

## **Preface**

*In June 1996 I gave an address to the assembly of the Western Dominican Province. The assembly is a means for all the Dominicans in the province to come together in common discernment of the will of the Holy Spirit. The Provincial suggested that I bring before the whole province a proposal I made at a conference in November 1995, concerning the importance for us in the hierarchy to see our relationship with the laity in a way that is consistent with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.*

*Following is the text of my address. As you read it, please remember that I directed it toward Dominicans and not lay persons. The ideas are the same as I would have presented to a group of laity, but the manner in which I spoke and the things I chose to emphasize would have been different. For example, I spoke about how Dominicans need to trust the laity; had I been speaking to laity, I would have spoken about the need to trust the ordained hierarchy. Regardless, I want our parishioners to be aware of what I said, and I invite your critique as well.*

*Three items from Church history, both recent and more distant, may need explanation. First, the Poverello movements before the time of St. Dominic were composed of Christians practicing radical poverty, chastity, and obedience, who were more inclined to trust in their lifestyle than in Church tradition. While the movements arose in large part in rejection of the opulent lifestyles pursued by many in positions of authority within the Church, the Church at this time being at the height of her power in medieval Europe, many of the Poverello nevertheless were in schism. They comprised a challenge, then, to the legitimate teaching authority of the bishops. Both Sts. Dominic and Francis of Assisi addressed themselves, each in his own way, to the problem they presented.*

*Second, the followers of the Albigensian heresy espoused an extreme form of dualism, opposing matter to spirit, matter being evil and antagonistic to spirit, the only good. The Albigensians lived austere, outwardly holy lives and were often well-intentioned, but at the same time represented a serious threat to the whole of Medieval society.*

*Third, the Second Vatican Council re-emphasized that the Roman Catholic Church is a communion of local churches, each headed by a bishop who is the successor to the Apostles. The council insisted upon the importance of the diocese as the fundamental unit of the church. Since the Council, greater emphasis has been placed upon regional synods of bishops in order for the Church to be more perfectly expressed in each community.*

*Finally, while I mention as important a number of issues that confront the Church today, including, for example, the growth of evangelical Protestantism and the generally poor state of catechesis of Catholics, I would like to stress that the most important issue by far is that of the laity and their proper role within the Church. To return to lay men and women the place that is theirs by right of baptism and confirmation, the place that our tradition has always recognized and that Vatican II re-affirmed, must be our first priority if the Church is to thrive.*

## ***Introduction***

Over thirty years have passed since Vatican Council II, and the face of the Church is very much changed since my childhood. I recall, for example, early efforts in ecumenism on the part of my mother. We lived in a small town in the Okanagan Valley of B.C., small enough, at any rate, for my mother to have been aware that our garbage collector was Baptist, and a teetotaler. Occasionally my parents would host family or company parties, at which the liquor ran free. After the parties my mother, careful lest she should offend our Baptist garbage man, would discard the empty bottles at the rate of one or two a week, rather than disposing of them all at once - thereby, I suspect, offering the impression that my parents had a steady drinking problem.

Times have changed. Our ecumenical efforts have become, perhaps, more sober, but they have had to. We now face challenges that were unthinkable even forty years ago. We live in a "post-Christian" culture. There are still vestiges of the Christian tradition to be found in all of our cultural institutions, but we cannot pretend that our society is Christian either in its inspiration or in its principles. We might say of Western society what Flannery O'Connor once said of the American South: if it is no longer Christian, yet still it is, perhaps, Christ-haunted.

We are called by our Church and Order to read the signs of the times. What do we see when we consider the Church, thirty years after the Council? We see a Church divided; we are all aware of the "issues" which trouble the Church in this country and abroad. We have witnessed a decline in vocations to the priesthood and to religious life. We have begun to witness an extraordinary growth in evangelical Protestantism, even to the degree that, according to one author, there are now proportionally more defections from the Church every year than there were during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century. Countries which once were solidly Catholic - the countries of Central and South America - are no longer so; it is thought that Guatemala may soon become the first Protestant Country in Catholic America. There is a neo-pagan movement which is growing at a considerable rate in North America and in Europe. There is an hostility to the Church which is everywhere manifested in the secular media. In the face of these challenges, there is growing concern that our institutions are moribund or, at least, are not equal to the challenges. Many call into question whether the parish is any longer a viable institution. To all of this we can add the fact that, compared to the Church of forty years ago, Catholics are very poorly catechized.

