

THE INDIVIDUAL APOSTOLATE AS THE STARTING POINT

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“You go into the vineyard too” (Mt 20:4). So said the householder in the Gospel parable to labourers standing idle in the market place. And so says the Lord Jesus to every baptized person: lay faithful, cleric or religious, for there is indeed in the Church a universal call to the apostolate.

In these reflections we are going to focus on “The Individual Apostolate as the Starting Point of the Lay Apostolate”. To forestall any misunderstanding, it will be well to define, no matter how briefly, what we mean by the lay faithful and then what is specific to the lay apostolate. A word needs also to be said about the organized lay apostolate. With ground so cleared, we shall outline the reasons for the individual lay apostolate. Instances of such apostolate in the New Testament will be cited. Some of its forms in our times will be mentioned. Situations where it is particularly urgent will be described. We shall close with a proposal for adequate formation for the individual lay apostolate.

1. The Lay Faithful

The lay faithful are those followers of Christ who by Baptism are made one body with Christ, are established among the People of God, and are sent to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God. What distinguishes the lay faithful from clerics and religious is the secular quality proper and special to the laity. This will be explained further in our next step (cf *Lumen Gentium*, 31; *Christifideles Laici*, 9).

“Incorporation into Christ through faith and Baptism is the source of being a Christian in the mystery of the Church... Only through accepting the richness in mystery that God gives to the Christian in Baptism is it possible to come to a basic description of the lay faithful” (*Christifideles Laici*, 9).

“I am the vine, you are the branches” (Jn 15:5), is said by Jesus to all the baptized. The Sacraments of Christian initiation begin and intensify this incorporation. “The participation of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King finds its source in the anointing of Baptism, its further development in Confirmation and its realization and dynamic sustenance in the Holy

Eucharist. It is a participation given to each member of the lay faithful individually” (*op. cit.*, 14).

2. Distinguishing Mark of the Lay Apostolate

By its very nature the call to become a Christian is also a call to engage in the apostolate. “No part of the structure of a living body is merely passive but each has a share in the functions as well as in the life of the body. So, too, in the body of Christ, which is the Church” (*Apost. Actuositatem*, 2).

Specific to the lay apostolate is the evangelization of the temporal order, that is, to bring the spirit of Christ into the ordinary arenas of secular life, such as the family, the arts and professions, science and culture, trade and commerce, politics and government, mass media and recreation. It is the apostolate of the lay faithful to work as insiders in all these areas. “The laity must take on the renewal of the temporal order as their own specific obligation” (*op. cit.*, 7; cf *Lumen Gentium*, 7).

It is not, therefore, that the lay faithful happen to find themselves in the midst of secular affairs and so have to do their best in the situation in order to be good Christians. No. It is rather that that is precisely where God has called them to witness to Christ. It is by their authentic and dynamic witness in these secular situations that they become holy. The Servant of God, Pope John Paul II, puts it this way: “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’” (*Christifideles Laici*, 15). That is why the Gospel uses such images as salt, light and leaven which indeed apply to all Christians, but to the lay faithful more specifically. Salt and leaven work silently and dynamically and from within. Light spreads its influence silently, effectively, unstoppingly, increasingly and all over the place!

3. Organized Lay Apostolate Groups

Before we focus attention on the individual lay apostolate, it is as well to state what looks obvious, the importance of organized lay apostolate groups. God has created us human beings with a social nature. Mutual contact and organized group action are according to our nature. “Hence the group apostolate of Christian believers happily corresponds to a human and Christian need and at the same time signifies the communion and unity of the Church in Christ” (*Apost. Actuositatem*, 18).

There is also the added reason that there are problems and challenges which cannot be faced singlehandedly but which require organized action if there is to be a fair chance of success. Think of organized attacks against marriage and the family, corruption in high places, deprivation of religious freedom to people, abortion, euthanasia, racism and intricacies of injustice, international relations, war and peace.

There are therefore such organized lay apostolate groups as Catholic Students' and Youth Organizations, Catholic Professional Societies such as for Lawyers and Doctors, Family enrichment Movements and Organizations, Knights, Legion of Mary, Society of St Vincent de Paul, Focolare Movement, Communion and Liberation, Sant'Egidio, etc. Many countries have other associations tailored to their needs.

