

THE CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY OF THE LAITY IN THE *POLIS*

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INTRODUCTION

The vocation and mission of the lay faithful is not solely in the Church but extends to the entire world. The laity as the bearer of Christ's message have to keep the light aglow in a world that finds darkness more comfortable for the purposes of political manipulations, selfish policies and corrupt social decisions. Brain Lucas has it all:

Everyone should look for the opportunity to animate the events of daily life with the spirit of the gospel. Those who take the call seriously will be effective witness of Christ in their workplace, neighborhood and social circle.¹

The question of whether the laity should participate in politics or not has long been answered by the Second Vatican Council. The primary issues now are, what difference the laity will have to create in the political life of their country? What is their testimony as Christians in the Polis? There are many dimensions to this. It is not simply enough that the laity lead good lives and avoid evil but more enough: it is for them to speak out and decry the ills of their society and seek ever to destroy corrupt political structures.

Christ's example cannot be overlooked by anybody who is called to be His disciple. During His time, Christ preached against the lack of compassion among His own people, the jealousy of workers, exploitation by those who benefited from political oppression. He criticized the status quo, the Scribes and Pharisees and those who absolutized power. He chose to re-order the political face of the universe.

Looking at the Christian testimony of the laity in the temporal order, three biblical injunctions come to mind: First, "You are the salt and light of the earth." (cf. Mt 5:14). Secondly, "You too go into my vineyard", (cf. Mt 20:7). Thirdly, "I am the vine you are the branches, who bears much fruit is one who stays in me and I in him. For apart from me you cannot do anything" (cf. Jn 15:5-6).

It is our hope that the Christian laity will continue to remain the light and salt of the world whose taste is the testimony they bear in the state or polis. To accompany our task of decrying the past and recommending a prophetic and Christ like testimony

of the laity in the polis, let us make a brief and concise clarification of the certain concepts. More emphasis in the work will be given to the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the most up to date magisterial teaching on the laity, *Christifideles laici*.

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

LAITY: The term 'laity' stems from two Greek words: *Laikos* and *Laos* meaning "belonging to the people" and "people" respectively. In the New Testament writers used the term *Laos* to refer to all the members of the Church. With the gradual passage of time, the term laity came to be associated with those who were not leaders in the community of believers and exercises no cultic function i.e. those who were neither priests, deacons nor religious. With the Second Vatican Council, the term came up with a new meaning;

Referring to all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the church. That is, the faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ and integrated into the people of God, are made sharers in their particular way in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ and have their own part to play in the mission of the whole Christian people in the church and in the world.²

POLIS: *Polis* is a Greek word for politics meaning, 'city-state' or simply 'state'. In ancient Greece, the city-state was the highest governing body. From the foregoing, we can therefore see that, polis or politics has to do with the governing of a group, making policies and taking decisions over affairs of public interest, making fundamental choices on behalf of the people. Peter Angeles defines politics as:

That which has to do with governing or the field of study, which deals with civil-social problems and develops approaches to their solution. This is basically about the way society is structured; the situation wherein ordinary people have to live out their day to day lives.³

Based on the above expositions, we can therefore deduce the participation in politics or being part of the polis to simply mean being actively involved in the

decision making process both on the individual level and as part of a community.

Lay participation would therefore mean the active involvement of all Baptised (who are not ordained) in the governing of a given society in which they find themselves.

THE CHURCH AND THE STATE

One of the most distressing divisive issues concerning the Church, and perhaps the most topical at this particular moment is the relationship of the Church with the state. The Church, by reason of her nature, mission and competence, is not identified with any political community nor by ties to any political system. There has always been tensions and quest for some disparity between the two. Regarding their distinctive but inter-related status, the Second Vatican Council has this to say:

...their proper sphere, the political community and the church are mutually independent and self-governing. Yet, by a different title, each serves the personal and social vocations of the same human beings. This service can be more effectively rendered for the good of all, if each works better for the wholesome mutual co-operation depending on the circumstances of time and place.⁴

Scanning through the minds of many Christians, Hugh Montefiore expresses their reservations in these words; "there are Christians who believe that Christianity should be a purely private matter, involving sorely the spiritual health of the soul."⁵ The Church and the state are bound mutually. John Powel says; "the church and the state are a most remarkable couple. They are invariably chained to each other and in a sense they will decide their fate mutually, since separation is out of the question."⁶ However, it must be borne in mind that before the attainment of the stage so aptly described above, Church-state relations underwent an evolutionary process that will be briefly sketched below:

