

CHAPTER VI

THE LAITY

20. The Principle.

"The eternal Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, in order to perpetuate the saving work of our redemption, determined to establish a holy Church in which, as within the house of the living God, all the faithful might be united in the bond of one faith and love." In the Church all the faithful have the honorable duty to labor so that the divine plan of salvation may be ever more applied to all people of all times. Called into the People of God and constituted in one Body under one Head, they are obliged, whoever they are, to devote all their strength, received through the Creator's blessings and the Redeemer's grace, to the growth and continual sanctification of the Church. The Lord himself consecrated some in the Church to be shepherds and teachers for the work of the ministry, so that the faithful would not be like children tossed to and fro, but would, according to the functioning in due measure of each member, work for the growth of the Body until all reach the age of the fullness of Christ (see Eph 4:11-16). The shepherds, therefore, were not instituted in order to bear alone the whole burden of building up the Body, but in order that all the faithful whom they govern might be brought by them to cooperate in their own way and order in carrying out the common task. For the entire organic Body has only one calling.

21. On the Universal Priesthood and the Ministerial Priesthood.

The ancient People of God was constituted as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (see Ex 19:5-6), whose members were called "priests of the Lord" (see Is 61:6). In Christ, however, the new People is by baptismal regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit elevated to be a spiritual temple and a holy priesthood, that it might offer spiritual sacrifices and, as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people, might proclaim the wonders of him who called them out of darkness into his own marvelous light (see 1 Pet 2:4-10). All the disciples of Christ, then, whom the Lord himself made a kingdom and priests to his God and Father (see Rev 1:6 and 5:9-10), whether they belong to the hierarchical order or not, should present themselves as a living sacrifice pleasing to God (see Rm 12:1) and throughout the earth bear witness to Christ and to his virtues.

In this Body all members through baptism and confirmation are so dedicated to Christ the Priest that by prayer, almsgiving and self-denial they might offer spiritual sacrifices to God and give to anyone who asks a reason for the hope of eternal salvation that is in us (see 1 Pet 3:15), and indeed that in the sacrifice of the Mass they might through the hands of the sacrificing minister offer to God the Body of Christ present on the altar through the words of consecration. But in the same Body there are also priests properly so-called, who, consecrated by the sacrament of Orders and set apart for men in the things that pertain to God (see Hb 5:1), exercise the hierarchical priesthood as Christ's ministers. These chosen men care for the people with sacred authority, bring them the means of salvation, and guide their worship. In the eucharistic sacrifice, they alone pronounce the words of consecration in the person of Christ, and in offering the sacrifice, they represent the whole Church, so that "what the people do by intention, the priests

accomplish in mystery."²

The one priesthood, however, does not preclude the other; on the contrary, the ministerial priesthood and the universal priesthood, because they differ not only in degree but also in essence,³ both flow in their own ways from Christ the High Priest; and they are so related to one another that the former by sacred power expands and directs the priestly kingdom, while the latter accompanies the offering of the sacrifice⁴ and is exercised in prayer, witness, self-denial, and active charity.

22. *Who are Meant by the Term "Laity".*

This Holy Synod here understands by the term "laity" the faithful who, united to the People of God by baptism but living in the world, are governed only by the common norms of the Christian life. It is directing its attention, that is, to those faithful who have not been called out of the People of God to the hierarchy of orders or to a religious state approved by the Church, but must rather pursue Christian holiness for the glory of God in a special way also by their secular works. They take part in the works of the world, but, led by an evangelical spirit, they valiantly oppose the malice of the world, indeed by their Christian vocation, they sanctify the world as it were from within.

23. *The Rights and Duties of the Laity.*

The rights and duties of lay people are those that belong to each and every disciple of Christ simply in virtue of their Christianity. They have the right, in accordance with their abilities, to participate even actively in the saving work of the Church. They have the right to witness to their faith in word and in writings. They have the right to receive from their pastors the helps necessary to salvation, and to them they can reverently make known their needs and desires.⁵ Pastors of the Church, remembering the words of Scripture: "Test the spirits to see if they are of God" (1 Jn 4:1), and, "Do not extinguish the Spirit" (1 Th 5:19), should in Christ carefully consider the undertakings and desires proposed by the faithful and should unceasingly impress upon the faithful the duty of offering the witness of an integrally Christian life.

