

Essential Role of the Laity

Never before in the history of the Church has the absolutely essential role of the layperson been so dramatically emphasized as it is now.

Particularly since Vatican II, the Church has called for a renewal in the life and role of the laity. Yet among the faithful, there remains a fundamental lack of understanding of the lay vocation and its role in the Church's mission. For many, there is a notion that the only real vocation in the Church is the ordained or vowed priesthood and religious. They believe "the Church" is the ordained office and only people in habits or collars are called to serve. Many think that the role of the laity is to help out around the parish and that they are not called to play an integral part in the mission of the Church.

But in fact, the actual teaching of the Church is that laypeople have a distinct and very real role in the spreading of the Gospel, which the Church desperately needs them to carry out with the authority, creativity, and power that the Holy Spirit has given them in Baptism. The Church teaches that in dignity laypeople are absolutely equal to those in ordained and religious life. In mission, the work of the laity is the crucial means by which the world is to encounter Christ.

Many lay Catholics would like to be more involved, but do not have a clear understanding of their role in the Church. In *Today's Disciples* you will learn:

- the lay state is a "vocation" derived from our Baptism,
- the role of the laity is essential in accomplishing the mission of the Church,
- how each of us has been called by God to our own specific vocation and mission,
- laypeople are called to engage in the affairs of the world and direct them according to God's will,
- the unique capability that laypeople have to bring Christ's divine message of salvation to every aspect of life, and
- how to discern one's calling.

"There is so much need today for mature Christian personalities, conscious of their baptismal identity, of their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world!"

—Pope John Paul II, May 30, 1998
*Message for the World Congress
of Ecclesial Movements
and New Communities*



The Role of the Lay Faithful in the Church

The Church's teaching on the laity is one of the most unknown pieces of good news in the world. By "laity" the Church means the following:

Laity—"all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church. That is, the faithful, who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ and integrated into the People of God, are **made sharers in their particular way in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ, and have their own part to play in the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the World.**"

CCC 897

Many of the common understandings of laity are mistaken because they are often defined by what we are *not*. This is misguided because it is an entirely *negative* definition and focuses strictly on what laypeople are not. They aren't priests. They aren't religious. Therefore many assume they don't have a vocation, that they don't have a mission.

The Church defines laity by what we *are*:

- sharers in Christ's office of priest, prophet, and king,
- holders of an important vocation, and
- critical participants in fulfilling the mission of the Church.

In short, the lay vocation is an *office*, not a vacuum. Because of this, it is a huge mistake to consider that only those called to religious or clerical life have a vocation.

Laity's mission and vocation is derived from our Baptism.

It is critical to realize that, according to the Church itself, our vocation and mission as laypeople derives from our Baptism and is strengthened through Confirmation. In other words, our place and work in the body of Christ is given to us directly, by the Holy Spirit, not indirectly through the ordained office.

"[The laity] are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. They are consecrated for the royal priesthood and the holy people not only that they may offer spiritual sacrifices in everything they do, but also that they may witness to Christ throughout the world."¹

Each of us has been called by God to our own specific vocation and mission.

As laity, we are called to share in the mission of Christ's Church by living in the midst of the world and addressing all its problems and concerns with the divine message of salvation.



1 Peter 2:4–10

¹ Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Pope Paul VI, November 18, 1965, (3).

Priests and laity work together to form the Mystical Body of Christ.

Ephesians 1:22–23
1 Corinthians 6:19–20



CCC 872–73

Ephesians 4:12–16

Communion with the Church.

As members of God’s family and his Church, we are no longer on our own. We are intimately and mystically united to the Lord and each other. Jesus says, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.” (John 15:4) The Church is a

living and functioning body and we as members bring diverse, but complementary gifts, talents, ministries, and responsibilities. In living out our vocation as the lay faithful, we “can never remain in isolation from the community, but must live in a continual interaction with others, with a lively sense of fellowship, rejoicing in an equal dignity and common commitment to bring to fruition the immense treasure that each has inherited.”²

The bishops and priests have a very real, extremely vital, and God-given place in the Body of Christ. We must keep in mind that although the role of the laity has equal dignity with the role of the ordained priesthood, it is not to be confused with the distinct and important role of the ordained priesthood. In short, at the altar, the priest

very properly presides. As Paul tells us, Jesus’ “gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.”

(Ephesians 4:11) These offices are given to the Church for a specific reason:

for the equipment of saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

² John Paul II, Homily at the Solemn Eucharistic Concelebration for the Close of the Seventh Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 30, 1987): *AAS* 80 (1988), 600.

In the Church there is a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission.

