



SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

THE APOSTOLATE OF THE LAITY, I

DECREE ON THE APOSTOLATE OF THE LAITY

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The Apostolate of the Laity

THE apostolate of the laity is as old as the Church. From the beginning of Christianity the faithful have done their share in spreading the gospel and expanding the kingdom of Christ. It has been so all along the history of the Church, in varying degrees. It may well be that, after the beginnings of the clericalization of the Church's apostolate in the Middle Ages, the Counter-Reformation has been the occasion to emphasize and speed up that trend. In reaction to the Reformers' overstressing of the universal priesthood of the faithful to the detriment of the ministerial priesthood it emphasized the apostolate of priests and so lessened that of the laity. Yet, it is mainly after the harmful results of this neglect of the lay apostolate became apparent in the laicization of society and the apostasy of the masses, that the Church woke up fully to the need of the apostolate of the laity.

The Popes of the twentieth century have been leaders in the re-awakening of the laity to their right and duty of sharing in the apostolate of the Church. It may suffice to mention the names of Pius XI, the Pope of Catholic Action, and Pius XII, the Pope of the world congresses of the lay apostolate. They both campaigned unceasingly to enlist the laity in the Church's apostolate; but as is well known, a shift in concept or in emphasis is apparent: Pius XI sought uniformity in the organized participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy, named Catholic Action; Pius XII initiated a trend towards pluralism in the lay apostolate,¹ a trend which was to be sanctioned by the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII himself had planned, from his first encyclical *Ad Petri Cathedram* (June 29, 1959), to come back on the question of "Catholic actionists and lay apostles", "the indispensable helpers of priests and religious, who can penetrate where the clergy cannot" (cf. C.M. 1959, 272). One generally expected an encyclical on the

1. Readers of the C.M. may test this shift by just comparing the 10 year indices of the C.M. of 1947 and 1957, at the entries Catholic Action, and Lay Apostolate. In the first of these, C.A. is the main entry, in the second it is Lay Apostolate, with a sub-section for C.A.



lay apostolate, but it never came. Pope John instead gave to the Church and the world a much better gift: the Council and its decree on the apostolate of the laity. He it is who, in the preparatory stage of the Council, erected the commission on the lay apostolate (though, unlike the case of the other commissions, there was no Roman Congregation for this particular field).

The just mentioned preparatory commission on the lay apostolate made ready for the opening of the Council a schema in three parts: on organized Catholic Action, on charitable assistance, and on social action (cf. C.M. 1962, 294f, 300). This did not come up at the Council's first session. As all the other schemas, it was redrafted in the interval between the first and second sessions. The redraft, which was the work of the conciliar commission on the lay apostolate and the media of social communication, dealt first with the lay apostolate in general: its principles, various fields of action, relations with the hierarchy, mutual collaboration in the apostolate; and then in particular with Catholic Action, charitable action, social action (cf. C.M. 1963, 310). At the second session the schema again failed to come up for discussion. A new redraft was then made before the third session, the schema "being shortened and revised in the light of the written observations on the previous text" (cf. C.M. 1964, 278). This new text was discussed at the third session, October 7-13, 1964. Many of the 67 interventions criticized its clericalism, and in general the discussion was not very enlightening — there was no clear definition of apostolate, and the use of the term 'Catholic Action' was rather confusing (cf. C.M. 1965, 43). The schema was considerably revised during the interval before the fourth session — no less than six new paragraphs were added. The revised text was submitted to the vote of the Council at its fourth session, September 23-27. After the last corrections demanded by the *modi*, the vote on the whole of the schema, on November 10, approved the text by 2,201 yes against 2 no (5 null votes). At the public session, November 18, it was approved before promulgation by 2,305 votes against 2.

The Council decree on the apostolate of the laity was demanded in a way as the practical complement and application of what was taught on the laity in the dogmatic constitution on the Church. The new teaching on the People of God and the place and function of the laity in the Church naturally raised the question of their active participation in the apostolate of the Church. The question had been illustrated in a concrete manner by the presence and participation of the lay 'auditores' (2nd to 4th sessions) and 'auditrices' (3rd and 4th sessions), and by the active collaboration of some of the laity in the work of the commissions, particularly in connexion with this decree and with the pastoral constitution on the Church and the world today. Perhaps its newness and decisive meaning for the shaping of the renewed Church may fail to strike us. Further developments, in particular what the revision of



the code of canon law will bring with regard to the status and apostolate of the laity in the Church, and further action on the new laws, should in due time reveal its full import. Meanwhile attention may be drawn to three or four points:

(a) The *doctrinal foundation* of the lay apostolate — With the renewal of the doctrine on the Church as the People of God, Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit, called to include in her fold all mankind, her mission to realize the plan of God for the world must be said not to be restricted to the hierarchy. It extends to all members of the Church. The lay apostolate thus appears to be essential to the life of the Church.

