical and religious order are a serious danger to Christian life;
- (h) in many places priests are very few;
- (i) in some places priests are deprived of due freedom for priestly work.

The Holy Spirit is making the laity ever more conscious of their own responsibility and encouraging them to serve Christ and the Church in all circumstances.

**The apostolate is defined as all the activity of Christ's mystical Body which is directed to the purpose for which the Church was founded, namely-**

- (a) the spreading of the kingdom of Christ throughout the earth for the glory of God the Father;
- (b) to enable all men to share in Christ's saving redemption;
- (c) that through them the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ.

**By its very nature the Christian vocation is a vocation to the apostolate because,**  
A. Every part of a living body must actively share in the functions of the whole body.

- B. The organic union and structure of the Body demands that all must contribute to its development, otherwise they are useful neither to the Church nor to themselves.
- C. The laity share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ. Therefore in the mission of the People of God.
- D. Because the laity live in the world they must be like leaven in the world, with Christ's zeal.
- E. Through baptism and confirmation Christ himself assigns the laity to the apostolate, and through the Eucharist they will receive and nourish the charity which is the soul of the apostolate.
- F. Charity demands that all the faithful promote God's glory, by making the message of salvation known to all.
- G. The apostolate the Holy Spirit gives the laity special gifts to be used according to the judgment of the bishops.
- H. Union with Christ both demands the apostolate and is the source of its efficacy.

Charity enables the laity to express the spirit of the Beatitudes in their lives. Following Jesus they will be detached from earthly things and imitate his humility. The laity practice holiness according to their state of life. Those who join religious associations should try faithfully to adopt the special characteristics of the spiritual life which are proper to them. They should also hold in high esteem professional skill, family spirit, civic spirit, honesty, justice, sincerity, kindness, courage, without which no true Christian life can exist. The Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles, is the perfect example of the spiritual and apostolic life. She

- (1) led the life common to all here on earth,
- (2) filled with family concerns and tasks,
- (3) but she was always intimately united with her Son and
- (4) in an entirely unique way cooperated in the Savior's work. Having now been assumed into heaven with her motherly love she cares for these brothers of her Son who are still on their earthly pilgrimage and remain involved in danger and difficulties until they are led into the happy Fatherland.

## **The Lay Apostolate -- What It Is**

Having read the appropriate articles of the Vatican Council's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, we are prepared to study in some detail the document to which it refers us-the Constitution on the Church. The second and fourth chapters are of special interest. The former puts the Church in the context of salvation history. Long ago God made an agreement, a covenant, with the People of Israel. They became his People, the People of God. The promises made to that People were fulfilled by Jesus, the universal Redeemer. The Catholic Church, the new or acquired People of God, is the fulfilment of the age of preparation described for us in the books of the Old Testament.

## **The Church -- A People of Brothers**

The Catholic Church as the People of God knows that it is on pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem. This means that it must, to a certain extent, always remain detached from worldly structures and have its eyes fixed upon the age to come. At the same time God's People remember that they are one with the human family and that they have a special responsibility to those who are in need, spiritually or materially. The Church is a family. It is true that the sacrament of orders introduces a distinction between the clergy and the laity, but prior to that baptism and confirmation constitute the faithful as a single People of brothers. All who are baptized share in Christ's priesthood. They can share actively and responsibly in the Church's liturgical worship.

The Constitution says that, although the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, they are nonetheless interrelated. Each is in its

own special way a sharing in Christ's one priesthood. While the ordained priest acts in the person of Christ, performing the Eucharistic Sacrifice and offering it to God in the name of all the people, the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise their priesthood also in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity.

### **The Laity as True Witnesses of Christ**

In an important passage the Constitution says that, being incorporated in the Church through baptism, the faithful are consecrated by the baptismal character to the worship of the Christian religion and "reborn as sons of God they must confess before men the faith they have received from God through the Church." The sacrament of confirmation binds them more perfectly to the Church and "the Holy Spirit endows them with special strength so that they are more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith, both by word and by deed, as true witnesses of Christ."

That is part of the answer to the second question we are discussing: Why should the laity be apostolic? The fundamental answer is because they are incorporated into Christ by baptism and more perfectly bound to his Mystical Body by confirmation. Speaking of the sacrament of marriage this important document proclaims: "The family is, so to speak the domestic Church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children."

### **Charisms Still with Us**

As the People of God, members of the Church share in Christ's prophetic office. They radiate a living witness to him especially through a life of faith and charity and, by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, "The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole people's supernatural discernment in matters of faith when 'from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful' they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth."

Moreover the Holy Spirit distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and duties which contribute towards the renewal and rebuilding of the Church. It is simply untrue to say that the charismatic gifts ceased with the earliest Christians. They did not.