Our vision will not be realistic if we indulge too much in pessimism. Since the Council there have been real signs of hope. Lay men and women have been admitted to a participation in the life of the Church to a degree which they have not known since before the Reformation. The Papacy, while controversial within some circles in the Church, nonetheless has a prestige in the modern world which it has not known since the High Middle Ages. The ecclesiology of the Council, especially expressed through national conferences of Bishops, has afforded the possibility - still being tested - for local Churches to respond much more adequately to their own situations. Moreover, there is, in

our world, a real hunger for the spiritual life - a hunger which may be sometimes misdirected, but is real nonetheless.

When I consider the work of the Order in such a milieu I am struck by the remarkable similarities which seem to pertain between the age of St. Dominic and our own age. St. Dominic faced a Church which appeared to be institutionally moribund in the face of the Albigensian heresy, much as our institutions, whether of diocese, parish, or Newman Center, seem inadequate in the face of the growing atheism and even paganism of modern culture. Dominic witnessed the remarkable success of the Poverello movements of the Middle Ages which, though separated from the communion of the Church, nevertheless were inspired by a genuine evangelical zeal and a desire to follow Christ, much as we are witnessing the growth of evangelical Protestantism. In the Albigensian heresy Dominic perceived, not just a false doctrine which was to be exposed, but a whole movement, as much cultural as it was religious, which threatened the whole fabric of medieval society, much as we are witnessing the defection of our own culture from its Christian roots.

Dominic's response was, if we can be both playful and honest, theft on a grand scale. Dominic stole from the Albigensians their zeal and their poverty, to reclaim it for Christ and his Church. He stole from the Poverello movements their evangelical zeal and their literal application of the evangelical counsels, in order that they might be placed, once again, at the disposal of the Church. He stole from Augustine his rule to accommodate his new Order, and stole from the cathedral canons their education and its place in their lives. Most significantly of all, he stole from Christ his sending of the disciples by twos, to proclaim the advent of the kingdom. The result of his thefts was the Order of Preachers.

I would like to suggest some thievery of our own. The one thread which is common to New Age, Protestant Evangelism and similar contemporary movements, is that they have mobilized their membership. They form intentional communities, with conscious and specific agenda; and no matter how little we may appreciate their ends, we should nonetheless be impressed by their means. In truth, we were there ahead of them: the single-minded zeal of the Evangelicals bears a great resemblance to the early Order. The only theft which it is really necessary for us to engage in is from the riches of our own tradition. We can mobilize our Catholic laity, and thereby play a significant role in the renewal of our Church, simply by applying our own tradition.

The Vatican Council II called for a new evangelization of the modern world, by means of a renewal of the role of the laity in the Church. What is that office, how is it related to the new evangelization, and how is it to be implemented? Finally, how is the office of the laity related to the work of the Order?

### ***The Office of the laity in the Church***

In the Council documents, and in post-conciliar magisterial documents - especially: [\*Evangelii Nuntiandi\*](#), [\*Redemptoris Missio\*](#) and [\*Christifideles Laici\*](#) - the laity are recognized to hold an office in the Church by their own right, by virtue of their baptism.

They are possessed of a double responsibility: on the one hand, to remain in communion with the Church; on the other hand, to evangelize the world, both by the witness of their own faithfulness and by actively making disciples of others, while working to renew the temporal order in the light of the Gospel. In fulfilling their responsibility in the Church, they hold a real office: theirs is a real priesthood; they participate in the priestly, prophetic and kingly dignity of Christ. While holding an office which is essentially different from the ordained, they are to be regarded as having a dignity in the Church which is equal to the ordained.

How are they to fulfill this double mandate, of fidelity to the Church and fidelity to the world, of personal holiness and apostolic zeal? How are the laity to make disciples of all nations, while restoring integrity to the world and to human work? Echoing the Council, John Paul II insists that it is their very insertion into the world which situates and characterizes the apostolate of lay men and women:

Pope Paul VI said the Church "has an authentic secular dimension, inherent to her inner nature and mission, which is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Word Incarnate, and which is realized in different forms through her members." The Church, in fact, lives in the world, even if she is not of the world (cf. Jn 17:16). She is sent to continue the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which "by its very nature concerns the salvation of humanity, and also involves the renewal of the whole temporal order" (*Christifideles Laici*, 15).

