

ELEMENTS OF ECCLESIOLOGY AND THEOLOGY OF THE LAITY

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ELEMENTS OF ECCLESIOLOGY AND THEOLOGY OF THE LAITY

What is the Church?

What is the relationship of its members among themselves?

What is the place and role of lay people in the Church?

Often, Secular Franciscans have imprecise ideas on what the Church is and on what is their role in it, as lay persons and Franciscan Professed members of the SFO.

The II Vatican Council has “re-thought” the Church in the light of Revelation and of the evangelical experience. “Old” novelties have emerged from this, which were perfectly anticipated by Francis 8 centuries ago when he founded his Family.

It is therefore essential for Secular Franciscans to have clear ideas and to understand well what the Church is and what is their role in it, as lay and secular persons.

I. THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE COUNCIL

With the Second Vatican Council the Church came to new and deeper insights in defining itself and its role in society. This new way of thinking has been hailed from the start as a liberating event. But still today, there still exists a widespread ignorance of its content and especially of the new outlook to which it gave birth. In some instances it has not yet been successful in bringing about complete and fully developed insights. And for other important themes, the spirit of the Council is still waiting to be translated into action.

That said, the change brought about by the Council with regard to earlier reflection on the Church is profound: the passing from a top-down ecclesiology based on structure and law to an ecclesiology of Church as communion.

In this way, moving from an understanding of the church based solely upon the aspect of authority (which traces the foundation of the Church back to the Apostles and to Christ the Founder, emphasizing the legal/structural dimension)--a top-down understanding, the Council instead sought to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit and of the Charisms which the Spirit inspires wherever he wills; of the Word and its link with the Sacraments; of human values and the capacity of each member of the community to be an apostle—a horizontal and radically equal understanding.

We rediscover the main themes of this new ecclesiological reflection which bring together and join these different elements in the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* of Paul VI. This Encyclical emphasizes the commitment the Council has for the Church and its theological reflection about itself.

Above all the Council wanted to express the self-understanding of the Church, its renewal and openness to dialogue within itself, with non-Catholic Christians, with non-Christian believers, and with people of good-will who are not believers. In this way, we understand the style, or better said, the spirit which animated the Council Fathers.

A positive attitude and approach appears in the presentation of the Truth of which the Church is the depository. A real change in attitude became apparent which is no longer one of condemnation of errors, of an excessive defense of traditional positions, but one of sincere encounter with the Word of God, the ultimate source of truth against error.

The discovery that the Truth is beyond human capacity to contain in its entirety, gives rise to the authentic Gospel spirit of openness to the truth wherever it is to be found, even with the non-believer in whose heart the Spirit of truth is always at work.

On the importance of seeking the truth and on the duty to reflect on it, this is how Paul VI expresses his message to scholars: “All of us here, Council Fathers, are in search of the truth... Your path is ours. Your thoughts are never strangers to our own. We are with you in your vocation as seekers, allied to you in your fatigue, admirers of you in your success, and if necessary sympathizers in your discouragement and failures.”

Because of this new self-understanding of the Church, the *lively dialogic style* became the new approach by which the Church would relate to the world and which came to

characterize the way that the Church would deal with social issues, the role of women, the importance of art within as well as outside the Church. This demanded a new style which consists not only in accepting the position of others as something to be taken into account but as something to be welcomed with great respect, and that represented a major shift! The Council wanted to meet the other with an attitude of respectful listening, understanding that it can and should learn from what is different; and in this way, it hoped to let itself be forced to re-discover itself.

While these themes make up the single thread of the Conciliar texts, some focused on the self-understanding of the Church itself- they are the four dogmatic Constitutions: *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), *Dei Verbum* (The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation), *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), *Gaudium et Spes*, (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). Other texts refer to the commitment to renewal (principally the Decrees); others again underline the need for dialogue (the Declarations).

The first part of this study will look mainly at *Lumen Gentium*, in order to clarify the theological elements which underlie the reflection on the Church; the second part will develop the two characteristics which set forth the identity of the layperson: his/her being Christian and his/her secular character.