A. The Independent Church Devoid of the Influence of the State: This was the

Church of the Apostles and the successors (the Apostolic Fathers) who were a persecuted minority. In this stage, history, both Ecclesiastical and secular record the heroic witness borne by the martyrs. The conversion of the Emperor Constantine and the issuance of the Edict of Milan can be said to be the beginning of State-Church collaboration and mutual involvement in the affairs of the two institutions.

b. **The Church Influence by the State:** The entry of Constantine into the Church marked the beginning of an era that saw the State gradually becoming involved in the internal life of the Church. We see this clearly during the doctrinal controversies beginning with the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea (Arianism), which witnessed the participation of the unbaptised Emperor. With Christianity officially becoming the state religion of the empire during the reign of Theodosius, what the Apostles did not foresee become not only possible, but became a reality. When the capital of the Empire was moved from Rome to Constantinople, the power vacuum created became a catalyst that made the Church hierarchy to gradually assume civil authority. The climax of the stage was reached as the Popes took control over territories formerly known as the Papal States and were responsible for their total administration.

c. **The Withdrawal of the Church from Secular Affairs:** This stage was inaugurated by events that could be termed "anti-ecclesiastical" the revolt, most times violent, against civil administration by the clergy (as can be seen in the Italian War of Unification). In countries like France, the new leaders that emerged after the French Revolution were very hostile to the Church. From this stage onwards, the only possibility left to the Church was to be involved in the affairs of the State, the secular arena, in a different way. Moreover, this would no longer be the work of the clergy as was the case with the preceding centuries. Secondly, the Church would have to speak to the world with a new language.

THE APOSTOLATE OF THE LAITY IN THE DOCUMENTS OF THE

SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

One of the failures of the medieval Church which Martin Luther decried with extremism in the 16th century was the over emphasis made on the clergy at the expense of the laity. The reversal of this attitude begun at the reform Council of Trent but it was in the Second Vatican Council that more serious discussion on the nature and role of the laity was given.

Beginning with the description of the nature of the laity⁷ the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church broke new grounds in affirming the existence of the laity as significant as a theologico-ecclesiological reality that the lay state belongs to the very life of the Church: that it is the ordained ministers and the laity who constitute the Church was brought to the fore in the Council's teaching that there exists "a true equality between all with regard to the dignity and to the activity which is common to all the faithful in the building up of the Body of Christ"⁸ Before a theological examination of the peculiar vocation of the laity, it must be borne in mind that the whole people of God live in the earthly city with their eyes set on the one that is to come. It was to attain that city that Jesus preached holiness of life to His disciples that they be perfect as the heavenly Father. In similar fashion, the Council addressed all the baptised: "all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love..."⁹ The ordained ministers answer this call to holiness daily by their exercise of the ministerial priesthood. On the other hand, because they live in the world, the laity are to pursue holiness of life by "engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will."¹⁰ Temporal affairs is employed as a collective term for all activities engaged in by people in order to meet human needs, be it personal, those of one's family or the society at large.

The Council outlined three key objectives to be attained by the laity in their involvement in temporal affairs. First, their involvement is necessarily linked with the overall mission of the Church the salvation of souls. At the heart of this is the proclamation of the Gospel and an invitation to the whole world to embrace the Christian way of life. Though this task is the special responsibility of the ordained

clergy, the laity are nevertheless called to join in. The Council Fathers acknowledged that lay people have countless opportunities of spreading the Good news because “the very witness of a Christian life, and works done in a supernatural spirit, are effective means drawing men to the faith and to God.”¹¹

Secondly, the laity are to aim at the renewal of the whole temporal order which is made up of “personal and family values, culture, economic interests, the trades and professions, institution of political community, international relations, and so on, as well as their gradual development... .”¹² Though the whole structure of the temporal order was good, the inherent goodness has now become tarnished. This is because, as a result of original sin, human nature became corrupted, followed by principles of morality, ideas about God, and human institutions. The council asked the laity to renew the temporal order in such a way that while fully respecting its own principles, it has to be brought into conformity with the principles of the Gospel and adapted to suit the diverse of times, places and people.¹³

The third object of the lay apostolate is the carrying out of works of charity with the aim of bringing effective help to individuals and nations that are in need. The Councils' Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, listed several fields for the exercise of this apostolate but since *Christifideles Laici* is the most complete, comprehensive and most up-to-date magisterial teaching on this subject, the fields will be discussed when the aforesaid document is considered.