(b) The *pluralism* of the lay apostolate — There is a variety of ways for the laity to cooperate in the apostolate of the Church. The immediate purpose of the apostolate can vary: either evangelization, or christianization of the temporal order, or charitable activity. The fields of action vary: parish or diocese, the family, youth, social milieu, national or international levels. The methods of apostolic action vary, particularly, those of the individual or of the organized collective apostolate.

(c) The emphasis on *individual apostolate* — Even those of the laity who, for some reason or other, cannot actively participate in organizations for the apostolate, have the right and the duty as individual members of the Church to bring their personal share to the apostolate, at all times and in all places, not only by the witness of their life but also by the ministry of the word.

(d) The *pluralism of the organized apostolate* — After stressing the importance and need for an organized apostolate of the laity, — group apostolate can achieve what individual apostolate cannot — the Decree allows for a variety of forms in the organizations. Catholic Action keeps its importance even today, but in no way claims the monopoly of the lay apostolate. As a consequence, the relations of the various forms of organization and organized apostolate to the hierarchy will also vary.

In conclusion there may still be noted: the brief but important directive regarding collaboration with non-Catholics and non-Christians in spreading the values of the gospel or the common human values; the insistence of the Decree on an adapted and varied formation for the apostolate; and the definite emphasis on the laity's initiative and autonomy in their own fields of apostolate — a reaction to clericalism, at least partially successful. All of these points are signs of a new climate in the Church.



Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity

AN unofficial translation of the Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* of the Second Vatican Council, which was promulgated on November 18, 1965, after having been approved by 2,305 votes against 2.

Preamble

1. Desirous of intensifying the apostolic activity of the people of God,¹ the sacred Synod earnestly addresses itself to the laity whose proper and indispensable role in the mission of the Church has already been dealt with in other documents.² The apostolate of the laity derives from their Christian vocation, and it can never be absent from the Church. Holy Scripture clearly testifies how spontaneous and fruitful their activity was at the very beginning of the Church (cf. Acts 11:19-21; 18:26; Rom 16:1-16; Phil 4:3).

Our own times are no less in need of the apostolic zeal of the laity; rather present-day conditions demand of them an even more intensive and extensive apostolate. The ever increasing population, the progress of science and technology and closer mutual relationship between men have not only greatly widened the field of the apostolate of the laity that is for the most part only accessible to them, but these facts have also raised new problems, which clamour for their urgent attention and application. This apostolate becomes all the more urgent as the autonomy of many sectors of human life increases. This is as it should be, though at times it has occasioned some degree of departure from the moral and religious order with grave danger to the christian life. Besides, in many countries where there are very few priests or, as happens at times, where priests are deprived of due freedom for their ministry, the Church could hardly survive and function without the apostolic activity of the laity.

A sign of this manifold and urgent need is the manifest action of the Holy Spirit: He makes the laity ever more aware of their own responsibility and arouses them to serve Christ and the Church everywhere.³

In this Decree the Council wishes to throw light on the nature, character and diversity of the apostolate of the laity, to state the

1. Cf. Apost. Const. *Humani Salutis*, Dec. 25, 1961 (AAS 1962, 7-10).

2. Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *On the Nature of the Church*, nn. 33ff (AAS 1965, 39ff); Constitution *On the Liturgy*, nn. 26-40 (AAS 1964, 107-111); Decree *On Instruments of Social Communication* (AAS 1965, 90-107); Decree *On Pastoral Duties of Bishops* nn. 16, 17, 18; Declaration *On Christian Education* nn. 3, 5, 7; Decree *On Missionary Activity of the Church*, nn. 15, 21, 41; Decree *On Priestly Ministry and Life*, n. 9.

