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Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity

**Reflections of the American Bishops
Commemorating the Fifteenth
Anniversary of the Issuance
of the *Decree on the Apostolate
of the Laity***

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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Introduction

Among the most enduring contributions of the Second Vatican Council is its description of the Church as the People of God. "This was to be the new People of God. For, those who believe in Christ, who are reborn not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed through the Word of the living God (I Pet. 1:23), not from the flesh but from water and the Holy Spirit (Jn. 3:5-6), are finally established as 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people . . . You who in times past were not a people, but are now the people of God.'" (I Pet. 2:9-10). (*Lumen Gentium*, #9)

This image, drawing on a rich biblical and historical tradition, gives marvelous expression to the role of the Church as the sign of the Kingdom of God. It was this Kingdom which Jesus came to announce and to inaugurate by his life, death, and resurrection. "After John's arrest, Jesus appeared in Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. 'This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand. Reform your lives and believe in the gospel.'" (Mk. 1:14-16)

Jesus established the Church to bear witness to God's Kingdom especially by the way his followers would live as the People of God. "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you." (Jn. 15:12)

The image of the People of God has many dimensions; its meaning is best grasped through a variety of experiences. Each sheds light on the whole and enables us to appreciate and live it more deeply.

At the present time the light shed on the meaning of the People of God by the laity is especially noteworthy and exciting. In an exercise of our charism of "bringing forth from the treasury of Revelation new things and old" (*Lumen Gentium*, #25), we bishops praise the Lord for what is happening among the laity and pro-

claim as well as we can what we have been experiencing and learning from them.

While focusing on the laity, we wish to address the whole Church. We affirm the vision of the Second Vatican Council and the importance it gives to the laity. We look forward to what is still to come under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, making the Church more and more the perfect image of Christ. We also acknowledge that these continuing developments may require new concepts, new terminology, new attitudes, and new practices. In prayerful dialogue with all our sisters and brothers we are prepared to make those changes which will aid in building the Kingdom.

The Call to Adulthood

As the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* of Vatican II says:

Indeed, everyone should painstakingly ready himself or herself personally for the apostolate, especially as an adult. For the advance of age brings with it better self-knowledge, thus enabling each person to evaluate more accurately the talents with which God has enriched each soul and to exercise more effectively those charismatic gifts which the Holy Spirit has bestowed on all for the good of others. (#30)

One of the chief characteristic of lay men and women today is their growing sense of being adult members of the Church. Adulthood implies knowledge, experience and awareness, freedom and responsibility, and mutuality in relationships. It is true, however, that the experience of lay persons "as Church members" has not always reflected this understanding of adulthood. Now, thanks to the impetus of the Second Vatican Council, lay women and men feel themselves called to exercise the same mature interdependence and practical self-direction which characterize them in other areas of life.

We note the response of many lay persons to different opportunities for faith development. There is the "coming to faith in Jesus" and a strengthening of commitment to Him and His mission which we commonly call evangelization. There is also the adult catechesis movement which allows persons to grow and deepen their faith, and there are those who in faith are seeking greater understanding through theological reflection. These and other adult lay persons have taken responsibility in their parish or diocese by serving in leadership positions on committees and boards.

Adult Christian living is also noticeable, though not always as publicized, in the daily struggle to live out Christian values in family, neighborhood, school, government and work. This is a hopeful sign because the laity are uniquely present in and to the world and

so bear a privileged position to build the Kingdom of God there. "You are the light of the world . . . Your light must shine before all so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father." (Mt. 5:14-16)

The adult character of the People of God flows from baptism and confirmation which are the foundation of the Christian life and ministry. They signify initiation into a community of believers who, according to their state of life, respond to God's call to holiness and accept responsibility for the ministry of the Church.

The Call to Holiness

Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. By this holiness a more human way of life is promoted even in this earthly society. (*Lumen Gentium*, #40)

The Second Vatican Council clearly proclaimed the universal call to holiness. Not only are lay people included in God's call to holiness, but theirs is a unique call requiring a unique response which itself is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is characteristic that lay men and women hear the call to holiness in the very web of their existence (*Lumen Gentium*, #31), in and through the events of the world, the pluralism of modern living, the complex decisions and conflicting values they must struggle with, the richness and fragility of sexual relationships, the delicate balance between activity and stillness, presence and privacy, love and loss.

The response of lay people to this call promises to contribute still more to the spiritual heritage of the Church. Already the laity's hunger for God's word is everywhere evident. Increasingly, lay men and women are seeking spiritual formation and direction in deep ways of prayer. This has helped to spur several renewal movements.

These developments present a challenge to the parish because, for the most part, the spiritual needs of lay people must be met in the parish. The parish must be a home where they can come together with their leaders for mutual spiritual enrichment, much as in the early Church: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' instruction and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts. 2:42)

We call special attention to the effect this should have on liturgy. The quality of worship depends in great measure on the spiritual life of all present. As lay women and men cultivate their own proper response to God's call to holiness, this should come to expression in the communal worship of the Church.

Simultaneously, as lay persons assume their roles in liturgical

celebration according to the gifts of the Spirit bestowed on them for that purpose, the ordained celebrant will be more clearly seen as the one who presides over the community, bringing together the diverse talents of the community as gift to the Father.

Whatever else the growing spiritual life of the community entails, it certainly means a more intense sharing among the whole People of God of the gifts of the Spirit. And this we wish to reinforce.