For, by *baptism* reborn as the children of God, lay people profess the Christian faith and are deputed by the character of baptism to the worship of the Christian religion. They are strengthened by the sacrament of *confirmation* to spread and defend the faith which they have received from the Church. Participating in *the eucharistic sacrifice*, joining their prayers to those of the sacrificing minister, they offer the divine Victim to God through the hands of the priest and especially in this way have an active role in the liturgy.⁶ While dedicating themselves to God, by their self-denial they battle against the reign of sin in themselves and in others. Made thus in their own fashion to share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly role of Christ, they fulfill his new and fundamental commandment, that of *charity*, by which we love our neighbors with the love with which Christ loved us, above all the least of the brethren whom the Lord especially identified with himself. Thus do the laity continue Christ's saving mission, not indeed by authority but by love.

24. *The Laity's Active Participation in the Salvific Life of the Church.*

Since, as the Apostle testifies, the Church is a body joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, with each part working properly (Eph 4:16), the laity too must work for the growth of the body and to build it up in love. Indeed, their activity, which is called the lay apostolate, although it does not engage the authority of pastors and does not constitute a distinct religious state, does nevertheless flow from the same source as every activity in the Church, however noble or humble, that is, from the superabundance of the graces of Christ the Head. For the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Cor 13:13) touches all the faithful and impels them to activity for the good and for the growth of the whole Mystical Body.

a) Their common work is, first of all, of an *explicitly religious character*, as was already clear in the primitive community, in which the baptized by prayer, example, sacrifice, and word built up the Church (see Acts 2:42; 4:31; 8:4; 11:19-20). For that reason, lay people in the Church are not deputed solely for temporal affairs, but also perform a very precious activity within the Church. And they are themselves in their own way bound to the service of evangelization and sanctification. If some of them, when there is a shortage of clergy or during a persecution, substitute for the sacred offices to the degree possible, and if many lay people, renouncing all things for the sake of the Kingdom of God, devote all their energies to apostolic work, still on *all* of them falls the duty to work together for the extensive and intensive growth of the Body of Christ. This task is carried out especially by married couples, who by the power of their sacrament sanctify one another in the Christian life, and by parents, educators, and catechists of all sorts, who with exceptional success work to impart the faith and grace to their children and brethren.

b) It also belongs to the laity *indirectly to promote religion* insofar as, living in the world, they open and illumine a closed and hostile world with the message of the Gospel; they gain and secure for the Church opportunities for its life and activity; and finally, they heal the institutions and conditions of the world that lead to sin, so that these worldly realities may instead contribute to virtue and justice. To such apostolic zeal the Church insistently calls all its members.⁷

c) Finally, without their leaving their situation in the world,⁸ to the laity belongs the *consecration of the world*, that is, efforts to see to it that the world in every sphere of its activity and progress is imbued with the Spirit of Christ. In the general fulfilment of this task, because of their lay status, they have the principal role. By sanctifying temporal works, they seek to bring it about that created goods, according to the Creator's intention, be perfected by human labor, by technical skill and public culture for the benefit of all, that they be more fittingly distributed among people, and thus contribute in their own way to universal progress in Christian freedom (see Jn 8:32). In this way the Church will truly stand out as the supernaturally life-giving principle of human society. In this noble work, the laity should take care, by the Spirit's driving force, to be led by a supernatural principle, to keep in mind the final and supreme purpose which is the glorification of God and eternal happiness, and, through the grace of Christ, inwardly to enrich all their actions with a spiritual and redemptive value.

