

The Laity in the Mission of the Church: A Neglected Truth

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Russell Shaw's response (in the FCS Winter 2003 issue) to the remarks of Cardinal Ratzinger and Professor Glendon on the participation of the laity in the mission of the Church is very useful. It is an excellent example of the point he makes about the importance of appropriate lay involvement and shared responsibility in the Church today. However, there is an area of consistent magisterial teaching about the participation of lay-people in the mission of the Church that continues to be ignored that, I believe, needs to be part of this discussion.

Vatican II in its Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People identifies three fields of lay participation in the mission of the Church. 1. The mission of evangelization and sanctification. 2. The mission of renewing the temporal order. 3. The mission of mercy and charity. And while this document, and others, identifies the lay-person's unique presence in the secular order as irreplaceable, it goes on to make some remarkable statements about the priority of direct evangelization.

“The Church's mission is concerned with the salvation of men; and men win salvation through the grace of Christ and faith in him. The apostolate of the Church therefore, and of each of its members, aims primarily at announcing to the world by word and action the message of Christ and communicating to it the grace of Christ...Laymen have countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very witness of a Christian life, and good works done in a supernatural spirit, are effective in drawing men to the faith and to God...This witness of life, however, is not the sole element in the apostolate; **the true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers to draw them towards the faith, or to the faithful to instruct them, strengthen them, incite them to a more fervent life...**”¹

Starting with the documents of Vatican II, and continuing with the subsequent pontifical documents on evangelization, the contemporary magisterial documents have been remarkably consistent in insisting on the priority of direct proclamation with a view toward conversion for everyone involved in the mission of the Church, specifically including laypeople. The documents make clear that even if a layperson's primary field of mission is in the political, economic or social sphere or in doing works of charity, he or she continues to have an obligation to directly proclaim Christ by word, with a view towards leading others to conversion or deeper faith.

“This apostolate...must not exclude any good, spiritual or temporal, that can be done for them. **Genuine apostles are not content, however, with just this: they are earnest also about revealing Christ by word to those around them.** It is a

fact that many men cannot hear the Gospel and come to acknowledge Christ except through the laymen they associate with.”²

Paul VI continued to make this point strongly in *On Evangelization in the Modern World*.

“There can be no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth the Son of God are not proclaimed.”³

“Evangelization will also always contain – as the foundation, center, and at the same time, summit of its dynamism – a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy.”⁴

John Paul II continues this emphasis on the priority of direct proclamation in his writings.

“I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church’s energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.”⁵

“Preaching constitutes the Church’s first and fundamental way of serving the coming of the kingdom in individuals and in human society.”⁶

John Paul II takes up the theme again in his inspiring vision for Catholic life in the new millennium. Drawing out the implications of baptismal spirituality the Pope roots his vision solidly in the universal call to holiness and the universal call to mission that each member of the Church receives by virtue of being a Christian.

“Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves; they must proclaim him. A new apostolic outreach is needed, which will be lived as *the everyday commitment of Christian communities and groups.*”⁷

It’s important to understand that direct proclamation doesn’t necessarily mean standing on a street corner (although it could!) and proclaiming Jesus. The proclamation of Jesus needs to adjust itself to what’s appropriate in the various circumstances in which we find ourselves, and must be in some relationship to the preparation that the Holy Spirit (“the principal agent of evangelization”⁸) is doing in the hearts of those we are hoping to help discover Jesus. Given the necessary qualifications, what implications does this priority of direct proclamation have for the life of the Church today, and in particular, lay participation in that mission?

1. Understanding the priority of some form of verbal proclamation of Jesus has implications for the formation of lay-people. It is not enough to get lay people “involved”, “signed up” or “active” in various organizations or activities. They

need to be led themselves to conversion, be brought into “genuine contact with Christ” so that they have the desire to share Him with others, whatever else they may be doing.

2. When it is understood that direct “proclamation” is the mission of everyone it’s clear that this has implications for spirituality. There’s an essential link between evangelization and spirituality that is also very consistently presented in the magisterial documents. John Paul II makes the perhaps startling statement:

“The future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. He is a witness to the experience of God, and must be able to say with the apostles: ‘that which we have looked upon...concerning the word of life...we proclaim also to you.’ 1 Jn 1:1-3).”⁹

This is perhaps why he has so strongly called the Church to reconnect with the mystical tradition –mentioning specifically John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and Therese of Lisieux – as a way of getting the help we need to respond to the universal call to holiness, and its link with mission.¹⁰

3. Clergy and laity, working together in various ways, to make Christ known, helps keep an appropriate spiritual focus in the whole atmosphere of the parish.
4. The ability of the Church to influence the “temporal order” and to be heard on the important issues facing society today has a definite relationship to the quality and fervor of our life as a Church and our success in drawing others to conversion. Numbers do matter. You’ve got to have Catholics to have a “Catholic vote.”

I’d like to end these preliminary reflections with a quote from Avery Dulles that I think sums up well some of the points we have been making.

“In my judgment the evangelical turn in the ecclesial vision of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II is one of the most surprising and important developments in the Catholic Church since Vatican II...All of this constitutes a remarkable shift in the Catholic tradition...Today we seem to be witnessing the birth of a new Catholicism that, without loss of its institutional, sacramental, and social dimensions, is authentically evangelical...Catholic spirituality at its best has always promoted a deep personal relationship with Christ. In evangelizing we are required to raise our eyes to him and to transcend all ecclesiocentrism. The Church is of crucial importance but is not self-enclosed. It is a means of drawing the whole world into union with God through Jesus Christ...**Too many Catholics of our day seem never to have encountered Christ. They know a certain amount about him from the teaching of the Church, but they lack direct personal familiarity...The first and highest priority is for the Church to proclaim the good news concerning Jesus Christ as a joyful message to all the world. Only if the Church is faithful to its evangelical mission can it hope to make its distinctive contribution in the social, political, and cultural spheres.”**¹¹

¹ Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, 6. Bolding in this and subsequent quotations is mine.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ Evangelization in the Modern World, 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ Mission of the Redeemer, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 40.

⁸ Mission of the Redeemer, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 32, 27.

¹¹ Avery Dulles, S.J., *John Paul II and the New Evangelization* (New York: Fordham University, 1992), p. 3. Originally given as a lecture at Fordham and then printed in pamphlet form (cited here) versions of this address have been given and published elsewhere as well. Another version of this talk can be found in: Martin, Ralph & Williamson, Peter ed. *John Paul II and the New Evangelization* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995) pp. 25-39.

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