

LAITY AND FAMILIES ON MISSION IN THE WORLD

The Second Vatican Council, positively describing the vocation of lay people and their mission, undoubtedly marked a turning point. The lay faithful “are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among 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” (*Lumen Gentium*, 31).

Over the following decades, the vital role of the laity has progressively been clarified, and the 1987 Synod of Bishops – on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World – marked a new and important turning point. In 1988, summarizing that Synod’s reflections, John Paul II promulgated *Christifideles Laici*, which describes the vocation and mission of the laity with the image of workers that a landowner, after agreeing on their pay, sends to work in his vineyard (see Mt 20:1-2). “The vineyard,” the Pope said, “is the whole world (cf. Mt 13:38), which is to be transformed according to the plan of God in view of the final coming of the Kingdom of God” (*Christifideles Laici*, 1). The world, then, is the place where the laity live and witness to their faith: “This ‘place’ is treated and presented in dynamic terms: the lay faithful live in the world, that is, in every one of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very fabric of their existence is woven” (*Christifideles Laici*, 15). In fact, the laity are normal people who live their lives in the world, study, work, establish friendships, and weave social, professional, cultural relationships.

And it is precisely within these environments in the world that they are called to live their faith and Christian witness. This is their mission. “Thus for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well. In fact, in their situation in the world God manifests his plan and communicates to them their particular vocation of seeking the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God” (*Christifideles Laici*, 15).

The lay person finds his or her model in Jesus, who participated in human coexistence and sanctified his relationships, from those within the family to those within society. As Jesus lived a profound, human-divine experience in the world, so all of the baptized laity are called to do. To be a lay person, then, is not an inferior or second-level position. The roots of its existence and therefore of its meaning are found in baptism, as is the case for every Christian. Pope Francis explains this with his effective and realistic style: “Our first and fundamental consecration is rooted in our Baptism. No one has been baptized a priest or a bishop. They baptized us as lay people and it is the indelible sign that no one can ever erase. It does us good to remember that the Church is not an elite of priests, of consecrated men, of bishops, but that everyone forms the faithful Holy People of God” (Letter to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, March 19, 2016).

The beginning of Christian life for all people is baptism, which makes us children of God and places us as Christians in the world. We all enter the Church as baptized laity. The relationship between faith and the world is at the heart of the identity of the Christian, who, as an authentic disciple, is missionary because he carries the world within him, with him, and around him in order to transfigure it in the Passover of Jesus. Baptism immerses a person in the Mystery Easter, placing him in an always more Christian way in the world, calling him to die to the world and to be reborn in God. Bodiliness is the very human way of being in the world, whose paschal form is the Church (see Gal 4:20). Mission is a relationship between God and the

world, between the Church and the world, and between the Christian faith and cultures and religions. At the heart of this relationship is the baptized lay person who, in marriage or virginity, chooses her saving relationship with the world within herself and outside of herself, through and within the Church, the Body and Bride of Christ, which is always in world for the salvation of the world (People of God).

The baptismal identity of the lay Christian should re-establish the Eucharistic centrality of marriage and consecrated virginity. In the Eucharist the deepest sense of our being in the world is revealed: the body offered and the blood shed show the total, gratuitous gift of oneself as the sole meaning of living and of life to the full (see Jn 10:10). Marriage and virginity are existential forms of self-offering for sanctification through one's own body (see Rom 12:1-2), which place each missionary disciple in a specific and unique relationship with the world. Freedom, justice, peace, dialogue, fraternity, and the unity of the human race are not simply values of the Kingdom to be promoted and applied; they are dimensions of a mission that builds the Church-Kingdom as a true transfiguration of the world through the Passover of Jesus on the way to the heavenly Jerusalem, the eschatological fulfillment of the Kingdom. The beatific union will be of a spousal nature. Each Christian lives, is sanctified, and is transfigured within his or her vocation as a mission. The Church is the principle and seed of the Kingdom. Hence the Kingdom, once accomplished in the eschatological Passover, is the Church in fullness, the Bride of the Lamb (see Rev 19:9; 21; 22:17).

