

LAITY

“You are a chosen race a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him, who called you out of darkness, into His marvellous light.” 1 Peter 2:9

cf: Mt. 5:13-16

OPENING PRAYER:

Gracious Father, we thank you for the gift of our faith and Baptism by which we have become members of your believing community. Send forth your spirit into our hearts so that we may experience the grace of communion with you, among ourselves and the pastors of your people. As we thank you for the gift of life and the manifold blessings we have experienced, grant us the spirit to commit ourselves ever more generously to serve your people and the society at large.

God our loving Father, we pray to you to bless our work, vision and our mission for the betterment of the lay faithful in the Archdiocese of Calcutta through this Pastoral Plan. We make this prayer through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

INTRODUCTION:

Since the closure of the Second Vatican Council nearly 50 years back, we have had many thought-provoking and challenging theologies of the identity and mission of the Laity in the Church. In fact, the two decades that immediately followed the Council saw a great proliferation of writings on the said topic. They have all been very convincing and well-founded on the Council documents, especially *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* and *Ad Gentes*, as well as on other contemporary theological writings of the time. We have all been giving our unanimous “placet” to them in more than one theological Conferences or Seminars.

But what is sad and unfortunate is that these teachings of the Council, even after 50 years, have not yet been sufficiently translated into the daily life and ministry of the Church in Parishes and dioceses ! What we definitely lack even this day is a strongly-willed, clear, positive, unbiased, honest, practical and down-to-earth ecclesial attitude towards the Laity. Occasional tokenism has not done any lasting and enduring good to the church. An overwhelming majority of the Laity in the church all over the world still feel that they are only seen and not heard, and their rightful place is in the market place.

This transition from theological thinking to concrete pastoral implementation in the Church has been rather slow and painful too. Barbara Aune Cusack says that the Church has been caught in a kind of “balancing act” regarding its understanding of the role of the Laity (“The Role of the Laity in the Church: Theory meets Reality”, in **Proceedings of the 55th Annual Convention of the Canon Law Society of America, Washington, D.C.: CLSA, 1992, p.25**). This situation, I think, is largely due to the fact that the Hierarchy of the Church has not been able to shift from the Institutional model of the Church to the Communion Model, where the Laity are considered as organic members, like the vine and the branches or the body and its parts , of the one single Body of Christ, the Church.

More than Ecclesiology, according to me, it is fundamentally a problem of attitude and approach that is causing this chasm between theology and pastoral praxis, viz., the way the hierarchy looks at the place and role of the Laity and vice versa too. The approach that the hierarchy takes towards the question of the vocation of the Laity calls for an honest and serious reconsideration.

PART 1: TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH

The Catholic Theology of the Laity, as we have it today, directly flows from the comprehensive Ecclesiology propounded by the second Vatican Council, especially in its four major documents: viz., the dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem), the Pastoral Constitution on the church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) and the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (Ad Gentes).

Any discussion or debate on the role of the Laity in the church should normally begin with clear understanding of the nature and mission of the church. Our answer to the question, "What is the role of the Laity in the Church today?" will naturally have to be coloured and conditioned by our answers to the following questions: 1) What is the Church? 2) What is the relationship between the Church and the world? 3) What is the mission of the Church? Therefore, we enumerate here below the following four principles that would determine our understanding of the identity and role of the Laity today.

Four Principles:

1. The Church is a Community of the disciples of the Lord Jesus, who are equal among themselves by virtue of their common Baptism in the one Lord. It is a people made one with the unity of the Father, the son and the Holy Spirit (L.G. 4). This awareness that the church is primarily a Mystery of Community has two important implications: First, we are all co responsible for the life, organization and mission of the community. Second, we are all called to holiness. These two implications precede any internal ordering or structuring of the church.

This, however, does not amount to say that there is no diversity or distinction between the Priesthood of the Faithful and the Priesthood of the Ordained. All that we state by this first principle is at our most basic and fundamental selves, we are all equals. With such a perspective, the involvement of the Laity will not be viewed as an intrusion from the uninvited, but rather as an essential element of what it means for the Church to be fully active and alive.

