

Joy and Hope in Christ: Vatican II

Part 17 in a series

2014

Holy Family continues to observe the 50th anniversary of Vatican II, which began on October 11, 1962, and closed on December 8, 1965. We're marking this milestone anniversary by celebrating the council, and exploring its teachings through special bulletin covers and inserts, newsletter articles, videos and other materials.

A New Vision for the Laity

One of the great contributions of the Second Vatican Council was a new theology of the laity. “The lay apostolate has been simmering on the ‘back burner’ of the church’s apostolic life for nearly two thousand years,” wrote one contemporary commentator, “and finally the Fathers of the Council moved it up to the ‘front burner’ and turned the heat up all the way.”

The laity had never been uninvolved in the life of the church. Throughout the centuries, there have been lay movements – many religious communities began as groups of laypeople who wished to dedicate themselves to service and to living the Gospel in a more radical way (think of St. Francis, for example). The 19th and 20th centuries saw an increasing engagement of the laity in service and faith, especially through organizations like Catholic Action, which began in Europe and spread to the Americas. Closer to home, the inspired work of Catharine De Hueck Doherty and of Dorothy Day among the poor showed the incredible power of the laity to serve in the name of the church.

In spite of these developments, the church still defined the laity in terms of negatives. They were *not* ordained, *not* clerics, *not* priests. They were those who could not preach or celebrate the sacraments (except emergency baptisms). They were necessary, of course, but had no role in the preaching of the Gospel or in the apostolic work of the church.

“The Church is essentially an unequal society,” wrote Pope Pius X in 1906. “With the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the pastors” (quoted in *Keys to the Council*, p. 98).

Laypeople and the Work of the Church

At the council, all of that would change. No longer defined simply in terms of negatives, the council gradually came to a positive understanding of the laity. In *Lumen Gentium*, the Constitution on the Church, the People of God, includes not only the laity but the clergy as well. All of us, by our baptism, share in the common baptismal priesthood, and through this priestly baptism we all share in the apostolic mission of the church. The mission of preaching the Gospel, of healing and serving in Christ’s name does not belong exclusively to the hierarchy: this is the mission of the entire church.

The debates about the laity began during the first session, with *Lumen Gentium*. While some bishops argued strenuously against the notion of a baptismal priesthood, fearing that the ministerial priesthood would seem to be reduced in importance, others felt that the draft did not go far enough. Cardinal Suenens of Belgium remarked that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not given only to the hierarchy, and that these gifts needed to be nurtured, not suppressed, in the laity. The cardinal took a considerable amount of flak for his suggestion that the number of lay auditors at the

council be increased and that women be invited as well – “Unless I am mistaken,” he drily observed, “women make up one half of the world’s population” (quoted in *The Second Session*, Xavier Rynne).

Soon enough, though, there were women auditors as well as men at the council, and the role of the laity became one of the key themes of the council. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy sets as a prime value in the renewal of the liturgy the full, conscious, and active participation of the entire assembly. A chapter in *Lumen Gentium*, the Constitution on the Church is dedicated to the laity, and the laity are also at the heart of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

In addition to these key texts, an entire document is dedicated to the laity: *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, promulgated at the end of the Fourth Session of the Council. In a secular world, the introduction notes, the apostolate of the laity becomes even more imperative, as they act as a leaven, bringing the light of the Gospel and the values of Christianity to bear on all they do. And in places where priests are few or “are deprived of due freedom in their ministry, the church could scarcely be present and functioning without the activity of the laity.”

Here are a few key teachings of the decree:

- “In the church, there is diversity of service but unity of purpose” (2). We do not all serve in the same way, but we all work together, laity together with clergy.
- The primary place where the laity exercise their apostolate is in the secular realm, “as a kind of leaven” (2).
- It is the special task of the laity to “take on the renewal of the temporal order” (7). “Wherever there are people in need of food and drink, clothing, housing, medicine, employment, education; wherever men lack the facilities necessary for living a truly human life or are tormented by hardships or poor health, or suffer exile or imprisonment, there Christian charity should seek them out and find them, console them with eager care and relieve them with the gift of help... Help should be given in such a way that the recipients may gradually be freed from dependence and become self-sufficient” (8).
- While most laypeople carry out their apostolic work in the secular world, “the laity have an active part to play in the life and activity of the church” (10). In the parish, laypeople – both men and women – work “in close union with their priests, bringing to the church community their own and the world’s problems as well as questions concerning human salvation... the laity ought to collaborate energetically in every apostolic and missionary undertaking sponsored by their local parish” (10).
- To live as a Christian family is itself an apostolate, and one that is “of unique importance for the church and civil society” (11). Vocations begin in family life.
- Young people and children are also called to take part in the work of the church (12), to recognize that they too share in the apostolate. All of us, without exception, are called to work towards the building of the Kingdom of God.

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