Marriage and family, together with work, articulate the transfiguration of the world, that is, the daily way that the great majority of lay people to carry out their mission, witnessing to their faith in charity. There is an intimate relationship between mission and the Christian family. The family is generated by mission: to become a Christian family, it was once evangelized, receiving the proclamation of Christ. It is through mission that the family establishes itself as such, above all in its duty to build a

true communion of love between the spouses, and to generate and educate the children. The apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* affirms, “The Christian family is called upon to take part actively and responsibly in the mission of the Church in a way that is original and specific, by placing itself, in what it is and what it does as an ‘intimate community of life and love,’ at the service of the Church and of society” (n. 50). The Christian family, founded on the sacrament of marriage, is missionary by definition, by virtue of the vocation and the task of transmitting faith and life. The mission of educating sons and daughters, introducing them to the true meaning of reality and of human and ecological relationships in the light of the Christian truth of faith, represents the specific missionary role of the Christian family. Educating in faith highlights the responsibility of evangelizing children and making them disciples and missionaries of Christ in a socio-cultural context that is not always favorable to the human family founded on marriage, a reality of love and unity of man and woman.

The family is a universal reality that is the basic cell of society. The numerous changes and mutations that afflict it in space and time (see *Amoris Laetitia*, 31-57) require us to remember that, whatever the waves of changes that cause a certain erosion and perversion, the family is not merely a socio-anthropological reality, but a theological reality that is inscribed in the saving plan of the triune God who is, himself, the original communion of love (see *Amoris Laetitia*, 10-11). In fact, with the concepts of couple and family, the God of love reveals himself to humanity as Spouse (see *Familiaris Consortio*, 13), as if to signify that the Trinitarian family is the archetype of the human family and that the human family is the icon of the divine communion made up of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this regard, human and Christian families, called to become domestic Churches, serve as an anthropological foundation for edifices of the Church and society. Even better, the bridal covenant expressed in the image of the spousal union of Christ with humanity (the Church) makes the human family a place of spiritual growth and a pedagogical tool of Christ’s mission to lead

humanity to full communion with God who is Love. The natural family and the bonds of blood, made fruitful by this Trinitarian communion, are a means of deeper understanding of the personal and universal love that God has for every human being, who are his sons and daughters and who are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. This unequivocal link between the Church and the family means that, in Jesus Christ, the family bonds that are founded on faith and nourished through the faith of those who hear the Word of God and put it into practice take precedence over family relationships of blood, without negating the latter (see Lk 8:21).

Professional competence, understood as a free, intelligent, and creative ability to relate to the world and transform it, is the ordinary way in which the lay faithful perform their baptismal mission. By vocation and profession, we mean the competent and engaged dedication of one's own person in faith through the conjugal spousal relationship and through one's work. Being a good father and husband, a good mother and wife is related to professional competence no less than being a good worker, a doctor or a competent professor, a careful and capable farmer. Even those who are physically, morally, or mentally incapable of this active and efficient contribution become fruitful in the Church's mission thanks to the Eucharistic offering of oneself united with the Passover of Jesus, which becomes part of it thanks to the situation of personal suffering, illness, or sorrow.

Mission, as a paschal transformation of the world, requires rediscovering the sacramental identity proper to the ministry of the bishop and priest in the lay baptismal context of the people of God. There is no distinction of superiority or inferiority between clergy and laity, but there is an ontological difference, not only in degree, so that the Eucharist and sacramental reconciliation are the unique prerogative of the ministerial priesthood (see *Lumen Gentium*, 10). This difference, however, is at the service of the uninterrupted apostolic unity of the Church (Tradition) that contributes to the transmission of the Truth that saves. The only true baptismal distinction with respect to the salvation of the Christian is that which is established

between marriage and virginity, that is, between the only two ways of making the world-body relationship a place of fruitful revelation of God, of his salvation for us and for the world, of the offering of ourselves to God.