4. Reasons for the Individual Lay Apostolate

Many life situations put us in a situation of one to one. Think of the medical doctor, the nurse, the lawyer, the taxi driver, the tax collector, the ticket collector, the radio or television interviewer, the psychologist and even the old, the sick and bed-ridden – all these meet others often at a one to one basis. Students, professional colleagues and members of a trade union also often meet as individuals.

Many people are sooner convinced in religious matters by one person rather than by a group. They suspect groups. They go on the defence. They fear being “recruited” for a hidden agenda. They will sooner open the doors of their minds and hearts to a trusted friend than to an organization.

It is also a fact that individual contacts can be much more frequent, unplanned and therefore less menacing to the fearful, than meetings with an organization.

It is therefore no surprise that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council lay heavy emphasis on the irreplaceable role of the individual lay apostolate. It is “the origin and condition of the whole lay apostolate, even in its organized expression, and admits of no substitute. Regardless of circumstance, all lay persons are called to this type of apostolate and obliged to engage in it” (*Apost. Actuositatem*, 16). The Council goes on to say that the individual lay apostolate is useful at all times and places but that in certain circumstances it is the only one appropriate and feasible. We shall later list some of such situations.

Therefore Pope John Paul II wants every lay person to be aware of being a member of the Church and of being “entrusted with a unique task which cannot be done by another and which is to be fulfilled for the good of all” (*Christifideles Laici*, 28).

In the Communion of Saints in the Church which we profess in the Creed, the good of all becomes the good of each one and the good of each one becomes the

good of all. "In the Holy Church", writes St Gregory the Great, "all are nourished by each one and each one is nourished by all" (*Hom. in Ez.*, II, I, 5; cf also *Christifideles Laici*, 28).

5. Individual Lay Apostolate in the New Testament

As we read the New Testament, we are impressed by the high number of individuals who took action on their own and did not wait for organized groups in order to share the Good News of the Gospel.

The Blessed Virgin Mary made "with haste" (Lk 1:39) the long journey to Ain Karim to visit Elizabeth: she brought them Jesus who sanctified John the Baptist, Elizabeth and Zechariah. The old man Simeon and the widow Anna gave witness to the Child Saviour in the temple in Jerusalem. John the Baptist was a fearless herald of Christ. He discharged his calling with fidelity, did not care for political correctness, and was beheaded because he did not keep silent in front of wife-snatching by the high and mighty.

The Samaritan woman, herself not a saint, brought her fellow Samaritans to recognize Jesus as "the Saviour of the world" (Jn 4:42). The Gerasene demoniac, out of whom Jesus cast out a legion of devils, begged Jesus to be allowed to be one of his regular followers. But Jesus refused and rather sent him home to engage in individual lay apostolate. Jesus said to him: "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you". "And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and all men marveled" (Mk 5:19-20). You see that it is not necessary to become a priest, or a Maryknoll Missionary, or a member of the Knights of Columbus, before you can give witness to Jesus the Saviour. And there are other New Testament examples.

Mary Magdalen out of whom seven devils were cast out, followed Jesus, was one of the women who ministered to him, was courageous enough to be on Calvary and was back to the tomb on Easter day so that the Risen Christ appeared to her and sent her to go and bring the good news of his Resurrection to the Apostles (cf Jn 19:11-8). St. Thomas Aquinas calls her "the apostles of the Apostles"! (In Joannem Evangelistan Exposito, C. XX, L.3 n.6. cf also Rabanus Maurus: *De Vita Beatae Mariae Magd.*, 27:PL112, 1474; John Paul II, *Malicis Diagratanen*, 1b).

In the Acts of Apostles the centurion Cornelius brought his whole household to Baptism (cf Acts 10) and Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman called Damaris responded positively to St Paul's speech in Athens and hopefully influenced others (cf Acts 17:34). Apollos, Aquilla and Priscilla and many others were called by St. Paul his fellow workers in the Gospel (cf Phil 2:25; 4:03; Col 4:11; Phlm 24; Rm 16:9).