3. Cf. PIUS XII alloc. to Cardinals, Feb. 18, 1964 (AAS 1964, 101-102); sermon to young Catholic workers, Aug. 25, 1957, (AAS 1957, 843).



basic principles and to give pastoral directives for its more effective exercise. All this should serve as a norm for the revision of canon law regarding the lay apostolate.

CHAPTER I

VOCATION OF THE LAITY TO THE APOSTOLATE

2. [*Participation of the laity in the Church's mission*] — The Church exists for the purpose of extending the kingdom of Christ all over the world for the glory of the Father: so that all men may share in Christ's redemption and salvation¹ and through them the whole universe may be truly ordered towards Christ. All the activity of the mystical Body directed to that end is called the apostolate, which the Church exercises through all her members in various ways. Hence the christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate. In the organism of a living body no member is purely passive, each member shares not only the life of the body but also its activity; similarly, in the Body of Christ, which is the Church, the entire body "in keeping with the proper activity of each part, derives its increase from its own internal development" (Eph 4:16). Moreover, in this body the connexion and interdependence of the members is such (cf. Eph 4:16) that a member which does not actively contribute its own share to the growth of the body must be considered useless both to the Church and to itself.

There exists in the Church a diversity of ministries but unity of mission. Christ conferred on the Apostles and their successors the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing in His name and by His power. But the laity share in the priestly, prophetic and royal function of Christ, and so, in the Church and the world, they play a role of their own in the mission of the entire people of God.² They actually exercise their apostolate by their activity in evangelizing and sanctifying men and by what they do to permeate and perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the gospel; in this manner their temporal activity is a manifest witnessing to Christ and a service for the salvation of men. Since the characteristic of their state as laymen is that they live their lives in the midst of the world of secular affairs, they are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like a leaven, by the fervour of their christian spirit.

3. [*Foundations of the apostolate of the laity*]. — The laity derive the duty and the right to the apostolate from their very union with Christ the Head. Incorporated into the mystical Body of Christ by baptism, and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit

1. Cf. PIUS XI, enc. *Rerum Ecclesiae*, Feb. 28, 1926 (*AAS* 1926, 65).

2. Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *On the Nature of the Church*, n. 31 (*AAS* 1965, 37).



in confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. They are consecrated to form a royal priesthood and a holy people (cf. 2 Pet 2: 4-10) so that by all their actions they might offer spiritual sacrifices and bear witness to Christ throughout the world. The sacraments, and especially the Holy Eucharist, give and nourish in them that charity which is the soul of the entire apostolate.³

The apostolate is exercised in faith, hope and charity, the virtues which the Holy Spirit diffuses into the hearts of all the members of the Church. By the commandment of charity, the greatest among the commandments of the Lord, all Christians are impelled to promote the glory of God through the coming of His kingdom and to work for the eternal salvation of all men that they may come to know the one true God and the one He sent Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 17: 3). And so, the noble responsibility of working to make the divine message of salvation known and accepted by all men the world over is incumbent on all Christians.

To exercise this apostolate, the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the people of God through the ministry and the sacraments, also imparts to the faithful special gifts (cf. 1 Cor 12: 7), "allotting them to every one according as He wills" (1 Cor 12:11); in this way all of them administering grace to one another, just as they have received it, may also prove "good stewards of the manifold graces of God" (1 Pet 4:10) for the building up of the whole body in love (cf. Eph 4:10). From the reception of these charisms, even of the more ordinary ones, there arises for each one of the faithful the right and the duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of men and the building up of the Church in the freedom of the Holy Spirit who "breathes where He wills" (Jn 3: 8). They should use the gifts in union with their brothers in the Church and in particular in union with their pastors. It is up to the pastors to judge of the genuineness of the gifts and to put them to proper use, not in order to extinguish the Spirit but to test all things and hold what is good (cf. 1 The 5:12, 19, 21).⁴

4. [*Spirituality of the laity in the apostolate*] — Since Christ sent by the Father is the source and origin of the entire apostolate of the Church, it is clear that the fruitfulness of the apostolate of the laity depends on their vital union with Christ. The Lord said: "He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15: 5). A life of intimate union with Christ in the Church draws its nourishment from the spiritual aids common to all the faithful, especially active participation in the sacred liturgy.⁵ The laity must use these means in such a way that, while properly carrying out their secular duties in the

3. Cf. Ibid. n. 33 (ibid. 39); cf. also n. 10 (ibid. 16).

4. Cf. Ibid n. 12 (ibid. 16).

5. Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution *On the Liturgy*, Ch.i. n. 11 (AAS 1964, 102f).



ordinary conditions of life, they do not separate union with Christ from their daily life; rather they must grow in that union by doing their work according to the will of God. In this way the laity must grow in holiness with joy and vigilance and strive to overcome difficulties with prudence and patience.⁶ Neither should family cares nor secular affairs be separated from their spiritual life, since the Apostle said: "Whatever you do in word or work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3:17). Such a manner of life demands the unceasing practice of faith, hope and charity.