Today Pope Francis pushes the Church towards the peripheries, in the direction of a constant commitment to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate, in order to create a culture of encounter, acceptance, and communion that offers a credible response to the throwaway culture, the culture of death, of discriminated and rejected migrants, of human trafficking. His proposal is clear: “A Church that goes forth – a laity that goes forth.’ Therefore, you also must look up and look ‘beyond,’ look at the many people who are ‘distant’ in our world, to the many families who are in difficulty and in need of mercy, to the many fields of apostolate that are still unexplored” (Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, June 17, 2016). The laity are therefore called to be in the forefront precisely in environments that are difficult to reach, with a commitment of dedication that can in no way be less than that of consecrated men and women. Not only the Church, but the human family today needs lay faithful with solid human and Christian formation, but above all young men and women who have had a decisive, personal encounter with Christ. In fact, only the transfiguring sign left by this personal encounter makes a man or a woman capable of ‘getting their hands dirty’ and ‘risk taking,’ continues Pope Francis, finding the courage to go forward in one’s mission: proclaiming Christ with our lives and with our words.

In today’s world, the privileged theater of this proclamation and witness are cities and, in particular, the great metropolises. Within these immense urban centers, alongside despair and contradictions, there is a great thirst for God. It is here that the baptized lay people, by faith and professional competence, are called to witness to their encounter with Christ and to proclaim his Good News.

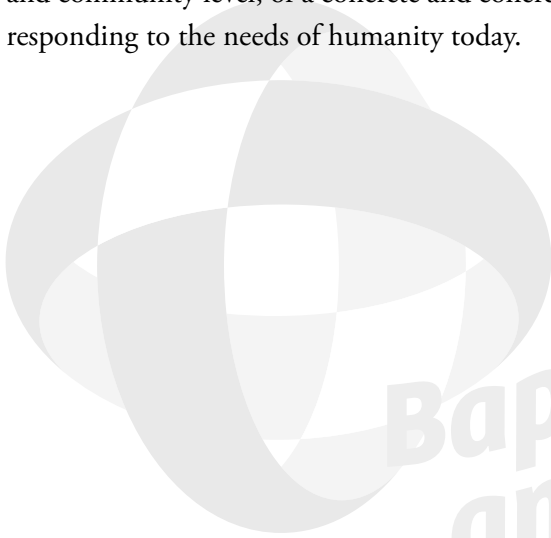
In these complex contexts, where life is often rushing by, two things are particularly necessary to make the mission of lay Christians authentic and

fruitful. In the first place, formation remains central, so that mission can be effective and in harmony with the Church. It is essential to have a Christian formation that allows the lay faithful, who are engaged in different sectors, to be able to grasp the challenges offered by the present world in the light of the faith of the Church.

Second is the need for mission to take place as a fruit and a sign of communion. This was highlighted by John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, the apostolic letter with which he inaugurated the third millennium. In it, *communion* is defined as an “important area in which there has to be commitment and planning on the part of the universal Church and the particular Churches . . . which embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the Church” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 42). It is precisely by living in the spirit of communion and love, John Paul II continues, that “the Church appears as ‘sacrament,’ as the sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the human race.” The Polish Holy Father understood the crucial role of communion within the Church and, in particular, its relevance in ensuring credibility and efficacy to proclamation, whether it be realized by consecrated persons or by lay people or, even better, by a community where both live the word of God in communion, according to their respective vocations, around the Eucharist, source of unity. For this it is necessary to make of all the communities (parishes, dioceses, associations, groups, base communities, and ecclesial movements) “homes and schools of communion.” This is the great challenge at the beginning of the millennium. Therefore, “before making practical plans, we need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43).

Precisely in reference to these two aspects – formation and communion – an important contribution today is that given by the ecclesial movements and new communities and organizations that were established in the Church during the years just before the Council and gradually up

through to our own day. Despite their great charismatic variety, these ecclesial movements demonstrate a strong sense of the missionary baptismal commitment of the laity, offering an adequate Christian formation in the face of the challenges of contemporary society and, in some cases more than in others, a marked spirituality of communion as a guiding force. These communities have increasingly emerged as places of witness, on a personal and community level, of a concrete and coherent Christian life capable of responding to the needs of humanity today.



**Baptised
and sent**

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