1. ORIGIN AND GOAL OF THE CHURCH

The etymological meaning of the word Church comes from the Greek word *Ecclesia*, which expresses its deepest essence: an assembly or community united to hear the Word of God. This use of the word *Ecclesia*, already present in the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, continues into the New Testament where the structure and constitution of the Church is seen as one of relation. On the one hand, it means a relation to God who speaks and calls together, and the people who listen and respond; and on the other, a relation of communion among the members.

From the meaning of the Church as an assembly called together more closely by the Word of God, the II Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* has expressed a theological reflection on the Church, underlining the relational aspect by means of the category of communion. In addition, we find two other categories or dimensions which are useful: witness and service.

In this way, communion (*koinonìa*), witness (*martyria*), service (*diakonìa*) become the three terms or categories which define the nature and mission of the Church. Around these three aspects the theological understanding of the identity and mission of the whole Church and of the laity in particular is tied together.

A) THE CHURCH: SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION.

“The Church is in Christ as a sacrament or sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG1).

The definition of the whole Church *as* a sacrament has as its aim to underline the close connection with Christ, source of all grace. The Church not only administers the sacraments as a sign-means of grace, but as a whole, in its being and action, has the duty to communicate Christ.

To be “Sacrament” means for the whole Church to be a sign of both vertical communion (intimate union with God) and horizontal communion (unity of the human race). In it people experience the mystery of God’s love. In his infinite love, God wishes to meet every person, in the unity of each of its members, to raise them to a sharing in his divine life. (LG2).

Such a **communion** of God with people and people among themselves constitutes the divine plan of being “one” in Christ. Through the eternal plan of a gradual and deeply rooted insertion into humanity, the Church becomes a visible **sign** of the presence of God and an **instrument** to realize the vocation of all people.

B) THE CHURCH: SIGN OF TRINITARIAN COMMUNION.

Communion and mission are the elements which define the Church. This assertion not only says something about the Church. The reason we say that the Church is defined by communion and mission is that first of all, these same ideas are characteristic of the inner life of God.

God is a communion of persons sharing a life of mutual giving and receiving in a relationship of equality. Through God’s loving plan, this inner life of God is opened up to all of the created world through the mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit, that is, God the Father sends the Son and the Spirit into the world in order to draw the human family into deeper communion.

So, in *Lumen Gentium*, the Trinitarian basis for the communion of the Church is articulated: “Thus the Church has been seen as a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (LG #4).

Similarly, in the Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity* the mission of the Church is firmly established in the mission of God. “The pilgrim Church is missionary by its very nature since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.”

To the Christological emphasis is added a Trinitarian one in the statement that the Church is a people gathered in the unity of Father, Son and Spirit. (LG4)

In the living out of this relationship, the Church itself becomes the time and place of the experience of God. Its being, a place of communion, is the consequence of its being an icon of the divine mystery.

The whole Church is not self-sufficient, it does not live for itself, it does not have within itself its own foundation, but receives it from God, through Jesus Christ in virtue of the Holy Spirit.

2. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

God calls all people to become His children, because they are brothers in Christ (sons in the Son) so as to make manifest the love of God the Father and to increase the divine family sharing in his life: All people are called to this union with Christ, light of the world; we come from Him, we live for Him, we go towards Him (LG3)

The mission of the Church, its duty, begins in the Trinitarian communion, and in the fact of being the Body of Christ. “The Church is by its nature missionary” (AG2), she does not proclaim herself but the gift received from on high.

“The Church (and in it every person) both prays and labors in order that the whole world may become the People of God, the Body of the Lord and the Temple of the Holy Spirit; and that in Christ, the Head of all, all honor and glory may be rendered to the Creator and Father of the Universe” (LG17)

The content of the mission is the proclamation (good news) of the love of God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Each member of the Church shares in the mission of leading humanity to the unity which Christ has come to establish.

The Church becomes missionary by giving itself and by giving the presence of the Spirit which always enlivens it. Its primary mission is accomplished in the heart of the human realities of its children, proclaiming to them that they are children of God and exhorting them to live according to “the state of dignity and freedom proper to the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple. It has for law a new commandment, to love as Christ himself has loved us. Finally, it has its goal in the Kingdom of God, inaugurated on earth by God Himself, destined to spread out through the ages until it is brought to perfection by Him at the end of time” (LG9).