THE MISSION OF THE LAITY IN THE TEMPORAL ORDER: THE INSIGHTS OF *CHRISTIFIDELES LAICI*

One of the innovations of the pontificate of John Paul II is the Synod of Bishops, which has become a regular feature aimed on enhancing collegiality between the Successor of Peter and his brother bishops, the successors of the Apostolate. The 1987 Synod was convened to discuss “the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World”. As is customary, the thoughts of the Synod fathers were

summed up in the post Synodal Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, which was issued by the Pontiff on December 30th, 1988.

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-7) provides the locus on which the Pope based his reflection. In order of precedence, the clergy are first to be invited to work in the Lord's vineyard, followed sequentially by the religious and member of institutes of consecrated life. The laity then are those who are called in at the last hour, since in their own words, "because no one has hired us" (vs.7). In the Exhortation, the Pope aimed "to stir and promote a deeper awareness among all the faithful of the gift and responsibility they share, both as a group and as individuals, in the communion and mission of the Church."¹⁴ He acknowledged the growth of the laity in holiness that has manifested in increased participation and involvement in the liturgy and proclamation of the Gospel. Since it is their participation in the world that is the concern of this work, we will turn our attention to the relevant sections of the Exhortation that treat the subject.

The laity must be conscious of dangers they are to avoid in their relation and involvement with the world. On the one hand, they must not over involve themselves with the life of the Church to the neglect of their temporal obligations. On the other hand, there must be no dichotomy between what many consider being the spiritual life and the temporal. Many years after the sounding of this warning, Ehusani made an elaborate and pointed out the effects:

Christian life has been perceived by many as a matter of private piety, one's dealing with his or her God, while social action has been perceived by many belonging to the public sphere, that is, the realm of "politics", which should not be mixed with religion... . When Christianity is seen purely as a matter of private piety, it is possible for an employer to treat his or her workers like slaves, yet believe that he or she is a "good Christian", or a politician to convert public resources into his or her private estate and still consider himself or herself a pious Christian. Perhaps it is because of this failure to integrate social action with personal piety and religion came to be seen as the opium of the people... Yet Christianity does not promote social indifference. Instead, Christianity raises the consciousness of adherents to their responsibility for the creation of a better world in the service of the kingdom of God¹⁵.

It must be noted that the call for the laity to get involved in temporal affairs, which has been the consistent teaching of the Church, as contained in many magisterial documents, is an elaboration on Jesus' doctrine of the Kingdom.

In the our Lord's prayer the "Our Father", Jesus asked that we pray for the coming of the kingdom "Your Kingdom come, Your Will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Simply put, "the kingdom of God is a society upon earth where God's Will is as perfectly done as it is in heaven."¹⁶ Since, the human will from which men's actions spring is in conformity with the Will of God, the end result should be a society characterized by justice, love and peace. The fact that we, assisted by divine grace, who are to bring this kingdom to reality is made clear in Jesus' parables of the kingdom and especially in the parable of mustard seed (cf. Matt. 13:31-32). J.C. Murray comments thus:

Most scripture scholars point out the contrast, evident in the parable between humble beginnings and abundant harvest indicates two stages of the one and the same kingdom. One, the initiation made by Christ and two, the consummation in the inevitable coming of the future kingdom. ...The parables of the kingdom become intelligible only when we admit the distinction between a present and a future stage of the kingdom of God. One stage is established in mercy in the present and a future stage of the kingdom of God. One stage is established in mercy in the by the Son of Man, who has come into this world and continues to live in it by the Holy Spirit whom He has sent from the Father. The other stage is certain to come, but uncertain as regards when. This stage is characterized by a final judgement on the members of the kingdom before Christ delivers this perfect kingdom of God the Father.¹⁷

Since we are members of this kingdom, we are to transform the earthly city by bringing our personal 'goods' to conform to the common good and where necessary, to rid the world of all evils. Has that been done? We don't think so. It is due to the situation in the world of today that has made the involvement of the laity in the secular order an urgent necessity. Though the world has ever been under threat from negative forces contrary to the intentions of the Creator, there are conflicting trends today such as a galloping secularism and yet increasing need for God and established religion, the degradation of human dignity in some parts of the

world and its exaltation in others etc. It is in the midst of these trends that the Exhortation presented Jesus Christ who is the answer to humanity's problems which the entire Church, the laity inclusive, are to proclaim and witness to. The Vocation of the laity is therefore set on strong "Christological, Ecclesial and Existential foundation". The distinctive feature of the laity is the fact that they have the world as the theatre for the living out of their Christian vocation. Though in baptism Christians participate in the three fold offices of Christ, the Priest, Prophet and King, they fulfill the obligation that flow from this sharing in a sphere quite different from those in the ordained ministry.

