

Gifted, Called, Sent...

Who are the lay faithful? What is the nature of their vocation? What is their role in the Church? How are they called to respond as Christians in the world today?

Questions such as these formed the agenda of an historic meeting of church leaders in 1987, twenty-five years after the Second Vatican Council. The purpose of this discussion between the pope, bishops and a number of lay participants was to revisit Vatican II: to examine from where we have come and to where we are going as a Church; to see how much of the Council's vision for renewal has come alive, and how much is yet to be realized.

This meeting was known as the Synod on the Laity and it generated enormous interest around the world. *Christifideles Laici* was the title of the document that came out of that Synod. (The technical name for the type of document is 'post-synodal apostolic exhortation.') It puts on record the issues discussed and the questions raised at the synod. While it doesn't set out to solve all the problems of the Church, it does intend to stir a deeper awareness of the grace and gift of the Christian vocation and our responsibility to respond generously in the mission of the Church.

Eye-witnesses

"It was a feast of universality... bishops, married and single people from all parts of the world, black and white, rich and poor... all of us coming with different issues of concern, all on a path of dialogue and discovery of the deeper meaning of our Christian lives." (Ron & Mavis Pirola, an Australian married couple who participated in the Synod on the Laity)

Background to *Christifideles Laici*

What is a synod?

The word 'synod' means 'a journey made together.' It is a consultative meeting usually held every three years at which the Pope gathers with bishops from around the world to discuss a topic of importance for the Church. The complete title of the 1987 synod was: 'The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World, Twenty Years after the Second Vatican Council.'

This was the seventh synod since Vatican II. While it is realistic to note that vast numbers of Catholics would never have heard of a synod, it is also encouraging that hundreds of thousands of lay people around the world took part in diocesan consultations held in preparation for this landmark gathering.

Who was at the Synod on the Laity?

There were 230 bishops plus 60 lay observers present at this synod. Of the lay participants, there were men and women ranging in age from late 20s to late 60s from various walks of life. They came from 44 countries and every continent of the world.

Fifteen months later, the papal text *Christifideles Laici* was published. Its Latin title translates as 'The lay members of Christ's faithful people.' This document was an effort to communicate to the whole Church the spirit and themes of the synod discussions and to give fresh impetus to the life and mission of the Church as it approaches the 21st century. The document consists of an introduction and five chapters.

Introduction

'You go into my vineyard too.'

The biblical image of the vine and the branches weaves its way through the text of *Christifideles Laici*. The Gospel parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Mt.20) opens our eyes to the immense scope of the Christian vocation. The vineyard is the entire world to be transformed by the Good News. The spirit of Vatican II continues in the renewal of the Church, inspiring a multitude of graced works. There is much to be thankful for...and much still to be done. The pressing needs of the world cry out for God's love to be felt, the Good News to be heard. The voice of the Lord resounds in the hearts of Christ's followers, in each one of us personally, urging us forth to bear Christ's love to others.

In a nutshell, *Christifideles Laici* says:

- *You are great!*
 - *Live up to your greatness!*
 - *Tell others of their greatness!*
- This 'greatness' is based in the magnificent truth that each of us is loved, gifted, called and sent by God.*

We are Gifted

You are loved. Believe it!

"As a teenager I developed a bad habit. Not drugs or alcohol. It was a habit of putting myself down. You see, I had this tape playing in my head: 'I'm not good enough. I can't do anything right.' Then one day I realized that not only was I destroying my self-esteem, I was denigrating God's own creation. I stopped playing that tape. I replaced it with a new one: 'I am good, cherished, gifted. God delights in me!' That positive decision has changed my life." (S.L.)

Chapter 1. 'I am the vine and you are the branches.'

Being a Christian involves far more than belonging to an organization. Like branches connected to a vine, the very life source of the Christian is the life of the risen Christ. Through baptism we 'come alive' in Christ. We know ourselves to be loved for all eternity. We are confronted with the realization that:

- God loves us - unconditionally, totally, forever.
- We belong to Christ and share in the joy of the resurrection.
- The Holy Spirit dwells within us, forever surprising us with the newness of God's presence.

But the Good News doesn't stop there. Through baptism we are immersed in a community of love. We are bonded by faith to millions of other believers who share in this discovery of the risen Jesus and the reality of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives.

This, then, is the context in which our relationship with Christ and the Church must be understood.