Speaking at the fifty-third general congregation of the Council on October the 22nd, 1963, Cardinal Suenens said: "We too easily lose sight of the fact that charisms still exist in the Church. Recognition of this fact is important for any well-balanced view of the Church. Such charisms are not mere peripheral phenomena or accidental appendages to the Church, but part of its nature. We must avoid giving the impression that the Church is no more than an administrative machine completely cut off from the influence of the Spirit of God.

"This is the age of the Holy Spirit, who is given not only to pastors but to all members of the Church. The charisms which were so common in the time of St. Paul are not limited to unusual aspects of the life of the Church. Any treatment of the Church which takes up bishops and the hierarchy, while saying nothing of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, would be defective. It is a fact of history that some members of the laity had at times awakened a sleeping Church, lest the teachings of the gospel be lost sight of. Charisms without hierarchical direction would be a source of disorder, but any government of the Church which would ignore charisms would be poor and sterile."

Referring to this, Father Eugene Maly, professor of Scripture in the seminary at Cincinnati, defined charism as any special manifestation of the Spirit, which can take place in any of the people of God. He distinguished two forms, ordinary and

extraordinary. He gave the gift of tongues as an example of the extraordinary, and the gift of interpretation and the prophetic spirit as examples of the ordinary.

The Constitution itself proclaims: "These charisms, whether they be the more outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation for they are especially suited to and useful for the needs of the Church. Extraordinary gifts are not to be rashly sought after, nor are the fruits of apostolic labor to be presumptuously expected from their use; but judgment as to their genuineness and proper use belongs to those who are leaders in the Church, and to whose special competence it belongs, not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good."

### **God Commands All to Spread the Church**

A little later this same document stresses that the Church, the People of God, has the gift of universality from God himself. "By reason of it," we are told, "the Catholic Church strives constantly and with due effect to gather all humanity and all its possessions under Christ its Head, in the unity of his Spirit." The Church is necessary for salvation. "Christ made present to us in his Body, which is the Church, is the one mediator and the unique way of salvation. In explicit terms he himself affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church, for through baptism as through a door men enter the Church. Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter it or to remain in it, could not be saved."

In view of the discussion which is taking place about the ecumenical movement the passage on the status of separated Christians is important. For our purpose here we remind ourselves that the Constitution stresses that the Holy Spirit arouses in all of Christ's disciples "the desire and effort to be peacefully united, in the manner determined by Christ, as one flock under one shepherd."

In the next section, which refers to non-Christians we read: "To promote the glory of God and procure the salvation of all the aforementioned, and mindful of the command of the Lord, 'preach the Gospel to every creature,' the Church fosters the missions with care and attention. . . . The Church has received this solemn mandate of Christ to proclaim the saving truth from the Apostles and must carry it out to the very ends of the earth. . . . The Church is compelled by the Holy Spirit to do her part that God's plan may be fully realized, whereby he has constituted Christ as a source of salvation for the whole world. . . . The obligation of spreading the faith is imposed on every disciple of Christ, according to his state." Here again is another reason for the lay apostolate-the positive command of God Incarnate.

### **"The Laity" Defined**

From chapter four of the Constitution we can learn much about the nature and obligation of the lay apostolate. For example, the pastors of the Church "understand that it is their noble duty to shepherd the faithful and to recognize their ministries and charisms, so that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one mind." It is here that we find the official definition of the term "laity." "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. The faithful are by baptism made one Body with Christ and are constituted 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."

Then we are taught that the laity, "by their special vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. . . . They are called there by God so that 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 as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity. . . . It is their special task to order and to throw light upon temporal affairs so that they may be made and grow according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and Redeemer."

Then, "Pastors of the Church, following the example of the Lord, should minister to one another and to the other faithful. These in their turn should enthusiastically lend their joint assistance to their pastors and teachers." A beautiful quotation is given from St. Augustine: "What I am for you terrifies me; what I am with you consoles me. For you I am a bishop; but with you I am a Christian. The former is a duty; the latter a grace. The former is a danger; the latter, salvation."

### **Apostleship -- What It Is -- and Why**

The section on the lay apostolate comes now. It is vitally important that it be understood correctly. The first point is that the laity, God's People, make up the Body of Christ under one Head. Then the solemn statement: "Whoever they are, they are called upon, as living members, to expend all their energy for the growth of the Church and its continuous sanctification since this very energy is a gift of the Creator and the blessing of the Redeemer." Note that this passage makes it clear that apostolic activity is not a matter of preference but a strict obligation.