Present in history, the Church shares the road with humanity throughout the centuries. It is the travelling companion of humanity, no longer with an attitude of conquest or defensiveness, but with affection and admiration towards people it offers itself as a leaven to lead to the fullness of the good that God has sown in her.

Concern for the world makes it not “the enemy” to be fought, but the place, time and condition in which God reveals Himself in a free and mysterious way. As Christ has taken upon himself all humanity to reveal to it his true identity as Son of God, so the Church presents itself to the world as the one for whom “the joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts”. (GS1)

The Church is the experience of people who journey, conscious that, in the mystery of love, “ it has pleased God to make people holy and save them not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness” (LG9)

The new identity as children of God and as a people which lives the Trinitarian communion, allows each member of the whole Church to establish new relationships, to see people as God sees them in his loving plan.

II. IDENTITY OF THE LAYPERSON.

The theological reflection on the laity was presented by the Council in different texts, notably chapter IV of *Lumen Gentium* (nos. 30-38), the Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, and *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

From these texts there emerges, besides doctrinal statements, a new image of the Church which reflects on itself in relation to the world and entrusts to the laity a specific duty in the realization of its mission. It is evident that the self-understanding of the laity or rather the theological reflection on Christian lay people, follows on the self-understanding of the Church. The new identity of the Church leads to the recognition in the laity of a special area of competence, the secular reality, and a “power” based on the common belonging of all to the People of God in virtue of Baptism.

1. SECULAR CHARACTER

The identity of the lay person and his/her special mission in the Church flows from the Christian newness brought about by Baptism. By this sacrament we are reborn to a new life, grafted to Christ, given life by the power of the Spirit. We proclaim salvation, hope and love.

As baptized, we are all children of God; but the modality of living it is different for lay people than for clergy and religious. This modality is not accessory nor secondary but proper and particular to the layperson; it is his/her intimate nature which is to be secular.

“ The secular character is proper and particular to lay people”.

In no. 31 of *Lumen Gentium*, the Council Fathers affirm that “the term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in a religious state sanctioned by the Church. These faithful are by Baptism made one body with Christ and are established among the People of God. They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ. They carry out their own part in the mission of the whole Christian people with respect to the Church and the world.

After the first negative definition which indicates what they are not (neither priests nor religious), lay people are defined as the faithful incorporated in Christ by Baptism. It is thus through **Baptism** that lay people receive their **identity** and **mission** in the Church; through Baptism they participate in the three messianic “munera” (priestly, prophetic, royal) in a **particular** and original way which is the **secular way**.

a) The priestly function of which one speaks is “spiritual” in the strict and proper sense of the word: to offer one’s concrete daily life to the Father in the spirit which animated Christ himself in the offering of himself. All their deeds, their prayers and apostolic activities, their work and family life, if they are carried out in the Spirit, become a

spiritual sacrifice agreeable to God. The vital priestly dimension appears clearly: to act righteously in all life situations leads the world to its fulfillment.

b) The prophetic function coincides with witness. It is realized by lay people through the gift of speaking of their own faith experience, by proclaiming in their own lives, the marvels that the Lord has wrought. It is a witness strong in hope that the lay person brings to the world when he/she sees suffering as the occasion in which God mysteriously reveals his presence. “The laity show themselves to be children of the promise, if, strong in faith and hope, they make the most of the present time and with patience await the glory that is to come. Let them not, then, hide this hope in the depths of their hearts, but even in the framework of secular life let them express it by a continual turning towards God” (LG 35).

To be a prophet means to be a witness to the faith which has been handed down to us, understanding its doctrinal aspects and actualizing it in life and word.

The seriousness of the prophetic duty involves the need to be prepared in teaching and knowledge. The study of theology is obligatory on lay people so as to overcome ignorance and incompetence.

c) The royal function exercised by lay people is properly that of the baptized who have the freedom of the Children of God. For them “to serve is to reign” (LG36), according to the logic of Christ for whom the greatest strength was that of giving himself to humanity in the power of love.

Service, freedom and kingship are the aspects which overlap and constitute the condition of those who belong to the kingdom of Christ. The lay faithful put this condition into practice firstly by confronting themselves in the daily effort at self-determination and with regard to created reality when they recognize in it the manifestation of the glory of God.