25. *The Principal Forms of the Laity's Collaboration.*

Given the nature of the Church, the common activity or apostolate of the laity can be exercised in various forms: individually or collectively, in virtue of the universal mission of the baptized, or also with a special mission, in matters religious or also social.

The first form of the collaboration of lay people, both men and women, is *personal*; that is, an action undertaken by one or many individuals, whether spontaneously in virtue of the general Christian vocation or on the basis of a particular task entrusted to them by the pastors, both in the order of evangelization and witness or in the order of the consecration of the world. There is no category of the faithful which could not with great effectiveness engage in such work.⁹

Next, the pastors of the Church have the right and sometimes the obligation to urge the laity, even by joining groups established for this purpose, to assist priests *in purely religious matters*, even in virtue of a mandate and with a true canonical mission through which, when accepted, lay people participate in the hierarchical apostolate of the Church--such participation usually is called "Catholic Action." In accord with different circumstances of time and place, pastors ought to encourage and promote various associations of this sort, whether for spreading saving doctrine, for promoting the apostolate of prayer, for fostering the Christian family, for promoting missionary work, or for obtaining and supporting other goods relating to the altar.

Since kindly Mother Church must preach the commandment of love not only by word but also by example, she has the right publicly to exercise *the spiritual and corporal works of mercy*, through institutes erected for such work, composed of both religious and lay people.

Although *secular economic and social matters* do not directly pertain to the Church, nevertheless, since people generally cannot easily live a religious life unless they are able to live a life worthy of the human person even with regard to temporal goods, the Church, taking pity on the crowds (see Mk 8:2), has the right and duty, especially where the necessary conditions are lacking, of urging the clergy and faithful to promote the social works that will meet such needs. She explicitly exhorts them to promote living conditions that will every day more fully coincide with justice and equity and to know thoroughly and put into practice the Christian principles on social matters proposed by the magisterium.

Finally, pastors of the Church should urge the faithful that, while they are variously engaging *in temporal matters of whatever sort*, they strive so that institutions and works dedicated to intellectual, physical, public and private culture, to art, science, and useful recreation, properly achieve their goal and, so far from opposing religion, be rendered even more effective by supernatural inspiration and Christian virtue. The Church recommends lay people willingly to accept the obligation that falls especially on them of effectively and appropriately promoting the common good in political society. In this field Catholics should take an active and favorable part by their efforts for peace and cooperation among all men of good will, for the prosperity both of their own nation and of the whole international community.

26. *The Healthy Autonomy of the State.*

In the world created by God and redeemed by Christ's passion, human society is to be brought to its immediate goal, the common temporal good, on its own principles and especially by the activity of lay people. On the one hand, lay people should carefully avoid a confusion or undue mixing of religion and the Church with merely civil matters; on the other hand, , remembering that all human activity, even in secular matters, is subject to God's laws, they will legitimately oppose a total separation of the two and, even more, any opposition of temporal society to God and his Church. Thus, just as the lay character of the state must be acknowledged, since it is properly dedicated to secular concerns and is governed by its own principles, so also is

a hostile "laicism" or "secularism," which attempts to build society without any religion and attacks and destroys Christian freedom, rightly condemned.¹⁰

27. Exhortation.

The Holy Synod, most gratefully aware of the immense benefits gained also by the work of lay people for the continuous growth of the Body of Christ, lovingly and insistently exhorts the lay faithful of both sexes to join their energies to those of the clergy and religious, in union with the divinely established Hierarchy, under Christ the Head and animated by his Spirit, and thus ceaselessly to fulfill their mission of apostolic charity for the glory of God the Father.

NOTES

¹ See Vatican Council I, *De Ecclesia Christi*, D 1821.

² Innocent III, *De S. Alt. Myst.*, 5, 2 (PL 217, 888 BC).

³ Pius XII, Address *Magnificate Dominum*, Nov. 2, 1954; *AAS*, 46 (1954), 669.

⁴ Pius XI, Enc. *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, *AAS*, 20 (1928), 171f; Pius XII, Address *Vous Nous avez*, *AAS*, 48 (1956), 714.