2. The transforming character of Christian Life and Spirituality: The essence of the Church is to be seen today not primarily in terms of its internal structure, but in terms of its being an effective and affective Presence of Christ's saving mission in the ever-changing world conditions. The church shares the same earthly lot as the "leaven" in the Society (G.S. 40). We understand the Church as "part of, open to and engaged in the World" (R. Haight, "The established Church as Mission: The Relation the Church to the Modern World", in THE JURIST, 39(1979), P.30)
3. The Church is essentially a Church in Mission. By its very nature, the Church is missionary (AG.2). The Church finds its self-expression in its identity as a being-on-mission in relation to the world. It does not exist to be in service to itself, but in service of the Kingdom of God for the world.

In this total mission of the Church, every member of the people of God, each according to his/her own life conditions, participates in the three-fold priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ. "Lay persons are not emissaries of the Church who venture forth into the world. They are the Church which realizes its Mission in the World". (N. Provencher, OMI, "The Church in the World," in THE JURIST, 47 (1987), p.48)

4. The church needs to be committed to the Liberation of the world at all levels of life and society. This liberative thrust of the Church today must find its expression in the transforming involvement of the laity.

It is within this understanding of the nature and mission of the church, as described above, that we must view the Laity and their role in the Church and the world today.

The Second Vatican Council was unprecedented in its reflection upon and articulation of the identity, role and spirituality of the Laity in the church and in the World. Its teachings on the vocation of the Laity in the Church and the World are spelt out very clearly in the following passages of the Council documents:

- ❖ “These faithful are by Baptism made one body with Christ and are established among the people of God.
- ❖ They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ.
- ❖ They carry out their own part in the mission of the whole Christian People with respect to the church and the world”.(L.G.31).
- ❖ The Council also insisted on the unique character of the vocation of the Laity by saying that “the Laity, by their very vocation, seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.
- ❖ They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God so that by exercising their proper function and being led by the spirit of the Gospel they can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven” (L.G. 31).
- ❖ In deepening the understanding of the mission of the Laity, the council states: “in concrete, the apostolate of the Laity is exercised when they work at the evangelization and sanctification of men; it is exercised too when they endeavour to have the Gospel spirit permeate and improve the temporal order, going about it in a way that bears clear witness to Christ and helps forward the salvation of men. The characteristic of the lay state being a life led in the midst of the world and of secular affairs, lay men are called by God to make of their apostolate, through the vigour of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world”. (A.A. 2)

Speaking about the absolute necessity of the Laity’s role in the mission of the church, the same Vatican II says, “...Their action within the church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect. Following in the footsteps of the men and women who assisted Paul in the proclamation of the Gospel (cfr. Acts 18:18-26; Rom.16:3), lay persons of a genuinely apostolic spirit supply the needs of their brothers and are a source of consolation no less to the pastors than to the rest of the faithful (cfr. 1Cor.16:17-18)

- ❖ The Laity should develop the habit of working in the parish in close union with their pastors, of bringing before the ecclesial community their own problems, world problems and questions regarding man’s salvation, to examine them together and solve them by general discussion.” (A.A. 10)

The Apostolic Exhortation, “Christifideles Laici” of Pope John Paul II on “the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the church and in the World”, points out that the Church is essentially an organic communion of people , wherein each part makes a unique contribution to the whole: “Ecclesial Communion is more precisely likened to an “organic” communion, analogous to that of a living and functioning body. In fact, at one and the same time, it is characterized by a diversity and complementarity of vocations and states in life, of ministries, of charisms and responsibilities. Because of this diversity and complementarity every

member of the lay faithful is seen in relation to the whole body and offers a totally unique contribution on behalf of the whole body” (C.L. 20)

“Even in the very founding of the Church, the greatest attention is to be paid to the raising of mature Christian Laity. For the lay faithful fully belong, at one and the same time, to the people of God and to the civil society.... Their main duty, whether they are men or women, is the witness which they are bound to bear to Christ by their life and works in the home, in their social group and in their professional circle..... Thus the faith of Christ and the life of the Church will no longer be something extraneous to the society in which they live, but will begin to permeate and transform it” (A.G. 21).