It is not for the laity, therefore, to set a value on these realities for, as the works of God, they are already constituted as “good”. The duty of lay people is to recognize the goodness of creation which orders these works in such a way through the members of the Church Christ will progressively illumine the whole of human society with his saving light” (LG36). The saving action of Christ becomes real from within society by the lay faithful called to reveal the definitive and ultimate meaning of created reality.

Lay people are invested with the duty of being a bridge between the world and the Church by their immersion in earthly realities and living their human activities in openness to the Lordship of God.

To be a “bridge” between the Church and World, between the economy of creation and the economy of redemption, it is necessary that the adult Christian be a person of our time, active and responsible, open to the richness of experience that the world can offer, but grounded in the proclamation of Christian newness.

2. LAY PEOPLE AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The secular dimension, while pertaining to the whole Church as to each of the faithful (cleric, religious, lay) called to build up the Body of Christ in the world, is realized, however, in a special way by lay people. The message of salvation is indeed addressed to the whole world and it is precisely there, **in the world** and **through** the things of the world, that the lay faithful respond to the call of God and are witnesses of **His presence**, incarnating in their lives the task of revealing God.

“By their very vocation, the laity seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances and social life which the very web of their existence is woven” (LG 31).

a. “Being lay” as a specific theological “place”¹

There is an important message in the Council: the world is not a place, a space, nor a means of sanctification, but the means of living the dignity of the Children of God in the midst of the most hidden miseries of the humanity that Christ has taken to himself.

Lay people in their ordinary activities (work, friendships, pleasure in knowing and learning, free-time of rest and sport, politics and economic affairs, etc.) witness to the extraordinary in life and realize the perfection of charity. In this sense we read in *Christifideles laici* that “the secular character of the lay faithful is to be defined not only in the sociological sense but especially in a theological sense” (CFL 15), that is a sign and revelation of the creative and redemptive activity of God.

This is what the Council affirmed when it said that the laity are called by God so that by exercising their proper function and being led by the spirit of the gospel they can work for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven. In this way they can make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. The lay person is closely involved in temporal affairs of every sort. It is there for his/her special task to illumine and organize these affairs in such a way that they may always start out, develop and persist according to Christ’s mind, to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer (LG31)

The universal call to holiness is made concrete in the diversity and variety of the members of the Church which recognizes in the lay state one of its fundamental characteristics.

b) Competence of lay people

Lay people are “competent” in the questions of ordinary life (marriage, family, human culture, political life, economics, etc.). It is through them that the Church is in a special way present there.

¹ The « state » of being lay is a specific way designed by God to live the vital relationship with Him (theological)

In these sectors, the laity act as leaders and the Church must rely on those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers.

With the help of the Holy Spirit it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age (GS44)

For the Church, listening to the world is not limited to a reference to method and language but through them she means to welcome the newness, the hopes, the needs and the presence of God which is at work in all things.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI, speaking of the laity, wrote: “Their own field of evangelizing activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes other realities which are open to evangelization, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work, suffering. The more Gospel-inspired lay people there are engaged in these realities, clearly involved in them, competent to promote them and conscious that they must exercise to the full their Christian powers which are often buried and suffocated, the more these realities will be at the service of the Kingdom of God and therefore of salvation in Jesus Christ.”

3. LAY PEOPLE AND PASTORS IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.

Having strongly confirmed and furthered the participation of lay people in the mission of the Church, the Council studies more deeply their autonomy and their relationship to the Hierarchy in no. 37 of *Lumen Gentium*.

This relationship is defined and articulated on the theological basis of equality in dignity of the Children of God and diversity of function. It is a question of rights and obligations.

“Lay people have the right, as do all the faithful, to receive in abundance the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the assistance of the Word of God and the Sacraments. The lay people make known to their pastors their needs and desire with that liberty and confidence which belongs to the Children of God and brothers in Christ”.

From the right to receive one passes to the right-duty to give their advice on that which concerns the good of the Church, not in a partisan or arbitrary way, but “according to the knowledge, competence and authority which they enjoy”. This must be realized “always with respect for truth, with courage and prudence, and with the respect and charity due to those who, because of their sacred function, represent Christ”. To make known their advice represents for lay people the true way of living their faith, expressing it by holiness of life and effective competence.

