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Apostolic Exhortation on the Lay Faithful, "Christifideles laici"

John Paul II, Apostolic
Exhortation on the Lay Faithful
(Chapter I, nos. 16 and 17) –
This excerpt on the vocation
and the mission of the laity in
the Church and in the world
helps illuminate the vocation of
Opus Dei members, 98% of
whom are laypersons.

03/02/2006

Called to Holiness

16. We come to a full sense of the dignity of the lay faithful if we consider *the prime and fundamental vocation* that the Father assigns to each of them in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit: the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity. Holiness is the greatest testimony of the dignity conferred on a disciple of Christ.

The Second Vatican Council has significantly spoken on the universal call to holiness. It is possible to say that this call to holiness is precisely the basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the gospel. This charge is not a simple moral exhortation, but an *undeniable requirement arising from the mystery of the Church: she is the choice vine*, whose branches live and grow with

the same holy and life-giving energies that come from Christ; she is the Mystical Body, whose members share in the same life of holiness of the Head who is Christ; she is the Beloved Spouse of the Lord Jesus, who delivered himself up for her sanctification (cf. Eph 5:25ff.). The Spirit that sanctified the human nature of Jesus in Mary's virginal womb (cf. Lk 1:35) is the same Spirit that is abiding and working in the Church to communicate to her the holiness of the Son of God made man.

It is ever more urgent that today all Christians take up again the way of gospel renewal, welcoming in a spirit of generosity the invitation expressed by the apostle Peter "to be holy in all conduct" (1 Pet 1:15). The 1985 Extraordinary Synod, twenty years after the Council, opportunely insisted on this urgency: "Since the Church in Christ is a mystery, she

ought to be considered the sign and instrument of holiness... Men and women saints have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult circumstances in the Church's history. Today we have the greatest need of saints whom we must assiduously beg God to raise up.”

Everyone in the Church, precisely because they are members, receive and thereby share in the common vocation to holiness. In the fullness of this title and on equal par with all other members of the Church, the lay faithful are called to holiness: "All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity." "All of Christ's followers are invited and bound to pursue holiness and the perfect fulfillment of their own state of life.”

The call to holiness is *rooted in Baptism* and proposed anew in the other Sacraments, principally in the *Eucharist*. Since Christians are reclothed in Christ Jesus and refreshed by his Spirit, they are "holy." They therefore have the ability to manifest this holiness and the responsibility to bear witness to it in all that they do. The apostle Paul never tires of admonishing all Christians to live "as is fitting among saints" (Eph 5:3).

Life according to the Spirit, whose fruit is holiness (cf. Rom 6:22; Gal 5:22), stirs up every baptized person and requires each to *follow and imitate Jesus Christ*, in embracing the Beatitudes, in listening and meditating on the Word of God, in conscious and active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, in personal prayer, in family or in community, in the hunger and thirst for justice, in the

practice of the commandment of love in all circumstances of life and service to the brethren, especially the least, the poor and the suffering.

The Life of Holiness in the World

17. The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their *involvement in temporal affairs* and in their *participation in earthly activities*.

Once again the apostle admonishes us: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3:17).

Applying the apostle's words to the lay faithful, the Council categorically affirms: "Neither family concerns nor other secular affairs should be excluded from their religious program of life." Likewise the Synod Fathers have said: "The unity of life of the lay faithful is of the greatest

importance: indeed they must be sanctified in everyday professional and social life. Therefore, to respond to their vocation, the lay faithful must see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ."

The vocation to holiness must be recognized and lived by the lay faithful, first of all as an undeniable and demanding obligation and as a shining example of the infinite love of the Father that has regenerated them in his own life of holiness. Such a vocation, then, ought to be called an *essential and inseparable element of the new life of Baptism*, and therefore an element which determines their dignity. At the same time the vocation to holiness is *intimately connected to mission* and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful in the Church and in the

world. In fact, that same holiness which is derived simply from their participation in the Church's holiness, represents their first and fundamental contribution to the building of the Church herself, who is the "Communion of Saints." The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring laborers who work in the Lord's vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God's grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history.

Holiness, then, must be called a fundamental presupposition and an irreplaceable condition for everyone

in fulfilling the mission of salvation within the Church. The Church's holiness is the hidden source and the infallible measure of the works of the apostolate and of the missionary effort. Only in the measure that the Church, Christ's Spouse, is loved by him and she, in turn, loves him, does she become a mother fruitful in the Spirit.

Again we take up the image from the gospel: the fruitfulness and the growth of the branches depends on their remaining united to the vine. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:4-5).

It is appropriate to recall here the solemn proclamation of beatification

and canonization of lay men and women which took place during the month of the Synod. The entire People of God, and the lay faithful in particular, can find at this moment new models of holiness and new witnesses of heroic virtue lived in the ordinary everyday circumstances of human existence. The Synod Fathers have said: "Particular Churches especially should be attentive to recognizing among their members the younger men and women of those Churches who have given witness to holiness in such conditions (everyday secular conditions and the conjugal state) and who can be an example for others, so that, if the case calls for it, they (the Churches) might propose them to be beatified and canonized."

At the end of these reflections intended to define the lay faithful's position in the Church, the celebrated admonition of Saint Leo the Great

comes to mind: "Acknowledge, O Christian, your dignity!" Saint Maximus, Bishop of Turin, in addressing those who had received the holy anointing of Baptism, repeats the same sentiments: "Ponder the honor that has made you sharers in this mystery!" All the baptized are invited to hear once again the words of Saint Augustine: "Let us rejoice and give thanks: we have not only become Christians, but Christ himself... Stand in awe and rejoice: We have become Christ."

The dignity as a Christian, the source of equality for all members of the Church, guarantees and fosters the spirit of *communion* and fellowship, and, at the same time, becomes the hidden dynamic force in the lay faithful's apostolate and mission. It is a *dignity*, however, *which brings demands*, the dignity of labourers called by the Lord to work in his vineyard: "Upon all the lay faithful,

then, rests the exalted duty of working to assure that each day the divine plan of salvation is further extended to every person, of every era, in every part of the earth."

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