The Call to Ministry

From the reception of these charisms or gifts, including those which are less dramatic, there arise for each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and the world for the good of humankind and for the upbuilding of the Church. (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, #3)

Baptism and confirmation empower all believers to share in some form of ministry. Although the specific form of participation in ministry varies according to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, all who share in this work are united with one another. "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so too we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the favor bestowed on each of us." (Rom. 12:4-6)

This unity in the ministry should be especially evident in the relationships between laity and clergy as lay men and women respond to the call of the Spirit in their lives. The clergy help to call forth, identify, coordinate, and affirm the diverse gifts bestowed by the Spirit. We applaud this solidarity between laity and clergy as their most effective ministry and witness to the world.

Christian Service: Ministry in the World

The laity, by their vocation, seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs, and by ordering them according to the plan of God. (*Lumen Gentium*, #31)

Christian service in the world is represented in a preeminent way by the laity. It is sometimes called the "ministry of the laity" and balances the concept of ministry found in the ecclesial ministerial services. Because of lay persons, Christian service or ministry broadly understood includes civic and public activity, response to the imperatives of peace and justice, and resolution of social, political, and economic conflicts, especially as they influence the poor, oppressed and minorities.

The whole Church faces unprecedented situations in the contemporary world, and lay people are at the cutting edge of these

new challenges. It is they who engage directly in the task of relating Christian values and practices to complex questions such as those of business ethics, political choice, economic security, quality of life, cultural development and family planning.

Really new situations, especially in the realm of social justice, call for creative responses. We know that the Spirit moves among all the People of God, prompting them according to their particular gifts and offices, to discern anew the signs of the times and to interpret them boldly in light of the Gospel. Lay women and men are in a unique position to offer this service.

Just as by divine institution bishops, priests, and deacons have been given through ordination authority to exercise leadership as servants of God's people, so through baptism and confirmation lay men and women have been given rights and responsibilities to participate in the mission of the Church. In those areas of life in which they are uniquely present and within which they have special competency because of their particular talents, education and experience, they are an extension of the Church's redeeming presence in the world. Recognition of lay rights and responsibilities should not create a divisiveness between clergy and laity but should express the full range of the influence of the People of God. We see this and affirm it.

Ministry in the Church

As sharers in the role of Christ the Priest, the Prophet, and the King, the laity have an active part to play in the life and activity of the Church. (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, #10)

Since the Second Vatican Council new opportunities have developed for lay men and women to serve in the Church. We acknowledge gratefully the continuing and increasing contributions of volunteers and part time workers who serve on parish and diocesan councils, boards of education, and financial, liturgical and ecumenical committees, as well as those who exercise roles such as special minister of the Eucharist, catechist, and pastoral assistant. We are grateful, too, for the large numbers of lay people who have volunteered and are serving in the missions.

Growing numbers of lay women and men are also preparing themselves professionally to work in the Church. In this regard religious sisters and brothers have shown the way with their initiative and creativity.

Ecclesial ministers, i.e. lay persons who have prepared for professional ministry in the Church, represent a new development. We welcome this as a gift to the Church. There are also persons who serve the Church by the witness of their lives and their self-

sacrificing service and empowerment of the poor in works such as administration, housing, job development, and education. All these lay ministers are undertaking roles which are not yet clearly spelled out and which are already demanding sacrifices and risks of them and their families. As lay persons increasingly engage in ecclesial ministry, we recognize and accept the responsibility of working out practical difficulties such as the availability of positions, the number of qualified applicants, procedures for hiring, just wages, and benefits.

Special mention must be made of women who in the past have not always been allowed to take their proper role in the Church's ministry. We see the need for an increased role for women in the ministries of the Church to the extent possible. We recognize the tensions and misunderstandings which arise on this question, but we wish to face these as part of a sincere attempt to become true communities of faith.

The combination of all these responses to the challenges of our time proclaims the interrelated oneness of ministry as a gift of the Spirit, and we rejoice in this.

The Call to Community

For from the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born. By the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism these are made children of God, thus perpetuating the People of God through the centuries. The family is, so to speak, the domestic Church. (*Lumen Gentium*, #11)

Most lay persons have a primary identification with family. This influences their expectations of and contributions to the Church as the People of God. The family, as a way of life, is often taken as a model for the Church. In most families life is interdependent. Ideally, strengths and weaknesses are blended so that a growthful atmosphere is maintained.

And yet we must frankly admit that failure occurs, that in many families the ideal is not reached. For example, divorce and neglect are realities. The parish has a vital contribution to make to all families struggling to be faith communities, for the parish can serve as a model and resource for families.

Because lay women and men do experience intimacy, support, acceptance, and availability in family life, they seek the same in their Christian communities. This is leading to a review of parish size, organization, priorities, and identity. It has already led to intentional communities, basic Christian communities, and some revitalized parish communities.



It is likely that this family characteristic of the laity will continue to influence and shape the community life of Christians. If it does, this should enable the clergy to give the kind of overall leadership which their office requires. Such trends are welcome in the Church.

Conclusion

The Church is to be a sign of God's Kingdom in the world. The authenticity of that sign depends on all the people: laity, religious, deacons, priests, and bishops. Unless we truly live as the People of God, we will not be much of a sign to ourselves or the world.

We are convinced that the laity are making an indispensable contribution to the experience of the People of God and that the full import of their contribution is still in a beginning form in the post-Vatican II Church. We have spoken in order to listen. It is not our intention rigidly to define or control, to sketch misleading dreams or bestow false praise. We bishops wish simply to take our place and exercise our role among the people of God. We now await the next word.