⁵ *Code of Canon Law*, can. 682; Pius XII, Address *De quelle consolation*, *AAS*, 43 (1951), 789: "In decisive battles, the most successful initiatives sometimes come from the front lines"; Pius XII, Address *L'importance de la presse catholique*, *AAS*, 42 (1950), 256.

⁶ See Pius XII, Enc. *Mediator Dei*, *AAS*, 39 (1947), esp. pp. 552ff.

⁷ Pius XI, Enc. *Quadragesimo Anno*, *AAS*, 23 (1931), 221f; Pius XII, *De quelle consolation*, l.c., p. 790f.

⁸ Pius XII, Address *Six ans se sont écoulés*, *AAS*, 49 (1957), 927.

⁹ Pius XII, *De quelle consolation*, l.c., p. 786f.

¹⁰ Leo XIII, Enc. *Immortale Dei*, *ASS*, 18 (1885), 166ff; Enc. *Sapientiae christianae*, *ASS*, 22 (1889-90), 397ff; Pius XII, Address *Alla vostra filiale*, *AAS*, 50 (1958), 220.

COMMENTARY

a) [*The Principle*] From the constitution and the purpose of the Church it is clear that all in her, under the eladership of the Pastors, have active roles to carry out.

b) [*The universal and ministerial priesthood*] This topic is developed by a consideration of the universal and of the ministerial priesthood. For the *universal priesthood* the principal texts of both Old and New Testament are chosen. This dignity rests upon baptism and confirmation, as is clear from the context of First Peter. It is pointed out in what this basic duty is that falls upon all, including ordained priests, namely, of offering the spiritual sacrifice, both metaphorical and eucharistic, and of bearing witness. The text was written in such a way as to make clear both the metaphorical and the analogical character of the universal priesthood.

Then the *ministerial priesthood* is discussed, which rests upon the sacrament of Orders; the specific task of this institution of the Lord is stated, one that is quite distinct and superior to the task of the people.

Finally, the relationships between the two priesthoods are set out. For in the biblical texts and in second-century writings, the word “priest” was used only of Christ, of the priests of the Old Law, and of the people, while ministers were called bishops, presbyters, presiders, etc. Nor does there exist a metaphysical definition of the priesthood: which elements would enter into a definition—e.g., the offering of a sacrifice, some mediation, the instruction of the faithful (see Mal 2:7), etc.—can only be determined from revelation. But because the two priesthoods differ not in degree only but essentially—this is stated in the words of Pius XIII—it is required that both in their own ways come from Christ the Priest. The principal relationships are these: the ministerial priesthood expands and directs the other priesthood; but the universal priesthood participates in the offering of the sacrifice—this is supported by the words of Pius XI and Pius XII—and is exercised in the various acts of the Christian life.

c) [*Who are meant by the word “lay people”?*] Questions about the precise juridical delimitation among the various categories in the Church being set aside, the paragraph expresses the intention of the Council to speak of those who are called “lay people” in the common sense. They are defined first *positively* by their baptismal incorporation into the Church, with a twofold restriction mentioned: they do not belong to the ministerial priesthood and do not enter into a religious state. It is up to the Church to determine in which people this religious state is acknowledged.

Then lay people are further described *in accord with their concrete condition* in society. They are to be sanctified even by their secular works, e.g., making use of their family and professional life for salvation. They are in the world and work there, but by opposing “the world’s wickedness” they sanctify “the world itself” from within. This antithesis corresponds to the twofold meaning of the word “world” in the biblical texts: Christ hates the world under the banner of sin and Satan, but he loves those who live in the world and saves the world. Christians ought to act in similar fashion.

d) [*The rights and duties of lay people*] This paragraph now sets out the rights and duties of lay people. They have the *right*, among others, to the means of salvation; they can, therefore, tell their pastors in proper form of their own spiritual needs and those of their brethren, which they keenly feel; they can offer documents, plea for remedies, and propose useful apostolic undertakings, as Pius XII said.