To help the lay people to fulfill their tasks in the church and in the World, sincere collaboration within the church is needed. “Let the sacred pastors recognize and promote the dignity as well as responsibility of the layman in the Church. Let them willingly make use of his prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to him in the service of the church allowing him freedom and room for action. Further let them encourage the lay man so that he may undertake tasks of his own initiative. Attentively in Christ, let them consider in fatherly love, the projects, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity. Furthermore, let pastors respectfully acknowledge that just freedom which belongs to everyone in this earthly city” (L.G. 37)

It is quite clear from the teachings of the Church that lay people must receive adequate training, doctrinal, spiritual and practical for this task of meaningful participation in the life and ministry of the church. They must be imbued with a sense for the oneness of the people of God in its various functions and offices and acknowledge hierarchical guidance and supervision. At the same time, the clergy must be trained for proper collaboration with the laity in a fraternal spirit. It is one of the decisive challenges of the post-conciliar era to find the balance between the true authority and sincere communion in dialogue, to acknowledge the work of the spirit in all members of god’s people and also outside the Church, and still to accept the authority which Jesus has given to the Apostles and their successors, to continue His Mission.

PART 2: LIGHT AND SHADOW SITUATIONS:

2.1 Light situation:

- ❖ More than 15 Archdiocesan Lay Associations and Movements are working in various fields mostly pious and social welfare organizations, such as SCC, SVP, Legion of Mary, CAB, CCWI, CCRS, Couples For Christ (CFC), Catholic Nurses' and Teachers' Guilds, Salesian Cooperators, CLC, AICUF, ICYM, YCS, etc. to name a few.
- ❖ Laity Commission on the Archdiocesan level and a few Laity cells in parishes have started. Lay faithful are also working through various action bodies at the parish level.
- ❖ Lay faithful are also involved in various Commissions in the Archdiocese such as Family, Women, Youth, etc.
- ❖ Some Lay faithful from the Archdiocese have contributed to the mission of the Church on Regional, National and International level.
- ❖ Few Lay leaders are appointed on various Committees, Governing Boards of Institutions and Organizations of the Archdiocese.
- ❖ Lay leaders support and organize many events and programs on the parish and Archdiocesan level.
- ❖ Some lay faithful are involved and committed in community development through their faith and are examples of Christ's love and compassion to others.
- ❖ Laity are successfully running the Bible School in the Archdiocese. Very good example towards formation and understanding the Word of God in English & Bengali.

- ❖ Lay faithful are generous and supportive to the needs of the parishes and the Archdiocese.
- ❖ Many lay faithful come forward to participate in liturgy, choirs, etc and also involve themselves as Eucharistic Ministers and other lay ministries.
- ❖ Lay faithful are actively involved in Sunday School in the parishes and the Parish Councils.

2.2 Shadow situation:

- ❖ Lack of interest and commitment by the majority of the lay faithful towards the activities of the Church.
- ❖ The materialistic values of the world have affected our people.
- ❖ Busy work schedules of working people and their concern to make their school-going children all-rounders restrains them from participating in church activities and faith formation.
- ❖ The rise in mixed marriages and inter-faith marriages has affected the Catholic faith-life of our people.
- ❖ Clergy dominated Church gives a wrong feeling to the Laity that Church is the domain of only the Priests and the Religious and the lay people have no role or hardly any role to play.
- ❖ Lack of awareness about the role and responsibility of the laity in the Church. There are no regular formation and training programs for the lay faithful.
- ❖ Many of our lay people are being attracted by the welfare schemes and care offered by other Church communities/denominations.
- ❖ Lay people are hardly encouraged by the priests to undertake active role in the administration and temporal affairs of the Church.
- ❖ Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committees are not in place in many parishes and very few are active.
- ❖ Lay faithful aim only for jobs and to serve others. They do not have the initiative and/or the zeal to do business or to become self-employed.
- ❖ Liturgical Celebrations or Sunday Mass has become a routine stereo type ritual for many of our lay faithful. There is hardly any or very little fellowship after mass.
- ❖ Many of our lay people have lost interest in the Church and have stopped practising their religion.
- ❖ Modern social life, the media, the internet has affected the family-life of our people. Family prayer is missing. There is little interest shown in community prayer.
- ❖ There are hardly any lay faithful who are working in Civil Services like IAS/ IPS and State Civil Services. Motivation and encouragement by the priests is lacking.
- ❖ Lay leaders are not encouraged by the Church to join politics. The Clergy do not recognize and promote Lay leaders.