So intimate is the relationship of the laity to Christ and to the world, that, in and through their life and work, the secular world is made sacred; the "Secular" has, in the light of the lay apostolate, a sacred character:

Precisely with this in mind the Synod Fathers said: "The secular character of the lay faithful is not therefore to be defined only in a sociological sense, but most especially in a theological sense. The term secular must be understood in light of the act of God the creator and redeemer, who has handed over the world to women and men, so that they may participate in the work of creation, free from the influence of sin and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in a family, in a profession, and in the various activities of society." The lay faithful's position in the Church, then, comes to be fundamentally defined by their faithfulness in Christian life and distinguished by their secular character (*ibid.*).

This "secular character" of the laity is their particular mark: through their work, and in their persons, the world achieves a secularity - i.e. is ordered, in time - toward the purpose and providence of God. Hence, the first vocation of the laity, and that upon which all else depends, is their personal faithfulness, and holiness of life. Our laity are able to speak to the world from within the world, becoming, as the Council insists, "citizens of two kingdoms." Theirs is an obligation both to the Church and to the world, which they are called to govern in Christ:

Thus for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well. In fact, in their situation in the world, God manifests his plan and communicates to them their particular vocation of "seeking the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God" (Ibid.)

Our laity are therefore, in the words of Pius XII, the first presence of the Church to the world, which they are called, by Christ, to transform and govern:

"The Faithful, more precisely the lay faithful, find themselves on the front lines of the Church's life; for them the Church is the animating principle for human society. Therefore, they in particular, ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the head of all, and of the Bishops in communion with him. These are the Church... (Pius XII, *Discourse to the New Cardinals*, February 20, 1946).

### ***The Laity and Evangelization: What is needed?***

It comes as news to the vast majority of our laity that they are "on the front lines of the Church's life." For all of their participation in the life of the Church since the Council, the ordinary experience of our laity is that they come to Mass or are involved in their parish for the sake of their own sanctification, or for their personal enrichment. To accommodate the Conciliar teaching, they will require a formation, the primary end of which is apostolic endeavor, not personal enrichment. Similarly, if our laity are to witness effectively to Christ through their insertion into the world, the primary locus of the lay ministry will be the world at large, not the parish or Newman Center.

What is the character of the lay witness? Whereas the hierarchy has the task of presenting the revelation of Christ through word and sacrament in accord with the Tradition, the laity are to present the revelation of Christ through the witness of their own holiness, in and through their secular professions. They are to propose the faith to others, while remaining faithful to the secular pursuits by which they are joined to others. They are to be faithful to the Tradition, they are also to stand in solidarity with their friends and coworkers who have no relationship to the Church. If this is the manner of the lay apostolate, then what are the personal qualities which might be expected of our laity if they are to live their office in the Church? What, in this sense, do they need?

First, they must be prepared to work collaboratively with the hierarchy. It has not been my experience that a true collaboration between laity and hierarchy has taken place in the post-conciliar Church - or, at least, that small part of the Church to which I am witness. Rather, we might speak of a clericalization of the laity which has marked the Church in this country. It is interesting - and telling - that one of the great issues of the day concerns who should be ordained, as if ordained ministry is the only real ministry which the

Church affords. That a lay man or woman collaborates with the hierarchy through an office in the Church which he or she holds by right of Baptism is hardly mentioned.

There is a decided difference between collaboration and delegation. To collaborate must involve the work of two or more who are of equal dignity and prerogative, relative to the task at hand. What has occurred since the Council on a grand scale has been the delegation of lay men and women to assist in tasks which are both pastoral and priestly. So, for example, we have seen lay participation in the liturgical and pastoral ministries of the Church - and, as a pastor, I thank God for it! We cannot, however, pretend that such a participation in ministry is truly a collaboration. Rather, lay men and women are delegated a participation in ministry which is and remains subject to the hierarchy; they are not ordinary, but extraordinary ministers. Such a minister is not an equal partner laboring with the pastor or priest; he or she is a participant in an office which is not his or hers by right. In the exercise of such an office the laity remain accountable to and dependent upon the delegation of their pastor.

