

# Called to Be Church

## The Role of the Laity

### Introduction

If you're like me you may find answering the question "What is your role, as a lay person, in the Church?" difficult. After all, when the Church is discussed, especially in the news, it is the institution and hierarchy that is usually the topic. As a result, I find it much easier to state what role the Pope has even if I can't speak to each and every function that his office affords him. I can say what diocese I am in and who the bishop is without much mental exertion (I admit that, now and then, I have to remind myself that he is now Cardinal Wuerl). I can tell someone how to get to St. Edward the Confessor, and that Father John Barry is our pastor, and when masses are held without even having to think twice. And on special occasions when I am being philosophical, I might even be able to talk to some of the rich history of the Church and the influence it has had on the world. But answering what my role is can be harder.

I suppose that there are several reasons for this difficulty. First, there is always the discomfort of talking about myself. Having the focus firmly planted on me can be intimidating. Suddenly, I'm not part of the crowd but in the spotlight. Second, there is a degree of lethargy or spiritual inertia involved. Our general mode of discussion in our day-to-day lives is usually on what others can do for us. "How can so-and-so fix the economy?" or "What is such-and-such doing about poverty?" are common questions. I find that there is a temptation to transfer this type of thinking to the matters of the spirit and faith, thus sidestepping the question of what my role in the Church should be. Third, I'm mindful that there is always sin present in my life, interfering with my relationship with God, those around me, and myself. As a consequence, sin also interferes with my ability to recognize what my role should be and to then embrace it (would I have walked by or stopped like the Good Samaritan?). And finally, I note that people of good conscience and who are well-informed may have significant disagreements about what are and are not proper roles for the laity.

So what's a layperson to do? Where does he go for answers? In this talk, I am going to start with the plan that Pope Paul VI outlined in a speech he gave in 1966 in Rome based on the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* [1]. This plan consists of four-parts which essentially deal with necessary tasks of 'building' and 'maintaining' our relationship with God and each other. I'm then going to talk a little about the some of the debate on the role of laity in the Church. I'm not trying to be controversial or to call out points to debate but rather I hope to emphasize two points. The first point is that living our faith can be difficult sometimes since there is rarely a choice that we make that is solely good or solely evil (the so-called double effect introduced by Aquinas [2]) and thus must be guided by prayer and our conscience. The second point is that since we are bound by the first point (i.e. our own imperfect state), we need to remind ourselves to have even more forbearance and love (*agape*) with each other.

### Pope Paul VI's Plan

Before launching directly into the content of Pope Paul's VI's plan it is worth quoting directly some of the opening sentences of the decree to show how seriously the he took the involvement of the laity in the church

*To intensify the apostolic activity of the people of God, the most holy 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. The apostolate of the laity derives from their Christian vocation and the Church can never be without it. Sacred Scripture clearly shows how spontaneous and fruitful such 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 require of the laity no less zeal: in fact, modern conditions demand that their apostolate be broadened and intensified.* [1, Introduction, ¶s 1 & 2]

So what exactly is the ‘apostolate of the laity’ one might ask? First, I should properly define who makes up the laity. Simply put, the laity is those people of the Church who are not ordained and have no official priestly duty or who have not taken religious orders. Obviously, the laity is the largest component of the Church.

What then is an apostolate? The pope defines the term apostolate as

*All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of [the] goal [of spreading the Kingdom of Christ throughout the earth] is called the apostolate, which the Church carries on in various ways through all her members* [1, Chap. 1, ¶ 1]

and adds that

*[T]he laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ* [1, Chap. 2, ¶ 3].

The apostolate of the laity is then simply the way that a layperson helps in spreading the Kingdom of Christ throughout the earth. The pope clearly recognizes the sacredness of this activity when he states that the Church can see

*the unmistakable work being done today by the Holy Spirit in making the laity ever more conscious of their own responsibility and encouraging them to serve Christ and the Church in all circumstances* [1, Introduction, ¶ 3]

Okay now that we’ve defined the apostolate of the laity in abstract terms what steps can we take to participate in spreading the Kingdom of Christ? To this end the pope goes on to define four tasks for the laity.