The duties of pastors are also presented: “they should recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of lay people in the Church, gladly make use of their prudent advice, assign to them posts of confidence in the service of the Church, grant them freedom of action and an area to exercise it, and even to encourage them to undertake

tasks on their own initiative. They should also consider, with fatherly attention and affection in Christ, the projects, demands and desires put forward by lay people”.

Hierarchy and Laity are thus associated in the mission of the Church which “is not merely to bring to humanity the message of Christ and his grace, but also to penetrate and to perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel” (AA5). In certain areas of life, without the laity, the Gospel of salvation cannot reach people. None the less, one should not forget that this mission is realized in the whole Church in diverse and complementary ways.

“Her pastors must clearly state the principles concerning the purpose of creation and the use of temporal things, and must make available the moral and spiritual aids by which the temporal order can be restored to Christ. The Laity must take on the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation. Led by the light of the gospel and the mind of the Church, and motivated by Christian love, let them act directly and definitively in the temporal sphere. As citizens they must cooperate with other citizens, using their own particular skills and acting on their own responsibility. Everywhere and in all things they must seek the justice characteristic of God’s kingdom” (AA7).

The close relationship between lay people and pastors shows that the participation in the mission of the Church does not depend on belonging to a category of persons but on belonging to Jesus Christ.

4. LAY SPIRITUALITY

Lay spirituality has consistently been overlooked and unappreciated. Lay spirituality has been an essential and fundamental aspect of Christianity from the beginning, although lay people themselves have frequently been portrayed by Church leaders as incompetent in religious matters and lacking in leadership abilities. In the earliest Christian communities, however, there was no separating lay people and ordained ministers. All lived in equality, for according to St. Paul, among the baptized “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

For Roman Catholics, the Second Vatican Council was an important turning point for the Church, the beginning of a recovery of that earlier vision and spirituality of Church with its universal call to holiness and appreciation of everyone’s ministries and gifts. Rich insights were given at that council especially with regard to the laity.

The particularity of lay people is made clear in an original and fruitful way not only at the level of the apostolate but at that of spirituality, one no longer borrowed from religious.

Lay Christians are called to be on the watch for the breath of the Spirit which makes the Word of God living and effective.

Their “life in the Spirit” (or spirituality) has specific connotations.

- It is characterized above all by service and apostolic co-responsibility which takes human history seriously, living it as the daily place of sanctification. The today of

God is in our concrete lives, our day-to-day is the “hour” of God, the today of salvation. Secular involvement, however, does not consist in living the faith by consecrating the world, but in living in the world according to the Spirit-mission proper to the People of God.

- It is Christ-like in the sense that it flows from sharing in the priesthood, prophecy and kingship of Christ in the Church.
- It is Charismatic: it is founded in the inner freedom of the Spirit which continually offers new life.
- It is Evangelic: in the spirit of the Beatitudes, lay people are not prisoners of the logic and wisdom of the world, but they make of their life and “path” the arena for the virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.
- It is Wisdom: by its dual belonging to the ecclesial community and the human community, as such it brings together the demands of divine revelation and human reason.

Gaudium et Spes denounces the grave error of separating daily life from the life of faith: “They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more than ever obliged to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation(...) This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age (...) The Christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties toward his neighbour and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation” (GS 43).

This is the vocation and spirituality of the lay person: to seek the Kingdom of God and to be concerned for God’s concerns.

The Christian lay person is called by the Church to be capable of expecting and welcoming the new and unheard of in the Spirit which is always given. Revelation is already fulfilled in Christ. But not all the power of the Word has yet been felt, heard, understood and realized.

Legitimate lay spirituality promotes leadership that values the wisdom of the past, the richness of the present, and a vision of the future that calls everyone to respond. It encourages a maturity in adults that is associated with gratitude and serenity, even in the midst of great anxiety, suffering, and pain.

Above all, it takes seriously the experiences, gifts, and common call to ministry of every baptized person. Such a spirituality will always be attentive to those experiences, especially those that raise questions about ultimate concerns, such as the meaning of life, the presence of God, and the depth of our love.

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