



The Role of the Laity in Liturgy

Never before in the history of the Church has the absolutely essential role of the layperson been so dramatically emphasized as it is now. Particularly since Vatican II, the Church has called for a renewal in the life and role of the laity. Yet among the faithful, there remains a fundamental lack of understanding of the lay vocation and its role in the Church's mission.

For many, there is a notion that the only real vocation in the Church is the ordained or vowed priesthood and religious. They believe "the Church" is the ordained office and only people in habits or collars are called to serve. Many think that the role of the laity is to help out around the parish and that they are not called to play an integral part in the mission of the Church.

But in fact, the actual teaching of the Church is that laypeople have a distinct and very real role in the spreading of the Gospel. The Church needs laypeople to take up the challenge of Jesus in Matthew 28:19 – "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." The Church teaches that, in dignity, laypeople are absolutely equal to those in ordained and religious life. In mission, the work of the laity is the crucial means by which the world is to encounter Christ.

All Are Called

The central Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, written during the Second Vatican Council was *Lumen Gentium*, which translates as "Light of the Nations." The heart of this document is its teaching in chapter five that reminds us that the call to holiness is not limited to one state in life, but is indeed universal, embracing all the baptized. "Fortified by so many and such powerful

means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in his (or her) own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect" (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). The call to holiness is not just for some, it is for all. This is the fundamental vocation of all believers.

Still, many of the common understandings of laity exist because they are often defined by what the laity are not. This is misguided. The laity are not priests. They are not deacons. They are not men and women religious. Therefore, many assume they don't have a vocation, that they don't have a mission.

The Church, however, defines laity by what they *are*: sharers in Christ's office of priest, prophet, and king, holders of an important vocation, and critical participants in fulfilling the mission of the Church.

It is critical to realize that, according to the Church itself, the vocation and mission of laypeople is derived from the universal call to holiness and the reception of Baptism. It is further strengthened through Confirmation. The place and work in the body of Christ is given to laypeople directly, by the Holy Spirit, not indirectly through the ordained office.

Every person has been called by God to his or her own specific vocation and mission. Laypeople are called to share in the mission of Christ's Church by living in the midst of the world and addressing all its problems and concerns with the divine message of salvation.

Bishops and priests, as members of the Mystical Body of Christ, have the important task to teach, sanctify, and govern, precisely so that the vast majority of the Mystical Body of Christ, that is the laity, can do the work of evangelizing, sanctifying, and renewing the rest of the world beyond the sanctuary. "Though they differ essentially and not only in degree . . . (they) are none the less ordered to one another; (since) each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ." (*Lumen gentium*, 10)

Roles In Liturgy

The priest has a unique role at the altar, just as we laypeople have a





unique role in the world. In the Eucharistic Feast, the priest, when celebrating Mass does not cease to be himself. As a man, the priest remains a disciple, a sinner in need of God's mercy. And yet, linked directly to the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, stands *in persona Christi* at Mass. He offers more than bread to the Father. He offers his very self. In a very tangible way, he is Jesus Christ among us. That makes the role of the priest *at the altar* unique. As the Catechism reminds us, "Christ is the source of all priesthood: the priest of the old law was a figure of Christ, and the priest of the new law acts in the person of Christ" (CCC, 1548).

Laypeople, however, have real authority, real competence, and real gifts that we have the duty to exercise in the world in order to accomplish the mission on which we have been sent. When it comes to the parish liturgical celebration, laypeople are welcomed to be involved in a myriad of roles:

- Altar Servers
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion
- Ministers of Hospitality
- Musicians
- Readers
- Sacristans
- Ushers

Not listed above, and often overlooked, is the role of the *assembly*. This is, apart from the role the priest plays, the most important. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* reminds us that there must be "full and active participation by all the people" (SC, 14) as this "is the aim to be considered before all else" (SC, 14). The assembly is to be *participating* in every moment of the liturgical celebration – even (and especially) those moments that call for silence, for it is in those moments we might hear God speak to our hearts most clearly. Every liturgical celebration is an action of Christ *and of the whole Church*. During a celebration of the Mass, or of any liturgy, there are ministers who may seem to be doing the 'work' and while it is true that some within the community have specific duties to perform, the liturgy is celebrated by all present, according to their proper roles.

It would be easy to think of participation in the Mass as 'just' singing the hymns or saying the responses, but the assembly is doing much more than that. First, the assembly offers thanksgiving and sacrifice to God, primarily by joining their prayers to those of the priest, but also by their

self-offering through individual prayers. Second, the assembly unites us to each other through the gestures, responses, and acclamations that belong to the assembly.

Discerning Our Role

Since a liturgical celebration is the action of the whole Church, all have an obligation to each other. The ancient writer Tertullian wrote that every member of the church community has a responsibility to every other member, to support each other in the liturgy through their prayers and their presence. This secondary obligation in no way replaces or reduces our Sunday obligation. Instead it reinforces the need for all of the baptized to continue, as a community, the saving work begun by Jesus.

In the celebration of the Mass, we join ourselves to Jesus in His Paschal Sacrifice. We also come together in unity and community, so that we may become the one Body of Christ, a witness of salvation to the world. As members of the assembly, we accomplish all of this through our full, conscious, and active participation in every liturgical celebration.

It is up to each of us to prayerfully discern the call to serve in our parish. We cannot discern our call to serve alone. We must listen to the Word of God, talk to others, and prayerfully consider where our gifts might be placed at the service of the parish community.

Ongoing Formation

Finally, ongoing formation is essential for every baptized Catholic. Just as we cannot discern our call on our own, we cannot accomplish our God-given mission on our own. We must be committed to ongoing formation and a life of prayer and virtuous living. Most of all, we must be open to allowing God to work through us.

The person principally responsible for our formation is not the Pope, our bishop, or even our pastor. We have primary responsibility for knowing and living our faith. We must learn the *Catechism*. We must study Sacred Scripture. We must participate fully and actively in the Mass. We must remain close to the Sacraments.

We need well-formed lay people, animated by a sincere and clear faith, whose life has been touched by the personal and merciful love of Christ Jesus. (Pope Francis, 6.17.16)