We have bishops and priests, members of the Mystical Body of Christ, whose task is to teach, sanctify, and govern, precisely so that the vast majority of the Mystical Body of Christ, that is the laity, can do the work of evangelizing, sanctifying, and renewing the rest of the world beyond the sanctuary. “Though they differ essentially and not only in degree . . . (they) are none the less ordered to one another; (since) each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ.”³

The priest has a unique role at the altar, just as we laypeople have a unique role in the world. We have real authority, real competence, and real gifts that we have the *duty* to exercise in the world in order to accomplish the mission on which we have been sent. The Church urges us to feel free to start any time and not wait around for Father to ask us to get involved. In the words of the *Catechism*:

- **Lay Christians need to permeate social, political, and economic realities.** “The initiative of lay Christians is necessary especially when the matter involves discovering or inventing the means for permeating social, political, and economic realities with the demands of Christian doctrine and life. This initiative is a normal element of the life of the Church.”
- **“Lay believers are in the front line of Church life;** for them the Church is the animating principle of human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the common Head, and of the bishops in communion with him. They are the Church.”
- **Lay Christians must bring Christ’s message to the whole world.** “Since, like all the faithful, lay Christians are entrusted by God with the apostolate by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation, they have the right and duty, individually or grouped in associations, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth. **This duty is the more pressing when it is only through them that men can hear the Gospel and know Christ.** Their activity in ecclesial communities is so necessary that, for the most part, the apostolate of the pastors cannot be fully effective without it.”



CCC 899

CCC 899

CCC 900

“The ‘world’ thus becomes the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation.”

—John Paul II
Christifideles laici, 15

³ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen gentium*, n. 10.

Disciples in the World

Our baptismal identity tells us who we are and equips us to do the work we are called to do. Our baptismal identity as priest, prophet, and king does not merely tell us who we are, it also points us toward and equips us to accomplish what we are to do. Supremely, it makes it clear that we cannot do the work we are called to by ourselves. We can often forget this, but Scripture never does. So we find that when St. Luke, having finished his gospel, undertakes to write a companion piece called Acts, his very first words are these:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach. **(Acts 1:1)**

The key word in that sentence is “began.” For, of course, the story of the gospel is not the story of a great teacher tragically cut down in his prime with a few disciples left behind who must now struggle to carry on in his memory. It is the story of God becoming man, dying, and the rising from the dead and continuing his work himself—through his Church, which is his mystical body.

It is through the Body of Christ that Jesus does his work in the world. We can often forget this and begin to imagine that the Church is just a human society of “followers” who banded together and concocted a bunch of rules and rites in order to keep busy once the Master was gone. But the reality is as Saul of Tarsus discovered it to be. When he was persecuting the Church, the Risen Christ confronted him on the road to Damascus and asked him, **“Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4)** “Me,” not “my church” or “my followers.” Jesus completely identifies with his Body and it is through the Body that Jesus does his work in the world.

And that work is done, not merely by priests, bishops, and popes, but most especially, by laity, who make up roughly 98% of the Body of Christ.



Discernment

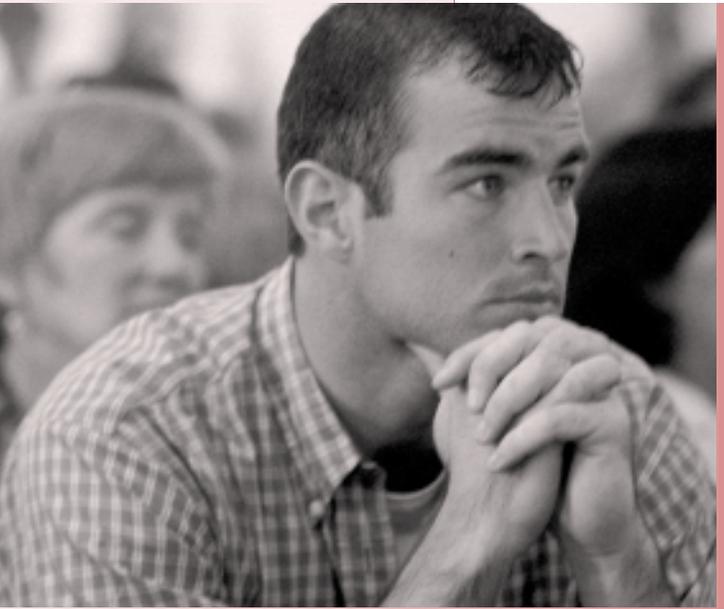
In order to fulfill one's mission as a layperson, discernment is the single greatest discipline or skill necessary. That is, we must "read the signs of the times" in order to pay attention to what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do. The first thing necessary to do this, of course, is the faith to believe that he really is calling us. Since, as we have seen above, this is the settled teaching of the Church, we need have no doubt that it is so.

