

CHRISTIFIDELES LAICI:
A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

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1. Background - Vatican II

The title of this talk, which I was asked to present for this gathering, echoes the apostolic exhortation signed by John Paul II in 1988. He issued this exhortation at the conclusion of the bishops' synod on the laity in the Church and the world, held in 1987, over twenty years after the Second Vatican Council. The central motif of that post-synodal exhortation was the invitation given in the Gospel parable of the workers sent to work in the vineyard, an invitation which is repeated insistently – at different times of day – now to some, now to others: “You too go into my vineyard” (Mt 20:4, 7).

The pope, summarizing the synod's discussions, explained that the vineyard is the Church and the world of today. All the baptized are responsible for this vineyard, and none can be dispensed from this responsibility. For the baptized laity this is translated into a service within the Church, expressed according to each one's particular spiritual charism and in different but complementary ministries meant for the well-being of the believing community. At the same time, and above all, this responsibility launches lay people back into the heart of the “world,” within the sphere that they – precisely as laity – have to participate in directly: the family, “where the duty to society begins” (CL 40); public life, which is “for everyone and by everyone” (CL 42); the economy, where human rights and dignity must be repositioned at its very center (CL 43); and culture and cultures, which must continually be re-evangelized from within (CL 44).

Nonetheless, it remains clear that *Christifideles laici* took its cue from Vatican II, and Vatican II flows through its every page. Therefore, if something must be repeated regarding the “place” that baptized lay people have in the Church and in the world – and likewise between the Church and the world, a kind of “bridge” between them – then it is necessary to continue referring to the Council. Today there is even more reason to refer to the Council, fifty years from the beginning of its work, inaugurated by John XXIII in 1962. Choosing this perspective helps put me in tune with the reflections that the other speakers have made before me, continually referring to the experience and the teaching of the Council.

Here's why, in beginning, it seems like a good idea to reecho some questions regarding the Council itself: this was indeed the Council of the Church (as so many commentators have said and written). If that was the case, which Church was being discussed? Further, if it can be said that the Council spoke clearly about both lay people and the laity per se, did this treatment include those lay persons who also live the evangelical counsels as consecrated persons, while being and remaining lay?

These questions are not merely rhetorical. The Council's most innovative intuitions on the identity of the Church have remained only a slogan through the years of the post-conciliar period. Yet understanding the role of lay people who are within the Church and for whom the Church is a starting point, depends on this identity. Some hidden weaknesses in the conciliar discourse on lay people have perhaps only covered up crises of the traditional modes of lay associations within the Church. These weaknesses led to the loss of interpretive keys suited for correctly explaining the metamorphoses of the last ten years (including the “originality” of secular institutes). The many meanings that have gradually clustered around terms like lay, lay person, laity, lay state, laicism [secularism] make them ever more ambiguous and, in the final analysis, no longer useful for debate within the Church or for dialogue among believers and secular humanists (as in the *Court of the Gentiles* held in Stockholm in September 2012, defined as atheist intellectuals and non-believers).

2. Two perspectives: A Trinitarian-agape origin and the relationship between the Church and the world

The Council's lesson, as far as it concerns the identity and role of baptized lay people, is really important. First of all, because it is a lesson *about* lay people but not intended only *for* lay people, it therefore challenges *all* in the Church and spurs *all* to renew their own way of seeing and living their reality in the Church. Lay people are an integral part of it no less than other baptized members.

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We find the most innovative pages about lay people in Chapter 4 of *Lumen Gentium*. This follows the discussion in Chapter 2 of the Church as the People of God, among whom all the baptized hold citizenship – with equal claim – without exclusion or partiality. It has been rightly noted that this progressive conciliar teaching concludes by emphasizing the direct relationship that lay people in the Church have with Jesus Christ. He is the only head of a body composed of many members. The distinction among the members, and notably between the hierarchy of bishops and of other ordained ministers and the laity, follows and is secondary to that which unifies all in Christ.

Said another way, the structure of the conciliar teaching (Chapters 2 to 4) is already the clue to a fundamental equality between the hierarchy and the laity. This is because the identity of the laity does not proceed from being under the hierarchy, but from the shared dignity of all the People of God, completely constituted as “a kingdom and priests” (LG 10; cf. Revelations 1:6, 5:9-10; 1 Peter 2:4-10). That is, all belong to God in virtue of the sole mediation of Jesus Christ; through his mediation all recover their true place in relationship with God the Father, within a history that has already been redeemed. Baptism consecrates all in a common, shared priesthood that participates in the priesthood of Christ, no less than those who participate also in the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood.