The point is stressed by repetition. **But first the lay apostolate is defined, and the definition is important. The Constitution says: "The lay apostolate is a share in the Church's mission of salvation."** This definition is different from that associated with Pope Pius XI which was that the apostolate of the laity is their participation in the apostolate of the hierarchy.

Of course, the lay apostolate may be a sharing in the apostolate of the hierarchy when lay people are called and appointed to fulfil a specific duty for the Church. Fundamentally, however, the duty of lay people in the Church to be apostles arises from the very nature of membership of the Church. They are called upon to share in Christ's mission, whether they are called to do this by the hierarchy or not. Even when a bishop issues no direct summons to the laity in his diocese to undertake apostolic work, they still have an obligation to do so. It flows from their baptism and confirmation. To this they are called by Christ. The Council says so explicitly: "Through their baptism and confirmation all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord himself."

### **Apostolate -- Charity Demands It**

This is also a duty of charity. Surely those who possess God's revelation are bound to try to share it with others? Surely those who believe that their faith contains the solution of most of the problems that are puzzling mankind have a duty to make others aware of it? We Catholics are sometimes like very rich men who keep all their wealth to themselves while those around are starving. The Constitution emphasizes this in relation to the sacraments and especially the Holy Eucharist. They communicate and nourish love of God and men.

Apostleship is simply that love in action. If it is not active, it is sterile and suspect. Again the Council document repeats the call to the laity: "Now 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."

This is an obligation inherent in membership of the Church. It belongs to every layman. The Council says so very

definitely: "Every layman, in virtue of the very gifts bestowed upon him, is at the same time a witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church itself 'according to the measure of Christ's bestowal' (Eph. 4:7)."

### **The Laity Must Be Given the Opportunity**

After insisting upon this general obligation the Constitution goes on to say that the laity can also be called in various ways to a more direct form of cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy. Men and women helped St. Paul like this. All is summed up as follows: "Upon all (note, all, not some) the laity rests the noble duty (note the word, duty) of working more and more to expand the divine plan of salvation to all men of each epoch and in every land. Consequently, may every opportunity be given so that, according to their abilities and the needs of the times, they, too, may zealously participate in the saving work of the Church."

The Constitution returns to the same point a little later when it speaks about the way in which the laity can share in the prophetic office of Christ. They go forth, it says, as powerful proclaimers of a faith in things to be hoped for. This particular work, this announcing of Christ by a testimony of life as well as by the spoken word, takes on a special quality and is specially efficacious simply because it is carried out by lay people in the ordinary surroundings of the world. "Even when preoccupied with temporal cares," the Constitution says, "the laity can and should perform a work of great value for the evangelization of the world." That is why they should try to grasp revealed truth more profoundly and beg of God the gift of wisdom. For still greater emphasis the Constitution repeats the point yet again and amplifies it. "The Lord wishes to spread his kingdom also by means of the laity," it says.

### **Apostleship in Detail**

Not content with the general exhortations the Fathers of the Council turn to details. To what should the laity devote themselves specifically? They should remedy the customs and conditions of the world which are an inducement to sin. They should try to make them conform to justice. They should see that the circumstances of daily life promote virtue rather than hinder it. They should imbue culture and human activity with genuine moral values. In all these ways they will prepare the world for the seed of the Word of God.

In every temporal affair, the Council insists, lay people must be guided by a Christian conscience because even in secular business there is no human activity that can be withdrawn from God's dominion. What a difference there would be if that were acted upon in these days!

### **Dialogue Between Clergy and Laity**

The last section of the chapter on the laity is concerned with relations between bishops, priests, and people. The laity are told that they should openly reveal to their pastors their needs and desires and that they should do that with the freedom and trust which are befitting those who are God's children and Christ's brothers.

There are occasions when the laity, because of the knowledge they have or their competence or outstanding ability, should say what they think on matters that concern the good of the Church. Indeed, this may be an obligation upon them.

But they should do it in the right way, through the proper channels recognized by the Church. They are warned, and the warning is obviously necessary, that when they speak in this way their conduct should be marked by five qualities: truth,

courage, prudence, reverence, and charity.

Pastors are instructed to perform certain duties. Firstly, they must recognize and promote the dignity and the responsibility of the laity in the Church. Secondly, they must employ their prudent advice. Thirdly, they must confidently give the laity duties in the service of the Church. Fourthly, they must allow them freedom and room for action. Fifthly, they must encourage lay people to undertake tasks on their own initiative. Sixthly, with fatherly love they must consider projects, suggestions, and desires the laity propose. Seventhly, they must respectfully acknowledge "that just freedom that belongs to everyone in this earthly city."