Now, we have only to educate ourselves on where to look for those signs. In *Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II tells us where to look:

To be able to discover the actual will of the Lord in our lives always involves the following: a receptive listening to the Word of God and the Church, fervent and constant prayer, recourse to a wise and loving spiritual guide, and a faithful discernment of the gifts and talents given by God, as well as the diverse social and historic situations in which one lives. (*Christifideles laici*, 28)

Guidelines for Discerning Our Calling

The following points enlarge on the Holy Father's guidelines for discovering the actual will of the Lord in our lives.



1. **Listen to the Word of God and the Church.** The Pope reminds us that the first thing necessary to discerning our particular calling in life is "a receptive listening to the Word of God and the Church." The reason for this is simple: The same Lord who calls us personally to our particular work in life calls the Church he created and sustains. He cannot contradict himself, so any authentic call we have will not contradict the teaching of the Church (although it may sometimes appear that way to certain individuals in the Church).

This requires, above all, both humility and courageous wisdom, since some people are all too ready to assume that "God spoke to me" even when their "revelations" contradict the Church's teaching, while other people are all too ready to assume that any initiative on their part is "uppity" and overbold. Generally, sanity lies somewhere between those extremes. A steady diet of the revelation of Christ in both word and sacrament is vital to discovering where Christ desires us to exercise our gifts.

Formation

Ongoing formation is essential for every baptized Catholic.

The simple truth is that our mission is not merely difficult for us to accomplish: It is impossible—on our own. Only God can do these things, therefore God will have to do them. And he will. But he intends to do them *through* us. Therefore we must know our faith so that we can have recourse to all the gifts God intends to give us to make it possible for us to accomplish our mission.

The Church uses exactly the same language to describe the formation of laity as it does to describe the formation of clergy.

The Church insists that proper formation in the faith is the “right and duty of all,” not merely a privilege of the few. Not only do priests or religious have that right and duty. We laypeople also must do all that we can to educate ourselves. We need to make sure that the parish to which we belong becomes a house of lay formation just as a seminary is a house of priestly formation. For formation empowers discernment and discernment is critical if we are to know what our gifts and calling are as laypeople.

The person principally responsible for our formation is not the Pope, or our bishop, or our priest. It is you and me.

We have primary responsibility for knowing and living our faith. We must learn the *Catechism*. We must study Scripture. We must remain close to the Sacraments. To be sure, others play a part in this process and we cannot, and must not, approach our

faith as Lone Ranger Christians, utterly independent of the Church. But neither can we be completely passive, waiting for something to happen and for our needs to be met. We must take the initiative as laypeople and see to it that our education is actively pursued and faithful to the actual teaching of the Church, using materials and resources that accord with her magisterial teaching.



Participating in the Life of the Church

Each of us must “always be fully aware of being a ‘member of the Church’ yet entrusted with a unique task which cannot be done by another and which is to be fulfilled for the good of all.”⁵ To fulfill our individual mission, we can participate in the life of the Church individually and in groups.

Individual Participation

All of us are called to individually participate in the work of the Church by living a truly Christian life. We are each called to spread the Gospel through both word and deed to friends, family, coworkers, neighbors, and even the strangers we may meet in our daily lives. This form of participation “can contribute greatly to a more extensive spreading of the Gospel, indeed it can reach as many places as there are daily lives of individual members of the lay faithful.”⁶



Group Forms of Participation

Throughout the Church’s history, there have always been various groups of lay faithful active in the life and mission of the Church. However, since Vatican II, there has been a new vitality in the development of various lay associations, groups, communities, and movements in the Church.

These lay movements “have arisen to meet the specific needs of the laity—the need for a deeper spirituality . . . and the need of the laity to give greater evidence of their own desire for evangelizing the word—the world of economics, the world of politics, the world of university, the world of unions. The new lay movements illustrate the desire of the laity for a greater commitment to the discipleship of Jesus, in the world and in the Church.”⁷

Involvement in these groups can promote a closer unity of our day-to-day life with our faith, as well as numerous opportunities for fellowship, ongoing faith enrichment, and specific apostolic works.

“The most significant positive development since the Second Vatican Council has been the flourishing of lay movements within the Church.”

—Cardinal James Francis Stafford, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity
The Pilot, August 8, 2003

⁵ John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, 28

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cardinal James Francis Stafford, President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, *The Pilot*, August 8, 2003.