

Mission of the Laity

The word “lay” is often used to denote something which is far from religion if not downright opposed to it. This term has a totally different meaning within the Church.

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. By their very vocation, they seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God (*Lumen Gentium* 31). In the language of the Church, laity is synonymous with piety and involvement “to establish the right relationship of the entire world to Christ” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 2). The lay faithful participate in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King, their mission being to seek sanctification through a transformation of the world according to God’s will and the preaching of the Gospel (*Christifideles Laici* 14).

The lay faithful, like the clergy, are through Baptism and Confirmation called to partake in Christ’s mission. The lay faithful together with the clergy and women and men religious, make up the one People of God and the Body of Christ (*Christifideles Laici* 28). This major statement of the Council curbed the temptation of identifying the Church with hierarchy. Currently, however, a reverse temptation has developed, as even the synodal documents mistakenly identify the People of God solely with the laity, excluding from and somehow opposing to it the pope, bishops, and presbyters. This is another, if by no means lesser threat for the identity of the Church.

Saying that “the People of God” express their wishes and then addressing these wishes to the hierarchs as a “foreign element” is most probably linked to the mistaken identification of the meaning of the word “people” with its political meaning within the framework of the theory of democracy. However, the People of God consists of all the faithful, irrespective of their estate. The mission of the laity and clergy is the same, even if the manner of its implementation differs.

The laity live the Gospel

The primary and immediate task of the laity is to put to use every Christian and evangelical possibility in the affairs of the world (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 70). In contrast to the clergy, the natural terrain of activity for the laity is not the church, but the family home, office, shop, university, factory, politics, media, or the arts. “Lay” spaces are to be transformed by the faithful, who, building on their professional competence and inner contact with God, can discover new avenues of activity.

Of special importance on the map of “secular spaces” is *marriage and the family*, “the first and basic expression of the social dimension of the lay faithful” (*Christifideles Laici* 40). Particularly in the current socio-cultural situation, described by St. John Paul II as the “apostasy of the satiated man” or the “culture of death”, the concern for the development of faithful spousal love and the transmission of the faith and the Christian way of life to children and young people are among the priority tasks of the entire Church.

Of course, the “world” in the broadest sense is not the exclusive mission territory of the laity, just as the church is not the exclusive territory of the clergy's ministry. It is difficult to imagine, for example, religious education lessons in school or the existence of many Catholic movements and associations without the laity. Nevertheless, the task of the laity is to proclaim the Kingdom by transforming this world, and the task of the clergy is to make present the Kingdom, which “is not here”.

Complementariness or clericalization

If a lay person is to be a specialist in their profession, the priest is to be not so much “an expert in economics, construction or politics” as “a witness to the eternal wisdom of the revealed Word” (Benedict XV, 25 May 2006). Through the ministry of the clergy (celebration of the sacraments, preaching), the lay faithful receive power and help from God to carry out the task entrusted to them. A well-performed priestly ministry thus helps the laity to be in the world as the soul is in the body, immersed in the Mystery and at the same time integrated into society, like leaven transforming the world from within (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 31). This makes it clear that the diversity of ministries in the Church serves a single mission (cf. *Apostolicam actuositatem* 2).

The collaboration of laity and clergy has been recognised by many communities and movements of Church renewal and has contributed to the development of pastoral care for married couples, entrepreneurs, etc., and finally the New Evangelisation movement. However, it still does not seem to have been fully discovered in the hierarchical Church, where secular tasks, e.g. in curial offices, are essentially performed by the clergy.

Unfortunately, the concept promoted in the synodal discussion of a wider participation of the laity in ecclesiastical structures is in many cases not so much a counterbalance to the “laicization of clergy”, but rather a form of “a clericalization of the lay faithful”. This increases the risk of creating “an ecclesial structure of parallel service to that founded on the Sacrament of Orders” (*Christifideles Laici* 23). This stems from the erroneous conviction that the only thing worthy and valuable in the Church is that which derives from the sacrament of Holy Orders and that the laity will only be valued if they have access to the same prerogatives as priests and bishops. We deal here with a conceptual confusion: the theological category of “service” is replaced by the sociological category of “elite”, and the vertical perspective of salvation and holiness is overshadowed by the horizontal perspective of power. A focus on power and office rather than on the ministerial essence of the priesthood can lead not only to clericalism, but also to the clericalization of the laity on the pretext of promoting the laity.

Holy and sanctifying

All the baptised are called to holiness (*Lumen Gentium* 39). “By this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society” (*Lumen Gentium* 40). Regrettably, in the Church too, many people have become accustomed to a life of mediocrity and lukewarmness. At times, holiness has even been considered unattainable and the mere reminder of it annoying or downright immoral. Attempts to discredit saints, such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta or John Paul II, are accompanied by the distortion of the image of the Catholic. Just as the media have succeeded in creating an image of priests as potential paedophiles, they have also succeeded in creating an image of laymen as divorced people who intend to leave the Church at the earliest opportunity. These phenomena sometimes cause discouragement and a kind of inferiority complex among Catholics in relation to those who have already “gave up hypocrisy” and lowered moral standards.

Holiness has always been a grievance of the Church's opponents. On the one hand, a concrete example of a holy life delegitimises the “black legend” about the Church. On the other hand, corrupt laymen, like immoral clergy, are easy to manipulate. It is no coincidence that a significant number of clergy who committed sexual abuse in the past were also recruited by the communist services. Immoral laymen are also easily manipulated from the outside, e.g. being used as pressure groups on bishops to change the magisterium and the Church discipline. The Church needs the competence of the laity in secular areas, but also the witness of the integrity of their lives. It needs Catholics who are holy and sanctifying.

The defence of orthodoxy

St. John Paul II wrote about “the *confusion* caused in the consciences of many of the faithful by differences of opinions and teachings in theology, preaching, catechesis and spiritual direction on *serious and delicate questions of Christian morals ends*” (*Reconciliatio et paenitentia* 18). At the same time, he taught that the faithful are not condemned to wallow in theological chaos, even if it were to spread through the Church. On the contrary, through constant prayer, active participation in the Eucharist, regular adherence to the sacrament of reconciliation, and the charisms received from the Holy Spirit, the laity develop a sense of faith (*sensus fidei*) and thus also the ability to distinguish between orthodox and heterodox teaching. There have been crisis moments in history, when “the truth of the faith has been conserved not by the efforts of theologians or the teaching of the majority of bishops but in the hearts of believers” (International Theological Commission, *Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church*, 119). The laity too, even those not theologically trained but living the faith, bear responsibility for the orthodoxy of the Church's teaching and its fidelity to Jesus. “According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which they possess, they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of person” (CCL can. 212, § 3). In other words, alerted by their *sensus fidei*, the lay faithful may deny assent even to a bishop if he were to preach heterodox “novelties” (*Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church*, 63).

Katarzyna and Michał Gierycz, a married couple for 20 years, parents of five, between 2013 and 2018 in charge of Emmanuel community in Poland.

Fr. Piotr Mazurkiewicz, a priest in the Archdiocese of Warsaw, Titular Professor of Social Sciences, a lecturer at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University.