*Task 1 (Talk with God): The permanent task of the laity will ever be the insertion of the Gospel in life, by means of a personal encounter and friendship with God, and in communion with our brothers and sisters.*

In other words, the first step to taking up the apostolate of the laity is developing a personal love of God and exposing ourselves to the Gospel. Work to take away the sins that interfere with our relationship with God and replace them with daily interactions through private prayer and reflection and in communion with others through public celebrations, the foremost of which is the sacrifice of the Mass.

*Task 2 (Believe in His Message): The laity, in making themselves over into Christians, reform their attitudes. Being converted, they believe in the Good News and make it come alive.*

Next we have to take the message we hear and weave into our lives. As Catholics, we believe that we are always being converted. Embracing our faith is not just a ‘once and done’ occurrence. We can’t just take the Gospel as an award that we received, that we can put on a shelf, and then move on with our lives. Rather it is a continuous choice – a commitment to renewing ourselves with the love of God each and every day.

*Task 3 (Align Our Hearts with Christ): The laity transform the temporal order in which they are immersed by taking their own responsibility seriously,*

The pope is asking us to take what you do seriously. But why? Surely my job as whatever can’t be that important. But Jesus would have us not think that way. We are to trust in God and to know that everything he gives us is for our good. So to then are our ‘secular affairs’. If we approach our responsibilities correctly and follow the model of Christ then everything we do becomes our primary, God-given mission—the evangelization of the world. As the pope said in his decree

*Neither family concerns nor other secular affairs should be irrelevant to their spiritual life, in keeping with the words of the Apostle, "What-ever 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). [2, Chap 2, ¶ 8]*

*Task 4 (Work with the Holy Spirit): The laity realize their human and Christian ideal in the world and in the Church by conforming their lives to the image of Christ and by bringing their lives to their temporal commitments at all levels: personal, family, professional, civic, socio-economic, political, and so on.*

The pope is asking for us to use the foundation built in the other three tasks to come to fruition in the here-and-the-now (temporal order). Our faith should be reflected in our good works. We should employ our particular talents and the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the betterment of the people around us.

*This plan for the spiritual life of the laity should take its particular character from their married or family state or their single or widowed state, from their state of health, and from their professional and social activity. They should not cease to develop earnestly the qualities and talents bestowed on them in accord with these conditions of life, and they should make use of the gifts which they have received from the Holy Spirit. [1, Chap 1, ¶ 12]*

Ultimately our actions will contribute to the final goal of all mankind coming to know God.

*The very testimony of their Christian life and good works done in a supernatural spirit have the power to draw men to belief and to God [1, Chap 1, ¶ 3]*

To sum up: We lay people have a very important role in the mission of the Church, the mission of the evangelizing of the world – of spreading Christ’s kingdom and drawing all to a belief and a relationship with God. It is a role that we must take seriously and prepare ourselves for each and every day through prayer and reflection on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But we don’t have to do it alone—we have our brothers and sisters in Christ, from all walks of life, to help us. To this end, we must understand that

- (a) Our mission is personal—each of us has our own different role to play.
- (b) Our mission is communal—our mission is not solely an individual mission.
- (c) Our mission is a work of grace—like the Sacraments, it is a gift from God.
- (d) Our mission is ecclesial—it is the work of God and ALL his people.
- (e) Our mission is apostolic—we are all apostles. We are the living bearers of the Gospel. We do not bear the Gospel through our words alone, but by being a living witness to Him with our lives.

### **Nuances & Difficulties**

I would like to draw this talk to a close by discussing some of the nuances and difficulties that arise. Even though Pope Paul VI’s plan has numerous details about the roles and tasks of the laity it is impossible for anyone to develop a step-by-step approach that covers every situation. Finding the balance between the secular and the spiritual and between too little and too much involvement can be challenging for both Religious and Lay members.

Consider the following two narratives that I found by doing a quick search on the web for ‘role of the laity in the Catholic Church’ using Google.