If our laity are to take initiative in proclaiming the Gospel from within the world, they must be invited to a collaboration with us in a task which is properly their own; they must, therefore, be formed to be competent to present the faith, and their competence must be something that we are able to trust. The first quality that our laity must possess is, therefore, competence in matters of the faith; they must have a catechesis equal to their calling.

Not only must our laity be competent to collaborate with us in the work of evangelization, but they must also be capable of discerning the things of the world in the light of the Gospel. In *Christifideles Laici* the Holy Father specifies that the parish is to be the locus of a conversation between hierarchy and laity in which the signs of the times are discerned, and new initiatives realized. Our laity must be capable of a real collaboration in discerning the signs of the times.

Part of the competence we must expect of our laity is their conviction that the Holy Spirit is at work in their lives, and that they are able to grasp the manner in which God works through them, in general and in particular. Thus, there must be a confidence according to which our laity are able to take initiatives on behalf of the Gospel. We see this entrepreneurial spirit at work particularly among Protestant Evangelicals; in the veritable tradition of the Order, we might steal from them some of their ideas. Most particularly, we must assist our laity to discern the charisms of the Holy Spirit with which they have been gifted. (In this regard, one of our lay parishioners at Blessed Sacrament Parish, Sherry Weddell, has developed a program for the discernment of the charisms of the Holy Spirit which we hope soon to be able to make available to the whole Province.)

Finally, our laity must be convinced of their apostolic calling, so as to be innovative in presenting the Gospel, and so that they may be actively engaged in the work of the Church. Most of our laity regard the proclamation of the Gospel as the exclusive business of the hierarchy and of the religious of our Church. Our laity speak of "the Church" as separate from them and from their initiative. (This is not wholly surprising, when we

reflect upon the fact that we occasionally do this ourselves.) If we are to call our laity to a collaboration with us in the apostolate, they must be formed so as to claim as their own right the apostolate which has been entrusted to them, and must be comfortable to take new initiatives on behalf of the Gospel.

### ***The Formation of the Laity***

How can our laity be called into the office which is theirs in the Church? Thirty years after the Council, it is still the case that there is no formation for lay men and women which is widely available. There are particular programs and institutes for lay men and women, but they are usually expensive, and inaccessible to most. (In Seattle, for example, there is the Institute of Theological Studies, operated through the University of Seattle. The training is expensive - the same per semester cost as in the regular university - and is offered on the campus of the University, rather than in the parishes.) We have implemented the RCIA programs in our parishes, and these are of extraordinary benefit to new or returning Catholics. They are also filled with possibilities for our parishes and Newman Centers. But the RCIA is an instruction in the faith, in preparation for the Sacraments of Initiation; it is not a formation for the apostolate. For a formation to be generally offered to the laity, it will have to be made available through the parishes and Newman Centers in which the laity normally gather for worship.

Here we should, perhaps, dwell upon the idea of a formation, in juxtaposition to classes in adult education, or specific instructions in the sacraments, which are available. The Church provides a formation for priests and for religious: a preparation for the apostolic life and for hierarchical office which embraces - or, at least, is intended to embrace - every facet of one's life. The purpose of the formation is not merely to sanctify the individual; nor is it intended for the sake of personal enrichment. Rather, formation is directed toward an office in the Church, and a life of apostolic engagement. This is true of both contemplative and active institutes; there is no contemplative vocation in the Church which is centered merely in the sanctification of the individual. The hallmark of a formation is the preparation of the whole person for the apostolic life.

We have viewed our laity as passive recipients of the apostolic office; we have not regarded our laity as co-workers in the apostolate. One evidence for this is the fact that we are, largely, anonymous to our laity. It has not been considered significant that the laity should know who we are; it has been considered significant only that we know who they are. When I delegate authority, it is important for me to know that I can trust the one to whom I delegate. When I minister to another, it is important that I have sufficient knowledge of the one to whom I minister. It is not significant that the one to whom I delegate or the one to whom I minister should know me. After all, as Our Lord has said, "the servant does not know what the master is about." In this regard, it is apparent that we have not yet called the laity our "friends"; we have not yet made known to them "all that we have heard from our Father;" indeed, we have failed even to introduce ourselves to them.