6. Some Forms of the Individual Lay Apostolate

It may help to list some ways or forms in which the individual lay apostolate can manifest itself.

Very powerful and convincing is a lay person's entire life as it develops out of faith, hope and charity. Example convinces more than words. Some people may not be impressed when they see priests and religious leading holy lives because they presume that that is what these are supposed to be doing. But when they see lay faithful, who like them live in the harsh details of family and city or village life, shine in the midst of it all as witnesses of Christian holiness of life, then their defences fall and they surrender in front of irrefutable Christian witness.

Lay faithful have great opportunities to exercise the apostolate of the word, to explain the Gospel, to show how reasonable and possible the Catholic faith is in daily life, to present in a convincing way the Catholic faith on chastity, contraception, abortion, euthanasia and honesty in work – these are opportunities for individual lay apostolate which should not be underrated.

Individual lay faithful have possibilities to cooperate with their fellow citizens to promote the progress of society. Inspired by the dynamism of the Catholic faith which they can absorb from such volumes as the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, they can cooperate with their colleagues as students, academic personnel, doctors, lawyers, industrialists, politicians, journalists or trade unionists, in order to help society to work better according to God's plan. "Let them be aware that by so doing they are cooperating with God the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier and are giving praise to him" (*Apost. Actuositatem*, 16).

Individuals can take initiatives in the family to help their relations to come closer to Christ and the Gospel. They can bring back to Mass and Confession their friends who do not remember when they were last in church. They can adopt children and help immigrants and homeless people. And they are not to undervalue prayer, penance and voluntary acceptance of hardships in life. "By such means does the Christian grow in likeness to the suffering Christ" (*ibid.*).

7. Areas of Urgent Need of Individual Lay Apostolate

Some areas where there is an urgent need of the individual lay apostolate need special mention.

In some places the freedom of the Church is seriously restricted. Priests are forbidden to function or are allowed to work under very stringent conditions. The laity can do much in such situations. They can gather children and adults. They can

teach prayers and the rest of our faith. They can baptize. They can conduct the Liturgy of the Word of God. They can prepare couples for marriage and officiate under canonically recognized situations. Above all, they can give examples of perseverance in the faith when under persecution. Many lay people have done this along the centuries and some have paid the supreme price with their lives. It was lay people who brought the faith to Corea. It was they who kept the faith alive during the centuries of persecution in Japan. The catechists have given and are giving admirable witness in many countries of recent evangelization. The Fathers of Vatican II praise all such valiant lay apostles (cf *Apost. Actuositatem*, 17).

The individual apostolate is also urgent where Catholics are few in number and are widely dispersed. In such cases the laity may be able to engage in the apostolate only as individuals. This can happen also where a person's professional work renders belonging to an organization rather difficult. Gathering in small discussion groups and giving spiritual encouragement to one another will normally still be possible. Thus people are helped to gain strength to face the challenges of isolation.

8. Formation for the Individual Lay Apostolate

It should not be presumed that all this will happen automatically. Formation is needed for such, as for any, apostolate.

Basic requirements are listening to the Word of God, prayer, consultation of a wise and holy spiritual guide, and discernment of one's vocation and personal gifts or talents.

"Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5), our Blessed Mother told the servants at the wedding feast of Cana. It is not enough for the laity to know the will of God for them. They also need the readiness to do it.

Care should be taken to promote an integrated formation for the Christian to carry out religious and civil duties as one piece. Vatican II condemns the introduction of divorce between religious duties on the one hand, and duties as a citizen on the other. The Christian who is not a good citizen is not a good Christian (cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 43). Good catechesis and a serious study of the social doctrine of the Church according to a person's ability and position in life are of great help. So are diocesan, parish and small Christian communities' programmes. "Formation", concludes Pope John Paul II, "is not the privilege of a few, but the right and duty of all" (cf *Christifideles Laici*, 63; also 57-62).

Distinguished brothers and sisters, the Lord Jesus, in front of the springtime for the faith among the Samaritans, said to his disciples: "Lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest" (Jn 4:35). The springfest for the faith will become an ever more present reality, the more every lay person gets dynamically engaged in sharing the faith. May the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles, obtain for us the grace that this may be a growing reality.

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