



A LIVING FAITH

A monthly column on the lay vocation and lay formation

by Todd Graff, Director of Lay Formation (January, 2016)

THE LAY VOCATION ~ VATICAN II AND THE YEAR OF MERCY

“Today, here in Rome and in all the dioceses of the world, as we pass through the Holy Door, we also want to remember another door, which fifty years ago the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council opened to the world.... Before all else, the Council was an encounter. A genuine encounter between the Church and the men and women of our time. An encounter marked by the power of the Spirit, who impelled the Church ... to set out once again, with enthusiasm, on her missionary journey. It was the resumption of a journey of encountering people where they live: in their cities and homes, in their workplaces. Wherever there are people, the Church is called to reach out to them and to bring the joy of the Gospel, and the mercy and forgiveness of God.” (Pope Francis, Homily at the Mass and Opening of the Holy Door – December 8, 2015)

I received an email recently from one of our lay formation alumni in the diocese sending me a link to an article noting the 50th anniversary of the approval of a significant document of the Second Vatican Council – the “Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*). The decree was approved by a vote of 2,340 to 2 by the bishops assembled for the fourth session of the Council. Pope Paul VI then promulgated the decree on November 18, 1965.

This was the first document of an ecumenical council of the Church to specifically focus on the role of the laity within the life of the Church. I had missed this milestone in the Church’s teaching on the laity, and was most grateful for her bringing it to my attention.

When he opened the Holy Door at Saint Peter’s Basilica on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Francis made reference to the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Council on December 8, 1965. He invited and challenged the Church to resume the “journey of encountering people where they live: in their cities and homes, in their workplaces.” This was clearly the message of the Council with regard to the laity’s primary role in the life of the Church – to bring the Gospel to our everyday world, and to seek to be the presence of Christ in our encounters with family members, co-workers, neighbors, etc.

With this Jubilee Year of Mercy now begun, it’s worth remembering and revisiting the work of the Council with reference to the vocation of the laity (the focus here), and then how this vocation relates to the Church’s ministry of mercy (the focus for next month’s column).

Before describing the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity directly, it is important to note that several other Council documents also offer important teaching on the laity’s role in the Church.

These would include the documents on the Church, on ecumenism, on the media, on the liturgy, and on Christian education.

The document, *Lumen Gentium*, is particularly significant in this regard. As it states, “The lay apostolate, however, is a participation in the salvific mission of the Church itself. Through their Baptism and Confirmation all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself. . . . Now the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth” [#31].

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity then echoes, summarizes, and expands upon the teaching on the laity as it is developed in other key Council documents. Some of the major points of this document can now be highlighted.

- ♦ All members of the Body of Christ – lay, religious, and ordained – share in the Church’s apostolate, which refers to “every activity of the mystical body” which seeks to fulfill the Church’s mission to proclaim and give witness to the saving work of Christ [#2].
- ♦ Lay people’s “right and duty to the apostolate” comes directly from “the Lord Himself,” by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation which unite them to Christ and strengthen them in the Holy Spirit. Through the grace of these sacraments, the laity “are consecrated for the royal priesthood and the holy people (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10) . . . that they may witness to Christ throughout the world” [#3].
- ♦ Within the Church, there is “a oneness of mission,” but a “diversity of ministry.” The laity share authentically in this mission and “in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ” [#2]. But, their participation in this one mission of the Church is distinct from that of the religious and the ordained.
- ♦ The laity live out their distinct apostolate primarily in the everyday world of family life, civic life, work, etc. It is their particular vocation within the life of the Church to “take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation” [#7]. By the daily witness of their Christian lives within the spheres of family, work, culture, education, public policy, etc., lay women and men seek to bring the “good news” and saving work of Jesus Christ to the secular world, and so to “penetrate and perfect the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel” [#2].

With this background of the Second Vatican Council’s teaching in mind, we can move on next month to reflect on how our lay vocation relates to Pope Francis’ call to resume the Council’s work of ‘opening the door’ for “a genuine encounter between the Church and the men and women of our time.” *Deo Gratias!*

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“Through this holy synod, the Lord renews His invitation to all the laity to come closer to Him every day, recognizing that what is His is also their own (Phil. 2:5), to associate themselves with Him in His saving mission. Once again He sends them into every town and place where He will come (cf. Luke 10:1) so that they may show that they are co-workers in the various forms and modes of the one apostolate of the Church, which must be constantly adapted to the new needs of our times” (“Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity,” #33).