Because we have not regarded our laity as co-workers with us, we have not provided them a formation. As Sherry Weddell has indicated in her address to the Brethren in parish ministry, just as St. Albert's is the house of studies for our Province, so our parishes and Newman Centers can be centers of formation for the lay apostolate. This means that we cannot regard our parishes or Newman Centers as the principal places of the lay ministry. St. Albert's is not the principal locus of the Dominican apostolate; we are prepared there for a ministry in the world. Similarly, we are to send our laity into the world, to witness the Gospel in the midst of their properly secular pursuits. If we are to form our laity, we must re-evaluate our parishes and Newman Centers to see how they can be centers of formation for the lay apostolate.

What should lay formation consist in? The common thread to the whole of the lay formation will be an apostolic mission focused upon the world outside the Church. Thus, apostolic endeavor, and not simply personal sanctification or personal enrichment, is to be the end of the lay formation, and therefore one of the first concerns of our parishes and Newman Centers. Such an apostolate must be founded upon and conducted in the light of a solid grasp of the essential elements of the Tradition. In this, we must concede the fact that our laity already have a certain expertise in the living of the Christian faith in a secular milieu. Thus their formation must respect the fidelity and understanding which they already possess; the laity must be invited to be active participants in their own formation. This is, I think, rather different from a catechetical instruction, in which it is not assumed that the candidates have either experience or expertise. With respect to their formation, personal freedom and the authority to initiate and pursue apostolic initiatives must be fostered among the laity. The hallmark of their formation must be one of personal discernment of their life situations in the light of the Gospel and Tradition. Lay Catholics are called to evangelize primarily by means of the integrity of their personal witness to Christ and the Tradition.

Whereas "adult education" is quite regularly offered in the Church, it differs from formation in that adult education does not offer an integrating principle, save one of personal enrichment or personal interest. A formation program is integrated and integrating: integrated around the apostolate which is the end of the formation; integrating of the various elements of one's life and experience, which is the subject of the formation. Thus, elements of a formation for the lay apostolate would include: fostering a sense of personal discipleship, by which the lay Catholic would offer to others the grace which they themselves have experienced; inculcating a personal sense of mission, and an understanding of the missionary character of the Catholic faith; fostering a sense of personal authority, whereby one's own experience is a source for theological reflection, and can serve as a bridge between the Tradition and the unchurched; forming the lay Catholic to exercise leadership in prayer and in faith sharing, so that he or she may be comfortable in listening to and encouraging others.

Echoing the Vatican Council II, John Paul II has insisted that man and woman "is the way the Church must walk." He envisages evangelization as an appeal addressed to men and women in the full concreteness of their lives and circumstances. Such an appeal is

impossible without mobilizing our Catholic laity. But such a mobilization is unthinkable apart from a lay formation.

### ***The role of the Province in lay formation***

The Dominican vocation is determined by two distinct ends: the contemplation of God and the salvation of souls. They are not the same ends, nor are they reducible, one into the other. It is our particular charism to preach, for preaching requires that both of these ends be satisfied. On the one hand, Dominican contemplation is ordered to the preaching task, which is to move souls to the assent of faith. Our contemplation is ordered to practical ends: to remove impediments to belief; to show not only the truth, but also the relevance, of the Gospel. On the other hand, our preaching is ordered to the contemplation of God: it is therefore doctrinal in character. Its purpose is not to answer particular concerns of the laity, but to present Christ as he is revealed in the Tradition. Simply put, in the moment that he is ordered to God in contemplation, the Dominican must most have his hearers in mind; in the moment that he is instructing the faithful, he is directed toward the contemplation of God. We see this tension in the life of St. Dominic: in his approach to God, his constant prayer was for the sake of others; in his approach to others, he spoke only of God.

