

The Laity: The Call to Holiness and the Call to Ministry

Introduction

In the Second Vatican Council, the “Decree on the Laity” was completed and approved in November, 21, 1965. Shortly after, the following response to the document appeared:

In considering the massive challenges facing the Christian Church in the fast-moving, urban, technological world of today, there is ground for the thesis that nothing is more urgent for the renewal of the Christian Church than a radical look at the apostolate of the laity. This is equally true of all churches — Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic (Mrs Theodore Wedel).

Time has intervened since the closing of the Vatican Council. During the years following, we have played a game of catch-up to the Council’s vision of the Church. For example, promoting talented lay people into leadership positions has taken longer than even Council Fathers might have anticipated.

One way in which this shift began to show itself was the introduction of lay ministry into the celebration of the Liturgy. In 1972, a few years distant from the last session of the Council, Pope Paul VI announced the laity would exercise new Liturgical ministries. Lectors and Eucharistic Ministers (called Acolytes at the time) had previously been stages leading to ordination of priests. They had been called Minor Orders. Now they would be shared with the laity and be called Ministries.

But doors did not swing open completely. These Liturgical roles would be understood as experimental. Lay people were functioning as Liturgical ministers but only on an extraordinary basis. When priests could not be found. But priests were declining in numbers. Rarely were there enough to cover what was needed. And so, restrictions received loose interpretation in many places because of pastoral circumstances. I myself had forgotten the original restrictions concerning women taking on these roles. Demands overwhelmed literal understandings. From beginnings at the Shrine, women were part of our program. A fitting conclusion took place last month. Through the direct intervention of Pope Francis, these exceptional ministries finally became fully accepted despite conditions. Lay ministers, both men and women, became a permanent and essential part of Catholic worship. There would be nothing exceptional about them anymore.

Given all of this background, I thought this a good time to begin a series on the role of the laity within the Church. In order not to get lost in a forest of information and attempt to say too much, I will focus mainly upon those involved in Liturgical ministry — in one way or another.

Our program for Lectors and Eucharistic Ministers at St. Anthony Shrine began somewhere in the 1980’s. My part was to train Lectors. Their program consisted of an introductory talk and a

practicum session. I would give an overall view of what it meant to be a Lector and then later work with candidates practically, helping them learn how to proclaim the Scriptures. Briefly put, I became their coach. Years have now gone by. At times, I have thought of how much need there was for follow-up. We prepared people for what they would be doing but did not gather them again to deepen their experience. And so, maybe my own felt-need may be motivating these reflections. Sort of cleaning up unfinished business. And yet, I have hope there may be some who want to search for deeper awareness of what they have been doing.

Two Council documents in particular I found helpful in researching these reflections. I discovered them and their significance when the pandemic struck. We all went into lockdown. One way I busied myself was rereading the documents of Vatican II. It was then I received a major jolt. I had forgotten how much importance the Council Fathers had given to the Laity. *The Constitution on the Church* was one of their major accomplishments. It offered ground work for many of the other documents. Of its eight chapters, one was devoted to the role of the laity within the Church. In its vision, the laity were given equal importance along with bishops, priests, and religious. Added to this Constitution, an entire work entitled *The Ministry of the Laity also took place*. It went beyond describing the laity and their place in the Church. It stretched to what lay people might do to join in the mission of the Church.

It seems important to begin this journey toward ministry with the call to holiness. What that means. But before approaching holiness, we must first look at what it means to be called? The thinking of the Council Fathers will be helpful here but maybe we need to launch out into more detail, Scripture offers an opportunity to locate roots and context. One major theme running throughout the pages of both Old and New Testament is call and response. It begins with the call of Abraham, continues into the New Testament to the call of the Apostles. In order to examine more closely this exchange, we will concentrate on more described examples of call and response as may be seen in the early life of the prophet Samuel and the conversion experience of St. Paul. All that will come in weeks to come.

The pastors indeed, should recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the Church. They should willingly use their prudent advice and confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, leaving them freedom and scope for acting. (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, #37)