Chapter 2. 'All branches of a single vine.'

The concept of 'communion' is central to *Christifideles Laici*. What we mean by 'communion' is our union of love with God brought about by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. Through the Word of God and through the sacraments we are constantly invited into this love relationship. Within this communion of love we find a variety of Spirit-filled gifts (or 'charisms'), leading people to assume different ministries and services, all for the building up of the body of Christ and furthering the mission of the Church.

In this regard, Chapter 2 of *Christifideles Laici* affirms the work of the diocese and parish as well as the many lay associations or 'movements' which have arisen in our times. The

Many gifts, one body

Until relatively recently we have thought of a lay person as a non-priest or non-religious; i.e., we have operated out of a negative definition. It is important, says *Christifideles Laici* (n.9), to use positive terms to describe the faithful based on their sacramental vocation as baptized, confirmed Christians who are called to holiness. For many lay people the gift of marriage is also integral to their Christian identity.

Try it: Practice using positive terms to describe Christ's faithful. E.g., refer to a married parishioner as a 'married man' rather than as a

Grey power

"My grandfather is an active 87 year old. One day his parish appealed for people to drive the elderly folk at a nursing home to an outing at the park once a week. Grandad volunteered! At an age when you might expect him to sit back and think that 'Life owes me,' Grandad is still asking what he can do for his parish. He is an inspiration to me as to what it means to live for others." (Anna)

Who are the lay faithful?

"Whether they be exceptional and great or simple and ordinary, the charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit that have, directly or indirectly, a usefulness for the ecclesial community, ordered as they are to the building up of the Church...and to the needs of the world" (CL, 24).

Within the community of love which is the Church, there are abundant graces and gifts. Each of us has a unique share in those gifts. God sees them. As brothers and sisters in Christ we are called to identify them in one another. In fact, in stark contrast to the 'knocking' habits of our society, this is one of the great hallmarks of the Christian vocation: the acknowledgement and empowerment of God-given gifts for the sake of Christ's mission.

Think about it: In what ways do I affirm my friends and family for their gifts? Am I more likely to praise or criticize people?

We are Called

document notes that at times tensions arise between the charismatic and institutional dimensions of church life, and it offers five criteria for the discernment of lay associations (see n.30). The faithful have great freedom in responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, they are called to discern and go forward in a spirit of unity and communion with the rest of the church. "For the sound building of a common house it is necessary...that every spirit of antagonism and conflict be put aside" (CL, 31).

Chapter 3. *'I have appointed you to go forth and bear fruit.'*

Co-responsibility in mission

There is no Christian mission without community, and no Christian community without mission. This interconnectedness of communion and mission forms an intricate dance threading its way through *Christifideles Laici*. How little cells of Christian love can send out ripples and draw others into their circle of communion is one of the mysterious powers of Christian community and the basis from which all acts of mission and service flow.

In the face of society's increasing

'secularism,' *Christifideles Laici* makes an impassioned plea to all Christians to evangelize; i.e., to share the Good News of Jesus Christ: "God loves humanity! Each Christian's words and life must make this proclamation resound: God loves you, Christ came for you. Christ is for you the Way, the Truth and the Life!" (n.34).

Essential to evangelization is the promotion of the dignity of the human person. The laity are called not so much to do 'churchy' things as to transform the secular order with gospel justice. In this regard, the document specifically mentions the work of the laity in science and technology, social communications, socio-economic life, ecology, promotion of human rights and, most especially, in the family which is the place where the 'humanization' of the person and society begins.

Chapter 4. *'Labourers in the Lord's vineyard.'*

Stewards of God's grace

"Indeed as a person with a truly unique life-story, each is called by name, to make a special contribution to the coming of the kingdom of God. No talent, no matter how small, is to be hidden or left unused" (n.56).

The parish

The parish is not principally a structure, a territory, or a building, but rather, "the family of God, a fellowship afire with a unifying spirit," "a familial and welcoming home...a Eucharistic community" (CL,26).

***Christifideles Laici* (n.26-27) affirms the indispensable value of parishes and calls for "a greater effort in their renewal," especially through:**

"a) adaptation of parish structures according to the full flexibility granted by canon law, especially in promoting participation by the lay faithful in pastoral responsibilities;

"b) small, basic or so-called 'living' communities, where the faithful can communicate the Word of God and express it in service and love to one another" (CL,26).