The world, which distinguishes the secular character of the identity of the laity, needs to be properly understood. The world should never be considered as evil or sinful in itself: at the completion of its creation, God saw that it was good. However humanity's sinful use of the good things God has made has necessitated its redemption it has to be recorded towards fulfilling the purpose, which God has at its creation. It is in the above light that we understand the Pope's statement that the laity's engagement in secular affairs is more than "an anthropological and sociological reality". Much more than that, it is "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'.¹⁸

SPECIFIC AREAS FOR LAY ENGAGEMENT

The Family: In obedience to the Lord's commands to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth, there has evolved the family which the Exhortation calls "the basic cell of society."¹⁹ The coming together of man and woman with a corresponding willingness to accept children from God has made the family a most strategic human institution. Apart from being the Domestic Church as the Church has consistently emphasised, the family is also vital to society at large. The Second Vatican Council taught that: 'the family is the first school of the virtues which every society needs... It is through the

family that they (children) are gradually introduced into civic partnership with their fellow human beings, and into the people of God.”¹⁹ Consequently, the laity so as to ensure its well being and progress should show concern. This entails the protection of the family from all that affects its continuance such as materialism, individualism, sexism, violence, contraceptives and abortion. This is because, “the future of humanity passes by way of the family.”²⁰

Charity: At the heart of the Christian life is the virtue of charity towards our neighbour, which necessarily must flow from our love of God. It is inspired by a sincere desire to relieve the suffering of other and manifested in works of mercy. Aside from the individual acts of love, the American Bishops have added a social dimension to it. Thus Jesus called His followers to

feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and afflicted and to comfort the victims of injustice (Mt 25). His example and words require understanding and action upon the broader dimensions of poverty, hunger and injustice which necessarily involve the institution and structure of economy, society and politics.²¹

Public Life: “The Church regards as worthy of praise and consideration the work of those who, as a service to others, dedicate themselves to the public good of the state and undertake the burdens of this task.”²² The above statement offers great encouragement to those who are engaged in the public service. That has to borne out of the realisation that involvement in the government offers great opportunities for influencing the decision-making process in favour of the common good. Unfortunately, H. Okeke has observed that many lay faithful have been enslaved by the gods of public life with the result that they end up worshipping their career and power and fall prey to the society sins of corruption, mismanagement etc.²³ Since the Christian is to be the leaven of society, engagement in public life should be aimed at realising the common good, the reform of all structures that enshrine injustice, racism, marginalisation and all negative forces that hinder the full development of all peoples. The same principles outlines above are also relevant for those involved

socio-economic activities. Here, the goal should be the elimination of poverty, unemployment and unjust working conditions. The universal destination of earthly goods should form the basis of all acts of production, distribution and consumption. This is the reason: "in his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately owns not merely as exclusively to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself."²⁴

Ecology: Humanity need to be awakened to the dangers it faces from destruction of the ecology. That human activities have an impact on the environment cannot be disputed. However the error of many is to accept that the environmental hazards of say, air and water pollution, are necessarily evil consequences of increased advances made in science and technology and development. However, John Paul II has rejected this error because the use and abuse of environmental resources are moral issues: "A true concept of development cannot ignore the use of things of nature, the renewability of resources and the consequences of haphazard industrialization- three consideration which alert our consciences to the moral dimension of development"²⁵ In a document released on World Day of Peace in 1990 titled: The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility: John Paul II suggested specific solutions for solving the present environmental crises. Men and women must rediscover respect for the harmonious ordering of the universe; eliminate inequalities in the share of the earth's resources etc. Problems of widespread poverty, unjust distribution of lands, dislocation of peoples must be urgently addressed. The Pope asked Christians, especially Catholics in government to regard with all seriousness their obligation to care for the earth, not only for the sake of this generation, but also for those to come.