In this sense, the question that was posed yesterday morning by Doctor Sfrondrini around the specific nature of a consecrated laity (“But isn’t Baptism enough?”) calls into question not only consecrated laity, but also the existence of an “ordained” priesthood in the Church.

Perhaps it is just a case of clarifying that the common priesthood remains linked with the ministerial priesthood in a reciprocal “ordination” or direction. Thus, according to the Council, the common priesthood is organized in relationship to the ministerial priesthood and vice versa, in the sense that the ministerial priesthood must proceed from the common priesthood, and, in comparison with the common priesthood, it should make itself available through service. (There are no priests or bishops who were not first lay persons; their priesthood and episcopacy are nothing other than ecclesial service to lay people, according to their “function” of representing Christ.) At the same time, the common priesthood, to be what it truly is, should give rise to the ministerial priesthood and should allow the ministerial priesthood to be inserted into it, “agreeing to receive” (to use the words of Balthasar), and therefore, “receiving-taking,” with an active receptivity that typifies those in relationship with God.

I purposely linger over this teaching of LG 10 because it seems fundamentally relevant. It helps us dispose of the rhetoric that the laity is singled out in contrast with the hierarchy. On the contrary, according to the Council the laity is a true and proper priestly experience. (With the traits of both prophetic and priestly experience, the laity is also involved in the divine sacralization of the world. In the world this priesthood is exercised with the spiritual vigor of witness and with the ethical force of commitment within history.) Further, LG 10 helps us interpret the relationship between the laity and the hierarchy, esteeming their not-incompatible otherness according to a non-pyramidal logic.

To use a word severely criticized by Yves Congar, but which is in circulation: this is a “hierarchology” based on reciprocity. It is a type of agape, if (as LG 4 teaches) the Church itself is truly a people called into being by the unity of the Three of the Trinity (“a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”). The Church *de Trinitate*, the Church that issues from the Trinity, that flows from the divine communion of agape, is constituted by the power of this same dynamic that constitutes the communion of agape. That is, the Church exists in accordance with the interweaving of being and non-being. At this point the personal profiles of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are configured: the profile of the Father who is the Father but is not the Son; of the Son who is the Son but is not the Father, of the Spirit who is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son but is not the Father or the Son. Picking up this Trinitarian perspective of a union that is not reduced to uniformity, LG 32, refers to the relationship in the Church between lay people and ordained ministers or religious. It affirms that every distinction includes union, so that in the Church what is proper and exclusive to some does not threaten the others and actually helps the others be what they should be. Let me say at this point that the members of secular institutes really personify this distinction-that-includes-union, because – by an extraordinary paradox – they are not simply lay or simply religious, but are both lay and consecrated.

These fundamental intuitions are somewhat grouped and reaffirmed in all of Chapter 4 of LG, where (all) lay people are presented as the *crisifideles* that form the Church. They are what they are in reference to Jesus Christ, whose disciples they are, to whom they are conformed, whose priestly, prophetic, and royal mission they share and participate in.

Truthfully, in the Church according to the Council, under this “Christic” profile all are *christifideles*. Among these, all who are not ordained ministers or religious are properly called *lay*. There is here a veiled echo of that definition “by a negative” that in the patristic era and then on through the Middle Ages defined lay people as the ones who are “not” clerics and “not” consecrated in a special way in religious life. A definition “by a negative,” with a juridical tone, by chance was not reechoed in the Code of Canon Law (canon 207). But this definition by negation, which would seem to debase the identity of lay people, can also have a value if understood beyond its canonical determinations and if it is connected to its perspective as a communion of agape.

LG 31 also offers, above all, a definition “by a positive” of a lay person, when it points out particular characteristics that do not delineate the lay vocation in opposition to the vocations of other members of the ecclesial community. Fundamentally LG 31 deals with what it calls “secular nature.” It explains the meaning of this expression like this: “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 led by the spirit of the Gospel, they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.”

Determining the meaning of the “secular nature” proper to the lay person – in the post-conciliar period – has been a sort of interpretive key. Literally it refers to the reality of the world and therefore to the “worldliness” of the Church, that is to say, to its relationship with the world understood in a historic sense. In this understanding, the Church, the whole Church, is situated within history; therefore secularity is one of its characteristics. This flows from the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word. From this perspective the Church is in the world and of the world, re-experiencing the same commitment to the world’s existence that belonged to Jesus Christ, redeemer of the world. To speak specifically of the laity by singling out their secular nature seems to some commentators a rhetorical stretch, as though bishops, priests, monks, and sisters were not also responsible to be in the world and for the world.