Think about it: In what way am I building up the life of my parish? How am I contributing to its mission?

Making a difference

A woman at the preparatory talks for the Synod on the Laity spoke of integrity in the workplace. Her husband was asked by the government of her country to investigate a bank scandal which was associated with corrupt and dangerous networks. (A number of senior officials were later murdered in connection with this scandal.) What was this couple being called to do? Should they risk their lives in a quest for truth? Supported by the prayers of their parish, they accepted the demands of the investigation. As protection, their home was placed under 24 hour police surveillance. Their children were sent abroad,. At the meeting in Rome this woman was in constant phone contact with her husband. Her fear was evident. So was her courage.

A characteristic of the current era in church history is the growth and spread of new lay associations, groups, communities and movements. Some examples include:

Young Christian Workers, Focolare, Marriage Encounter, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Teams of our Lady, Christian Life Communities, Antioch, L'Arche, St Vincent de Paul, Cursillo, Neo-Catechumenate, Opus Dei, International Movement for Catholic Students, associations for Catholic professionals, covenant communities, family clusters, parish renewal programs, small group networks...

Discussion: Note the variety of ways in which people express their mission. How many of the ecclesial initiatives above do you recognize? How many more can you name?

We are **Sent**

Christifideles Laici affirms the variety of ways in which the Christian vocation is lived. Specifically it mentions:

- Young people: they are the Church of today and tomorrow (n.46);
- Children: a sign of life (n.47);
- Older people: their gift of wisdom (n.48);
- Women and men: collaboration is vital (n.49-52);
- Marriage and family life: fundamental to society (n.52);
- The sick and suffering: a special sign of Jesus' presence (n.53).

Chapter 5. 'That you bear much fruit.' Formation

This chapter notes the various ways in which the lay faithful are formed in faith and equipped for their mission. Being a Christian is a continual process of maturation. Our lives are a never-ending journey of discovery as we listen to how God calls us to live, act and use our resources. This requires openness to God through the Word, prayer, the voice of the Church, spiritual

guidance from wise members of the faithful and discernment of gifts (n.58).

Formation is about integration of faith and life. We are members of the Church and citizens of human society. There cannot be two parallel lives—a 'spiritual' life and a 'secular' life. Rather, we are called to a unity of life whereby our faith and our response to the gospel permeates all our activities and responsibilities (n.59-60).

Many Catholics go to Mass on Sundays and then live Monday to Saturday as if they have no awareness of their gift of baptism. *Christifideles Laici* challenges us to live up to our calling by bringing our faith into all our life experiences—our familial, professional, social, cultural, political lives. This is the great vineyard of the Lord in which God's people are called to labour: the world which confronts us each day, the daily activities that consume our time and energies. This is the 'market place' where faith meets life, where we are called to bear the love of Christ to others.

The hour has come!

***Christifideles Laici* points out the tremendous freedom of the laity to make a difference (n.29). The Code of Canon Law clearly states that Christ's faithful have every right, indeed every responsibility, to gather and to take a lead in apostolic ventures (see Can. 215). Their mandate is their baptism and their qualifications are the qualities, skills and graces of their lives as members of the body of Christ. Get on with your mission! urges Christifideles Laici (n.33-35). The world desperately needs to hear the Good News. Christ calls each of us by name to bear this Good News in the unique circumstances of our lives (n.28). We are never powerless. We need not scapegoat or blame others for what is or isn't happening in the Church. We must remember our own baptismal commissioning and step out in faith. Always in a spirit of unity and love. Always in communion with the Church (n.29-30).**

Mission in the market place

- A woman living in a housing commission unit organized a skills workshop for the unemployed residents in her block of units.
- A young businessman applied his skills to assist a neighbourhood youth refuge raise its start-up capital.
- The owner of a video store put up a sign that read: 'Free hire on any Christian video.'
- A mother felt a powerful stirring in her heart to pray for the children of her country. She invited a few mothers from the local school to pray with her in her home. Their little group grew and their vision spread. Four years later 300 such prayer groups exist.

Get started in a gospel initiative

- Take your gospel dream;
- Find two people who share your dream;
- Set a date to meet. Meet regularly;
- At each meeting be sure to do two things: PRAY together and PLAN a specific action towards the realization of your gospel dream.