Culture: The Second Vatican Council used the word culture to refer "to all those things which go to the refining and development of man's diverse mental and physical endowment."²⁶ It is the means by which he strives to subdue the whole of creation, to

humanise his entire social life through the improvement of customs. Through culture, he is able to give expression to his experiences and aspirations and to communicate and preserve them with the aim of inspiring the progress of peoples. Since man is the author of culture, he can also be its destroyer and may even subvert its purpose. In this era of efficient system of communications and globalization, otherwise traditionally healthy cultures are undergoing rapid changes being heavily influenced by the values of the West. A good example is the current trends in Asia, a continent similar to ours. In the Exhortation released on November 9, 1999 in New Delhi, after the Synod for Asia, the Pope pointed out that due to the modern means of communications, cultural globalisation is fast drawing Asian societies into secularism and materialism. Consequently, traditional family and social values that have shaped whole generation haven eroded.²⁷

It is the responsibility of the laity to carry out a thorough evangelism of human cultures so that, influenced by the Gospel, societal values and criteria of judgement, aspirations, attitudes and all constituents of culture will conform to God's Salvific plan as revealed in the Bible. Towards this, there must be responsible use of the means of social communications.

EVALUATION

The greatest discovery of our generation says, William James is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitude of mind.²⁸ Thus, in corroborating the above reality, Mahatma Ghandi succinctly states: "a man is but the product of his thought; what he thinks, that he becomes" what the two statements above mean is that we naturally act from what we believe in and hold to be true.

In Nigeria generally, lack of job security has caused many people to look at the public service as an avenue for having ones share of the national cake since the possibility of remaining in an office for a reasonable period is not here. With such a notion in the mind, talk of courageously bearing witness to Christian values of hard work, selflessness, and honesty will make no meaning to such a one. The first step

towards effective witnessing in Nigeria is a change of notions and attitudes. For instance, what is your thinking about politics? Do you see it as dirty game or a noble vocation that should be embraced by all? If the first view is an expression of your notion of politics, then that is the more reason why you are called to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ. By venturing into politics, guided by a Christian conscience and in conformity with its values and more specifically, we present the fruits of the spiritual, intellectual and moral heritage of Catholicism to the modern society. However, the Church cautions that the citizens are obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of the civil authorities when they are contrary to the spirit of Gospel.

Political indifference or nonchalant attitude on the part of Christians will only result in the election of individuals whose religions or political ideologies may not favour freedom of worship. If for instance Pope Gregory VII [1073-1085], was indifferent to the political affairs of his time, and consequently refused to embark on the crusade [1096-1270], Christianity would likely not have survived the devastating onslaught of the Turks, Arabs and Muslims. Thus at any point in time, we are all called to actively participate in politics the way Christ would have done if he was physically around. Whether we like it or not, we are either directly or indirectly affected by the activities of the government. All Christians share in the sacred mission of sanitizing the national polity. For those who have gone into it, from corruption scandals, especially in the National Assembly and the poor state of the nation's infrastructure are pointers that many Christians who venture into politics do so with impure intentions. Since the Code of Canon Law expressly forbid the participation of the clergy in partisan politics,³⁰ the laity's obligations as outlined in the Post Synodal Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici* assume a higher seriousness. This is because,

Obviously, the layman is that hand of the Church which holds the values of the temporal, secular order: and if the Church is destined to Christians the world, to gather it under one Head, Christ, this the hand holds the destiny and mission of the Church in a very vital way within its grasp.³¹

CONCLUSION

The call for the Christian testimony in the polis does not mean everyone aspiring to be government, senators or even presidents of their country. It simply means taking active part in the affairs of one's country. This can be best done in the way we live our lives as Christians. It is the duty of citizens to work hand in hand with the civil authority to common good of the society in a spirit of truth, justice, solidarity and freedom.

Suffice it to mentioning that it is a *per se nota datum* that questions of politics easily trouble many Nigeria Christians as is the case of self defense in times of Sharia riots. This is largely due to the many wrong conceptions many Nigerians have about the political process occasioned by the bad example of those who have been involved in it in the past. As a result of thuggery, defamation of character, rigging of elections and assassinations, politics is seen by many as "dirty game by dirty players and referees." In such an atmosphere, the cautious Catholic wonders whether he will be able to change the system-reorder it to be at the service of the common good.

The above can never be accepted as a justification of indifference. Thus as Christians, we should not fall into the sin of omission by folding our arms and looking at our fatherland being mismanaged. If you cannot change the system, then help in bringing in those who can do so. At least you can vote to the right person during elections.

Endnotes

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31. Cf. Can. 285
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