It is only in the light of faith and by meditating on the word of God that a man is able always and everywhere to discover God in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Act 17: 28); that he is able to seek God's will in all that happens, see Christ in all men, be he a relative or a stranger, and to rightly judge the true meaning and value of temporal things both in themselves and in relation to man's goal.

Men who have this faith live in the hope of the revelation of the sons of God, mindful of the Lord's death and resurrection. In the pilgrimage of this life, hidden with Christ in God and free from enslavement to wealth while intent on those riches which last forever, they can generously dedicate themselves wholly to the extension of the kingdom of God and to the task of animating and perfecting the temporal order with a christian spirit. In the trials of this life they will find strength in hope, knowing that "the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come that will be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18).

Compelled by the love that comes from God, they seek to do good to all men, especially to those of the household of the faith (cf. Gal 6:10). Laying aside "all malice and all deceit and pretence and envy and all slander" (1 Pet 2:1), they thereby draw men to Christ. The love of God "which is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given us" (Rom 5: 5), enables the laity really to express in their lives the spirit of the beatitudes. Following Jesus poor, they are neither dejected by want of temporal goods nor elated by their abundance; imitating Christ humble, they do not become covetous of empty honours (cf. Gal 5: 26), they seek to please God rather than men, always ready to leave all things for Christ's sake (cf. Lk 14: 26) and to suffer persecution for justice sake (cf. Mat 5:10), mindful of the word of the Lord: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mat 16: 24). In mutual christian friendship, they help one another in every need.

This spirituality of the laity must take on a particular character from their state in life, be it married and family life, celibacy or widowhood, from eventual sickness, and their professional and

6. Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *On the Nature of the Church* n. 32. (AAS 1965, 38); cf. also nn. 40-41 (ibid. 45-47).



social activity. They should never cease to develop the gifts and talents bestowed on them in these conditions of life, and they should make use of the gifts received from the Holy Spirit.

Besides, the laity who, while carrying out their lay vocation, have joined one or other of the associations or institutes approved by the Church, should strive faithfully to adopt the spirituality proper to them as well.

They should also hold in high esteem professional skill, family spirit and civic sense and the virtues pertaining to social life such as honesty, justice, sincerity, kindness and fortitude, without which there can be no true christian life.

The perfect example of this spiritual and apostolic life is the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles. When she lived in this world a life like that of all men, with its family cares and labours, she remained at all times intimately united with her Son and in an entirely unique way cooperated in the work of the Saviour. Now assumed into heaven, "she takes care of her Son's brothers, still journeying on earth and surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they reach their blissful home".⁷ All should have a great devotion to her and commend their life and their apostolate to her motherly care.

CHAPTER II

OBJECTIVES OF THE APOSTOLATE OF THE LAITY

5. [*Introduction*] — Christ's work of redemption is of its nature concerned with the salvation of men, yet it also includes the renewal of the temporal order. It is the mission of the Church, therefore, not only to bring to men the message and grace of Christ, but also to permeate and perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the gospel, and so the laity in fulfilling this mission of the Church, exercise their apostolate both in the Church and in the world, in the spiritual order and in the temporal order. These two orders are distinct but they are so connected in the one divine design that God intends to restore the entire world in Christ and to make it a new creation, initially in this world and completely on the last day. A layman who is at the same time a believer and a citizen, must be guided continuously in both these orders by the same christian conscience.

6. [*Apostolate of the evangelization and sanctification of men*] — The mission of the Church concerns the salvation of men that is to be attained by faith in Christ and by His grace. The apostolate of the Church and of all her members, therefore, seeks primarily to bring to the world, by word and deed, the message of Christ, and to impart His grace. This is done chiefly through the ministry of the word

7. Ibid. n. 62 (ibid. 63); cf. also n. 65 (ibid. pp. 64f).



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