On their part the laity must obey the decisions of their pastors because they are "representatives of Christ as well as teachers and rulers in the Church." In this they must follow Christ's example, "Who by his obedience unto death opened to all men the blessed way of the liberty of the children of God." The laity must pray for those who are placed over them, "for they keep watch as having to render an account of their souls."

The Constitution clearly envisages a new era of cooperation between priests and people. It speaks of a "familiar dialogue" between the laity and their pastors. As a result of this three benefits will come to the laity: firstly, a strengthened sense of personal responsibility; secondly, renewed enthusiasm; and thirdly, greater readiness to use their talents to help the projects of their pastors. On the other hand pastors will benefit. They will be able to call upon the experience of the laity. This will help them to make decisions more clearly and more fittingly about both spiritual and temporal matters.

The last paragraph is a general exhortation. "Each individual layman ought to stand before the world as a witness to the Resurrection and the life of the Lord Jesus and as a symbol of the living God. All the laity as a community and each one according to his ability must nourish the world with the fruits of the Spirit. They must spread in the world that spirit that raises up the poor, the meek, the peacemakers—those whom the Lord in the gospel proclaimed blessed. In a word, 'as the soul is in the body, so let this spirit be in the Christian world.'"

### **All Are Called to Be Holy**

The fifth chapter of the Vatican Council's Constitution is called the Universal Vocation to Holiness in the Church. It emphasizes particularly that all Christians, and not only religious, are called to follow in our Lord's footsteps. All are called to perfection and perfection means the perfection of charity in loving God with one's whole heart, whole soul, and whole mind and in loving our neighbors as Christ has loved us. Clearly, love like this is suspect unless it shows itself in service or apostolate.

Let it be repeated, apostleship is love in action. Love which is sterile is hardly worthy of the name, and activity which does not spring from love is certainly not the Catholic lay apostolate. This point is stressed very strongly by the Constitution: "The Church considers martyrdom as an exceptional gift and as the fullest proof of love. Though few are presented with such an opportunity, nevertheless, all must be prepared to confess Christ before men in the midst of persecutions, which will never be lacking to the Church, to follow him on the way of the cross."

We have seen that the Vatican Council has defined the apostolate of the laity as sharing in the salvific mission of the Church and has emphasized repeatedly that all are called to be apostles by our Lord himself. This is a duty which flows directly from membership of the Church. It is imposed by baptism and in a special way by confirmation. While the apostolate is an obligation on all Christians, the laity are also called in various ways to a more direct form of cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy.

It is not out of place to add here other motives which stress the seriousness of the apostolic obligation. We have seen that it flows directly from the love of God and the obligation to love our fellow men. Surely it is also a duty of gratitude which we owe to the Church. How can we ever repay all that the Church has done for us? There can hardly be a better way of showing our gratitude than working for the strength and growth of the Church we love as a mother.

### **The Church Must Reflect Christ's Zeal**

Another aspect is simply this -- that in every place the Church must imitate Christ, its Head. The Church is the prolongation of Christ's earthly life. That cannot be unless the dominant features of Christ-life are reproduced. Why was there a Christ? To save souls. Why did he teach? To save souls. Why did he found his Church? To save souls. Why did he suffer and die? To save souls. Anybody, then looking at any community of Catholics anywhere should see in it a reflection of this spirit and virtue which dominated the life of Christ, zeal for the salvation of souls.

This finds expression in his own prayer. From some points of view it is an extraordinary prayer. We might well have expected him to reply to the apostles' request in this way: "Thus shall you pray. Say, 'O God Almighty, we adore You. O God, infinitely generous, we thank You. O God of infinite justice, we are sorry for having offended You,'" and so on. But our Lord did not dictate a prayer like that. He gave us an apostolic prayer. He knew that this prayer would be said millions of times daily by his members. He must have put into it his most ardent longings. But what practical efforts do most Catholics make that God's name will be hallowed, his kingdom come, and his will be done? Perhaps we ought to say and take seriously the prayer of St. Thomas More: "Grant, Lord, that I may work for the things for which I pray." By apostolic action we prove that our prayers, especially our recitation of the "Our Father," are sincere.

### **Lay Apostles Must Prevent Sin**

From another aspect, that of the battle with sin, we ought to learn how urgent it is that the laity undertake enthusiastically apostolic work. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, St. Paul says that those who sin grievously crucify Christ again and make a mockery of him. How often this happens! This applies, of course, to every opportunity of preventing a sin. Every sin prevented, we may say, is like a crucifixion of Christ prevented. And you can be sure that you rarely prevent one sin without preventing a whole train of sins which follow it. Little wonder that our Lord promised that he would speak before his Father in heaven for those who would speak for him on earth. "So everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32).