Their chief duty is to give the witness of an integrally Christian life. This rests upon the three sacraments of Christian initiation with the obligations that flow from them. The effect of baptism and confirmation is expressed in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas. See *Summa theologica*, III, q. 63, a. 2, on baptism, III, q. 65, a. 3; q. 72, a. 1 and a. 5, on confirmation. The participation of the faithful in the sacrifice of the Mass is developed in accord with the teaching of Pius XII in the encyclical *Mediator Dei*.

Thus the laity participate in the threefold office of Christ: in his priestly dignity, basically in baptism, in act especially in the eucharist; in his prophetic office by the spiritual strength of confirmation; in his kingly dignity in accord with the teaching of the holy Fathers, by victory over the reign of sin.

All of these bear fruit *in charity*, which the Lord calls “his” commandment and the “new” commandment both because of its unlimited application and because of the Spirit who urges toward it: “That you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34). “And we ought to lay

down our lives for the brethren” (1 Jn 3:16). “That all may be one, as you, Father in me and I in you, that they too may be one is us” (Jn 17:21). “As often as you did it to one of these the least of my brethren, you did to me” (Mt 25:40). “The love of God is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rm 5:5).

e) [*The laity’s active participation in the saving life of the Church*] This object is determined by the object of the mission of the Church herself. For lay people are not profane people, but members of the Church in a profane world; hence they are distinguished not by their secular works but by their active belonging to the Church. Their ecclesial activity achieves a threefold object, set out by degrees.

The first object is of the *directly religious order*. This activity is not merely occasional and supplementary, but ordinary and regular. Some lay people laudably take up a full-time apostolate with total dedication. But all have the duty of cooperating in the spread of the faith and of grace according to their circumstances, especially parents and educators; many Christians are called to the office of father and mother.

The second object *indirectly concerns religion* insofar as it attempts to create in the social and political order of the earthly city conditions apt for the progress of faith and morality and for the saving activity of the Church.

While the first two concern evangelization, the third concerns *the consecration of the world*, which in the text is concretely defined as that to which Pius XII time after time expressly exhorted the laity. If this object of its nature belongs to the temporal order, it is to be directed in the end to a spiritual goal by the person acting in the various fields of human endeavor. Thus work, whether material or intellectual, is brought to perfection in a Christian manner worthy of man. Christians, aware of the ultimate goal of such work, strive to make it proceed from a superior principle; they look toward a superior goal, and they make their works, even profane works, intrinsically nobler by grace.

f) [*The principal forms of the collaboration of lay people*] After the object of the lay apostolate, the way of exercising it is now considered, and criteria for the distinctions are first set out.

The text speaks first about the *personal* apostolate which is exercised not by any group set up for this, but by individuals. As Pius XII expressly taught, not all can enter into apostolic associations. And the hierarchy can also entrust a particular apostolic mission to one or more Christians.

It speaks secondly of the *collective* apostolate which is taken up by associations of lay people. Associations of this kind can be listed under four general categories, and sometimes there can be mixed forms of them.

The first series is found in groups established *for properly religious activity*. The title by which they are designated is determined by the consent of the hierarchy which grants approval or even a special mission in various degrees and solemnity.

The second series concerns *the works of mercy* which inalienably benefit the Church because they constitute a preaching of the Gospel in act.

The third series especially regards *Catholic social works* which in a more indirect way promote religion and morality by a more fitting social order and which do not depend on the hierarchy as rigorously as the preceding associations. The Church can also by herself establish

works of this sort in order to meet more urgent needs.

The fourth series has to do with the very diverse action of Catholics *in civil life and society* aimed at the consecration of the world. This particularly concerns political action, even in international relations. This activity, in which lay people take up their own responsibility, is also not exempt from the Church's vigilance.

g) [*The sound autonomy of the earthly city*] This concluding section establishes the difference between the tendency to preserve the legitimate autonomy of civil society and its complete secularization, hostile to religion.