If the Dominican life might be said to be shaped by a double obedience - to the tradition and to the needs of souls - our laity might be said to live a life which is shaped by a double fidelity: to Christ in his Church, and to the world as they find it. The distinctive element in the Catholic approach to the world is an insistence that the world has its own proper ends, implanted by the Creator. This means that it is necessary to let the world be the world. St. Thomas reminds us that secondary causality is a real order of causes; Congar has remarked that there has been a tendency in the post-Reformation Church to refer all things too quickly to their first cause, and so to rob creation of its proper dignity. As we have seen, John Paul II, echoing the Second Vatican Council, insists that the laity have a secular character, which is sacred: it is their character to restore the world to its original dignity and destiny by finding, in the world, their means to holiness. Our laity are to live their vocation in the world, but in such a way as to be formed and shaped by two facets of the revelation: Christ revealing himself through the Catholic tradition, and Christ revealing himself through the agency of created things and of human work.

I cannot think that it is by accident that much of the significant work in the theology of the laity was accomplished by Dominicans - Chenu, Congar, Tillard et. al. - in preparation for the Vatican Council. Given that the lay task consists in relating the tradition of the Church to life in the world, that task could best be illumined by theologians who were steeped in the tradition of the Church, but also directed toward the practical application of that tradition: theologians who, in other words, were obedient to a two-fold task to contemplate the Word and actively to proclaim him. The tension lived between contemplation and apostolic preaching, between a cloistered life in community and a life invested with others, exactly complements the tension which illumines the lay task of faithfulness to the Gospel and faithfulness to life in the world.

Our laity require to be formed for their apostolate in the Church and world. The theology of the laity, which laid the groundwork for the Second Vatican Council, was largely a Dominican work. The tradition, charism, and even the structure, of the Order are admirably suited for the purpose of providing a lay formation. In what ways might we undertake this work?

First, the lay vocation in the Church must be preached. This is an initiative which we can undertake throughout the Province, and in all of our assignments. To preach the dignity of the lay apostolate, the manner in which it proceeds, and the necessity for a lay formation might be, particularly, a work of our preaching missions. In addition, our laity require a spiritual formation, according to which they are directed to a fidelity to Christ in his Church, and apostolic witness of Christ to the world.

Second, our institutions may be used for the purpose of lay formation. This will require of us - and of the laity - what amounts to a paradigm shift: we must conceive of the laity, not as passive recipients of the priestly ministry, but as co-workers, equal in dignity to us, whom we are assisting to form for the sake of an apostolate in the world. Our parishes and Newman Centers might, therefore, become centers of lay formation. Our programs should reflect that emphasis. Hence, teaching must be integrated around the apostolic work to which the laity are called, and must assist them to integrate their experience: their experience of the life of grace and their experience in the world - whether the "world" is the world of the university or of commerce or of social involvement.

We might investigate the structures of our institutions, to see what might be done to encourage the conversation between laity and hierarchy which the Council and magisterial documents have called for. Might we use our own methods of administration and governance - by means of assembly and chapter - in the administration and governance of our parishes and Newman Centers? In Seattle, I have begun to govern the parish by means of parish assemblies, the preparation for which imitates the preparation for our own assemblies. The pastoral council then functions much as the council of the province, or our house councils, both in advising the pastor and in assisting to implement the work of the assemblies. In this way, a true collaboration with our laity might be effected.

If we are to take seriously the task of lay formation, we will have to review our own formation programs. How can we prepare ourselves for the work of forming our laity; to what extent do we presently participate in a paradigm according to which the laity are merely passive recipients of the Catholic tradition? Serious theological work must be undertaken - especially in ecclesiology and in pastoral theology - to support the work of lay formation. Hence, our school and faculty have a significant role to play in such an initiative. In this regard, it is interesting - and telling - that little work has been done in the theology of the laity since the Council. Magisterial statements have been offered which elaborate the work of the Council, but magisterial statements do not afford us a theology, so much as the principles for a theology. A great deal of work remains to be done.

Our Order was founded for the sake of announcing the Gospel. The work of formation is by no means alien to the Order; in one sense, to form disciples might be regarded as an admirable way of speaking what the end of preaching has always been. We have not yet seen the implementation of the lay apostolate in the manner which the Vatican Council called for. The articulation of the theology of the laity prior to Vatican Council II was very largely a Dominican work. Might we not now finish the job?

Fr. Michael Sweeney, O.P.