Though recognizing the rationale of this observation, I consider that the Second Vatican Council may have suggested two irreconcilable criteria for interpreting the identity of the laity. The first criterion is evangelical and borrows from the Sermon on the Mount: the laity, stalwart in their secular nature, do not remain on the margins of the Church, least of all if they draw on it when outside it, going down into the furrows, the furrows of the world. They are the Church itself; with them and in them the Church lives out its mission of being the “leaven” of salvation, like leaven in the dough, giving it substance and flavor. They are the Church itself; in them the Church lives out its mission of being “present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can [the Church] become the salt of the earth” (LG 33).

The second criterion is a cornerstone of theological anthropology: according to the Council, by their specific vocation lay people are called to sanctify the world from within. This “from within” is not a purely earthly dimension. If the conciliar teaching is considered according to the logic of the Incarnation that permeates and supports it, the inside of the world, the starting point of the laity’s call to devote themselves for the redemption of the world itself, is a precisely theological dimension. This is the place that God, in Jesus Christ, has chosen for himself. This is the place where, transcending his very transcendence, he has graciously and gratuitously made himself present. In fact, the God of Jesus Christ is both on high and also within the world: not outside, and not even beneath the world. *On high* and *within* are asymmetrical poles: there is not a distance between them, as there could be between someone on high and someone down low, or between someone inside and someone outside. No, the One who is on high is also within. This must be said of the God of Jesus Christ. And it must also be said of the lay Christian. This means that lay people live a mission that is set in motion by God himself and as such is an authentic ecclesial mission, not an excuse or a substitute for mission.

It can easily be said, then that the whole Church is “secular.” Considering the relationship between the Church and the world, then, it can be said that the identifying factor of the clergy and religious is being in the world and for the world, starting out from inside the Church. Likewise, the identifying factor of the laity is their being in the world and for the world, starting out from inside the world itself, as LG 31 teaches.

A great theologian like Balthasar keeps all this in mind. In his book on the states of life of Christians, he emphasizes precisely that the identifying factor of clergy and religious is having – in the Church and for the Church – the function of representing Jesus Christ and the radical requirements implied by being children of the Father (the evangelical counsels). Their identifying factor is of a “functional” type, as such destined to

express itself in a “ministry” in respect to the laity. (The etymology of *ministry* suggests real “service” [Latin *munus*] and also a humble being-less-than [Latin *minus*]). If all this is true – and it is true – then the Church “is” not only clergy and religious and finally, by subtraction, the laity. The Church “is” precisely the laity and functionally, by ministry for them and among them, also the clergy and religious.

From this viewpoint it can be affirmed that baptized lay people are called to point out the traces of God in the world. Moreover, they are called to leave God’s footprints on the world. This does not mean for lay Christians to play a sacred role that does not belong to them. Rather it means to act in such a way that the world senses and understands that, in Christ, God takes care of it, wearing himself out, putting aside his divine prerogatives, the treasure of his equality with God.

The lay person is the one who lives the Gospel, reinterpreting it according to this incarnational logic: beginning with those pages where the Teacher from Nazareth, passing from village to village, announced the Reign of God and “cured” all the maladies that he encountered. In the Greek version of the Gospels we notice that the verb principally used by the evangelists to describe Jesus’ attitude to the sick is *terapeuo*, which means precisely to cure and, in our case, to take care of, without avoiding, without getting distracted, without turning away and also without resorting immediately to a miracle, without insisting on intervention from on high, because God is already here and is located inside of history.

Insisting on this point seems useful for understanding in what sense baptized lay people are – as Paul VI said in his speech to Catholic graduates on January 3, 1964 – a “bridge” between the Church and the world.

3. The originality of a vocation “at the border”

In this sense lay people are fully engaged in the relationship between the Church and the world, so that it can be said that the laity is a state typically secular, while – on the other hand – the consecration of religious stresses their experience in an eschatological perspective. But lay people should not misunderstand the eschatological orientation of consecrated religious, as though it dis-incarnated them and alienated them from the shared history of humanity. And the secular nature of the laity should not be misunderstood, either, as if this turned off all their yearning for transcendence. The challenge that consecrated people and lay people share is to live fully one of the two orientations of Christian life – incarnational or eschatological – and not under-appreciate the value of the other orientation.