PART 3: SETTING GOALS

- ❖ Formation and training of the laity, of various groups, at different levels, in matters related to faith, leadership and other subjects that will promote their empowerment in the Church.
- ❖ Promote better clergy-laity relationship.
- ❖ Involvement of the Lay faithful in the temporal affairs of the Church especially administration, finance, etc.
- ❖ Generate greater awareness among the laity about social issues and promote their involvement in politics and social work.

PART 4: ACTION PLAN:

- ❖ To form a Panel / Team of Resource Persons for regular formation and training program for the lay faithful. The dates should be announced at least 2 months in advance and at least one training program should be held every six months during the weekends. More and more lay people should be encouraged to undergo training programs held at NBCLC Bangalore.
- ❖ A Committee comprising of Clergy and Laity should be instituted for frequent dialogue / interaction on various matters relating to Church and affecting clergy - laity relationship.
- ❖ A Panel / Animation Teams on the Archdiocesan level should be constituted for ongoing faith formation programs on parish / Archdiocesan level.
- ❖ An Archdiocesan policy should be prepared for the mandatory involvement of the Lay faithful in the temporal affairs of the Church especially administration, finance, etc. Finance Committees should be constituted in all the parishes.
- ❖ To acknowledge, encourage and support Catholic leaders to join politics and a Committee headed by the Archbishop to recommend them for appointments on Government bodies, commissions, etc.
- ❖ Archdiocesan level policy on appointments of lay faithful on various governing boards, commissions, institutions, etc within the Church. Also, lay people should be appointed on Finance Committee, Educational Board of the Archdiocese, which will provide more transparency.
- ❖ Separate cells / units for the welfare of the elderly, youth and the underprivileged should be constituted on parish level. Also, Corpus Fund should be constituted on the Archdiocesan level to help the needy.
- ❖ The Parish Pastoral Councils should be constituted in all the parishes as per set directives, rules, etc. Annual performance of these parish councils should be monitored by a Committee headed by the Archbishop or the Vicar General to assess the development of pastoral work of the respective parish.

PART 5: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- ❖ How do we create interest in the lay faithful towards various activities, programs, events, action groups, lay ministries, etc?
- ❖ Which areas require active participation of the lay faithful?
- ❖ How to organize ongoing training and formation program for the lay faithful?
- ❖ What are the short term and long term programs, which are required for the overall development of the parishes and the Archdiocese? And how can the laity involve themselves in the same?
- ❖ Is it possible to handover the administrative affairs of the Church to the lay faithful? If yes, then what should be the process and how to segregate the pastoral work and temporal affairs?
- ❖ Should the lay faithful be involved in the decision making process in matters relating to the Church? If yes, specify the various fields where the expertise of the lay faithful will be helpful.

CONCLUSION:

The life and vitality of a Christian community depends largely on the interest and commitment of its members who are mostly the laity. It is a matter of great joy to note that the lay faithful are growing in the awareness of their identity and role in the Church and society. The Archdiocese of Calcutta is blessed with many resourceful and generous lay faithful in our various Parishes. Through this Pastoral Plan, it is hoped that more and more people are made aware of the precious gift of faith they have received, their responsibility to

nurture it in their lives, promote it in their families and hand it over to the next generation. The growth of the Church and its effective witness will be possible only when the clergy and the laity work hand in hand. The clergy has the responsibility to discern, develop, promote the charisms of our lay people for the good of the Church and the world. The effort made in this Pastoral Plan will help the priests, who are leaders of our Christian communities to listen to the voice of their people and act in such a way Christ, the good shepherd, would do with his flock.

CLOSING PRAYER:

O Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, with you we give thanks to God "whose mercy is from generation to generation," for the exalted vocation and the many forms of mission entrusted to the lay faithful. God has called each one of them by name to live his/her own communion of love and holiness and to be one in the great family of God's children. He has sent them forth to shine with the light of Christ and to communicate the fire of the Spirit in every part of society through their life inspired by the Gospel. O Virgin of the Magnificat, fill our hearts with gratitude and enthusiasm for this vocation and mission. With humility and magnanimity you were the "handmaid of the Lord;" give us your unreserved willingness for service to God and the salvation of the world.

O Virgin Mother guide and sustain us so that we might always live as true sons and daughters of the Church of your Son. Enable us to do our part in helping to establish on earth the civilization of truth and love, we make this prayer through Christ our Lord, Amen.