



# A LIVING FAITH

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*A monthly column on the lay vocation and lay formation*

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by Todd Graff, Director of Lay Formation (August, 2015)

## MARKING THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF “CO-WORKERS...” (II)

*The Risen Lord calls everyone to labor in his vineyard,  
that is, in a world that must be transformed in view of the final coming of the Reign of God;  
and the Holy Spirit empowers all with the various gifts and ministries  
for the building up of the Body of Christ.*

(U.S. Catholic Bishops, “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord”)

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In 2005, our U.S. Catholic Bishops issued a statement on lay ministry entitled, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*. To mark its tenth anniversary, I want to share something of its message as it relates to the role of lay women and men within the life of the Church.

In a previous column (in the June issue), I described the purpose of the statement and provided a brief description of its history and context within the recent teachings of our U.S. bishops. In this column, I would like to delve a bit more into its content especially as it relates to the broader call of the laity to live out their Catholic Faith.

The primary focus of the statement is on lay men and women who serve within the Church in significant roles of leadership – e.g., as “the pastoral associate, parish catechetical leader, youth ministry leader, school principal, and director of liturgy or pastoral music.” *Co-Workers* refers to these leaders as “lay ecclesial ministers.”

The major part of the statement is devoted to concerns relating to these leaders – i.e., how such lay ecclesial ministers come into their leadership positions; how they are to be formed and authorized for their service; the nature of their relationships with their bishops, pastors, and other laity; and the context and issues relating to the “ministerial workplace.”

While these matters relating to lay ecclesial ministry are very important and certainly merit our thoughtful study and reflection, I would like to focus my attention here on the parts of the document that speak more broadly of the role of all the laity within the life and mission of the Church.

Following the Introduction, the content of the statement is given in two parts: “Foundations” and “Pastoral Applications.” The “foundations” section includes a reflection on the “call” of the laity to holiness and to service, and provides a theological context for this calling and the laity’s response within the life of the Church. It is this part of the document that I will focus on in the remainder of this article.

## “The Call to All Believers”

*Co-Workers* begins this section by affirming the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that “all Christians in whatever state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity” (*Lumen Gentium*, #40).

This is sometimes referred to as the “universal call to holiness,” and means that all members of the Church – whether clergy, religious, or lay – share a common calling by virtue of baptism to give a living witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ by their lives. It is not that some are called to such holiness; each and every believer shares in this grace-filled, baptismal vocation.

At the heart of this calling is to love our sisters and brothers, and to give our lives in their service. The particular paths we take as priests, religious, married, or single are distinct – and these distinctions within our “states of life” are very important – but all of the paths share a common calling to holiness of life.

## “The Call to the Lay Faithful”

Within this universal call to holiness that all share, the laity have a particular role and purpose within the mission of the Church. As the bishops write, “Lay men and women hear and answer the universal call to holiness primarily and uniquely in the secular realm” – i.e., within their “occupations and callings” and “in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life.”

By living out their faith within the realities and dynamics of daily life, the laity “contribute to the sanctification of the world from within” (quoting from *Lumen Gentium*, #31).

To say that the calling of the laity has a “secular character” can be misunderstood to mean that it is not a religious or sacred calling. But, what is meant by “secular” here is that the laity’s call to holiness is not primarily lived out within the Church setting, but rather in family life, in civic life, in the workplace, in neighborhoods, etc.

The unique vocation of lay women and men is to “participate in the work of creation” (Pope John Paul II) and to seek to transform the world to better reflect the goodness, truth, and beauty of its Creator.

This is, indeed, a truly sacred calling – *Deo Gratias!*

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*[T]he forms and tasks of life are many but there is one holiness,  
which is cultivated by all who are led by God’s Spirit....  
All, however, according to their own gifts and duties  
must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith,  
which arouses hope and works through love.*

(Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, #41)