To face such a challenge, God granted the Church of the Council the awareness that a distinct vocation exists which reminds the laity that secular immanence is always open to transcendence, and reminds the consecrated faithful that the transcendence of the God toward whom they stretch always breaks into secular immanence. Members of secular institutes live in the state of both secularity and consecration. While remaining fully lay, they also live a special, authentic consecration. In fact, their special consecration accentuates the transcendent orientation of baptismal consecration, visible among persons consecrated in the religious state.

But, at the same time, the Council treats the incarnational orientation that also belongs to baptismal consecration. Furthermore, it focuses on this new and special consecration and on the secular nature that the consecrated laity share with all the other lay faithful. Likewise, they make a radical commitment to the Gospel in and for the world, a responsibility of every lay person. So, their charismatic vocation to live in the world as consecrated laity is expressed in the Church as the service of 1) reminding the lay faithful that they can and must live according to the evangelical counsels even in earthly reality, and 2) showing the consecrated faithful the impact within history of the Gospel beatitudes, which can transform and redeem the world and humanity’s temporal life.

Finally, the characteristic that defines consecrated laity is living fully and contemporaneously the secular nature that belongs to their lay state and also the consecration of the counsels that belongs to the religious state. They are actually lay, but not only that. Moreover, they are authentically consecrated, without becoming religious. Their specific reality is that of synthesizing secularity and consecration. They do this by bearing witness fully and radically to the value of the one and the other. Both to other lay people and to other consecrated people they manifest the goal of “transfiguring the world from within by the power of the Beatitudes” (*Vita consecrata*, 10 and 32). The members of secular institutes, then, fulfill in the contemporary Church a vocation that serves as an example both to lay people and to consecrated people, since they share secularity with the first, living it as consecrated people, and they share a special consecration with the second, living it as lay people.

However, this vocation is not easy to understand or to live. The Council itself had difficulty speaking about it, inserting the only meager allusion to consecrated laity in the decree dedicated to religious life, in n. 11 of *Perfectae caritatis*: “Secular Institutes, although not religious institutes, involve a true and full profession of the evangelical counsels in the world.” And *Christifideles laici* did not get much further, if at all, reversing the Council’s viewpoint by grouping consecrated lay people no longer among religious but among the laity: “The Church’s rich variety is manifested still further from within each state of life. Thus *within the lay state diverse ‘vocations’ are given*, that is, there are different paths in the spiritual life and the apostolate which are taken by individual members of the lay faithful. In the field of a ‘commonly shared’ lay vocation, ‘special’ lay vocations flourish. In this area we can also recall the spiritual experience of the flourishing of diverse forms of secular institutes.... These offer the lay faithful, and even priests, the possibility of professing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience through vows or promises, while fully maintaining one’s lay or clerical state” (n. 56).

One firm point stands out: that consecrated lay people are at the same time truly lay and fully consecrated. As lay people, they are *in* the world, participating in the historic situation of every human being; furthermore, they are *with* and *for* the world, since they share the secular commitment of each baptized lay person, remaining thus totally committed to “seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs” (LG 31) with the secular means proper to temporal reality. As consecrated persons they have the mission of practicing the evangelical spirit of the beatitudes in an exemplary way. All lay people must feel motivated by the beatitudes to organize secular reality “according to God.”

As lay people, members of secular institutes must live the Gospel from inside the world (in, with, and for the world) according to the incarnational logic of the Christ-event. Likewise, as consecrated persons they must also experience the yearning to open themselves unreservedly to encounter God, who reaches out to people while calling them to himself. Their vocation is not to abandon the world, since God is really present in the world so as to encounter humanity. Neither is it a matter of conforming to the world, but rather of going to meet God, always with the world as the starting point, and as if one is carrying the world itself. As consecrated persons they are called to uproot the world from their hearts to dispose themselves unconditionally to God; but as lay persons they are also called, in the heart of the world, to be identified by their awareness that, through them and for all, this world must be able to become the vast horizon of God. Their lifestyle is not flight from the world but exodus, with the world as their starting point, passing through the world, and together with the world. Their goal is to stimulate the world itself both to welcome God and to reach beyond itself toward God.

The vocation of members of secular institutes is, in this sense, a vocation “at the border,” because it is located on the frontier that runs between the world and God and on the threshold introducing the One to the other. Lay people who consecrate their secularity announce to humanity that God has crossed that threshold, and they invite humanity to cross it in turn.