The first is an essay by Carl Olson, hosted on Ignatius Press’ website and entitled ‘The Role of the Laity: An Examination of Vatican II and *Christifideles Laici*’. In this essay, Olson raises some points that I would like to share. First, he notes that the Church, in [\*Gaudium et Spes\*](#), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, has identified,

*[t]wo common errors...: the shirking of responsibilities by those who would focus on their heavenly home at the expense of earthly duties, and those who, due to a legalistic understanding of their faith, divorce it from their everyday life. [3, page 1, ¶ 9].*

He also notes that John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation [\*Christifideles Laici\*](#), identifies that there can be a problem with how the laity participate in their apostolate due to an

*unbalanced focus by the laity on "Church services and tasks" [that] is directed, at least in part, at the often hotly contested issue of "ministry"*[3, page 1, ¶ 12]

and that

*[t]he desire to be associated with--or to even compete with--the ordained ministry has led to an abundance of "ministries" among the laity. What is particularly noteworthy is how so many of these ministries are focused on those people already in the Church and how so few look outward to those who are outside of the Church. With so many lay ministers alongside the priest it was inevitable that the lines between the priesthood common to all believers by virtue of baptism and the ministerial, ordained priesthood would become blurred.* [3, page 1, ¶ 14]

Olson relates an anecdote to illustrate this point

*For example, a priest recently told me about his experience while filling in at Mass at a local parish. A few minutes prior to Mass the priest was approached by a layman who matter-of-factly stated that he was the "Eucharistic minister" and would be up at the altar with the priest. When the priest flatly told him that he was not, in fact, a "Eucharist minister"--only the priest can claim such a title--and that he would not be needed (since the parish was fairly small), the man left in fit of anger!* [3, page 1, ¶ 15]

In contrast, there is the blogger at ‘Positive Infinity’, who I take as a representative of the ‘angry man’ in Olson anecdote. He feels that there should be less division between the ministerial, ordained priesthood and the laity. In particular, he says

*...the New Testament does not create an elite group of people; this authority and the gifts of the Spirit are distributed throughout the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12). Churches that plan to be faithful to the New Testament — and successful — need to activate the laity in the life of the Church.* [4, ¶ 8]

He also cites a lack of respect or snub that finally causes him to sever his connection with the Church

*As for myself, I lectored in most every Catholic parish I was a part of until the last one, which required that all lectors go through training before they became a lector. My travel schedule did not permit me to attend any of these classes; moreover, I thought it strange that they would require such of an experienced lector such as myself. The disconnect from parish life created by that void made it a lot easier to leave Roman Catholicism for the last time.* [4, ¶ 9]

So there we have it. On one hand, the Church has an obligation to correct and admonish all of us (Religious and Lay alike) on the correct way to approach our roles in the Body of Christ. The priest in Olson's anecdote was absolutely correct in his identification of his role versus the 'angry Eucharistic Minister'. By the same token, our unnamed bloggers feelings (which very well may reflect those of the 'angry Eucharistic Minister') are real as well and the marginalization of that he expresses, whether we agree with it or criticize it as being childish, has separated him from the Church.

What is to be done? How do we find a balance? What I would like for us to do is to take some time to reflect on Pope Paul IV's plan and the two viewpoints expressed in the narratives I've included here and then discuss what each of us would do in both situations; as both the priest who admonishes the Laity and as the Laity so admonished.

## References

[1] – Pope Paul VI, 'Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*', November 18, 1965

[2] – Renick, Timothy M., 'Aquinas for Armchair Theologians', [http://www.amazon.com/Aquinas-Armchair-Theologians-Timothy-Renick/dp/0664223044/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1296308039&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Aquinas-Armchair-Theologians-Timothy-Renick/dp/0664223044/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1296308039&sr=8-1)

[3] – Olson, Carl E., 'The Role of the Laity: An Examination of Vatican II and *Christifideles Laici*', [http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/colson\\_rolelaity1\\_oct06.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/colson_rolelaity1_oct06.asp)

[4] – The blog entry of a self-proclaimed 'Real Elitist Snob' <http://www.vulcanhammer.org/2009/07/15/called-out-of-the-pews-an-experiential-reflection-on-the-role-of-the-laity/>

### Additional references of general use:

[5] – Diocese of Manchester, NH, 'Role of the Laity', <http://www.catholicchurchnh.org/public-issues/public-policy/family-and-laity/role-of-the-laity/>

[6] – A collection of Church documents on the laity <http://www.saint-mike.org/library/laity/laity.html>