

COUNCIL OF THE LAITY OF THE PHILIPPINES FIRST NATIONAL CONVENTION OPENING ADDRESS

By

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In November 1965 the Council Fathers recalled with profound gratitude and joy that "more than a few decades ago the laity in many nations began to dedicate themselves increasingly to the apostolate." This increasing dedication to the laity to the apostolate according to the Council Fathers "received the title "Catholic Action" and it was very often described as involving the collaboration of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy." The Council Fathers also recalled that "certain forms of the apostolate of the laity are given explicit recognition by the hierarchy, though in various ways," and that "this procedure of the hierarchy is called a mandate." They declared these in the Magna Charta of the apostolate of the laity, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, (Apostolican Actuositatem) where precisely they sounded the clear unequivocal call for the laity to take their own proper role in the mission of the Church not as something mandated by the hierarchy but as something deriving from God himself. "The laity," they declared solemnly, "derive their right and duty with respect to the apostolate from their union with Christ their Head. Incorporated with Christ's Mystical Body through baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself". (A.A. 3; L.G. 33)

This clear departure from the prevailing understanding of the lay apostolate which limited its membership to organizations recognized as such by the hierarchy and its extension to every member of the Mystical Body of Christ, has been echoed in our local Church when only year ago, we adopted as convention theme "Every Christian an Apostle". This theme was the crystallization of a feeling that has been with us since Vatican II. Today, there remains no doubt whatsoever that "the right and duty to exercise the apostolate is a common to all the faithful, both clergy

and the laity and that the laity also have their proper roles in building up the Church" (A.A. 25), that "the Church can never be without it (layman's apostolate)" A.A. 1) and that it pertains to absolutely every Christian (L.G. 33).

The Lay Apostolate during Apostolic Times

Placing the Lay Apostolate in its proper theological and historical perspective, the Council Fathers speaking through the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity declare "how spontaneous and fruitful such activity (lay apostolate) was at the very beginning of the Church." Indeed, no one can read carefully and meaningfully the Acts of the Apostles without visualizing the early Christians giving witness to their faith to the extent of being persecuted and condemned because of their witnessing to Christ, helping as teachers and even as prophets of the Good News and the Way aside from helping the apostles and the others on whom the apostles have laid their hands in ordination. When persecution compelled the early christians to flee to other places, these areas became their area of apostolic activity preaching Christ and witnessing to Christ by their exemplary life. Their assemblies for singing psalms, prayers and breaking of the bread, and the love that bound them so closely to each other became a light that for the pagans who were initiated into the knowledge of Christ and his salvation.

The same impression is gathered from reading the letters of St. Paul. One can almost feel and hear the unceasing activities of the early christians, the collaborators of the apostles, as they went to every known place to bring the Good News to all men. Isn't it amazing, almost miraculous, that in less than thirty years the whole mediterranean area including the imperial household in Rome and even as far as Spain there were already christians living intimate community life, celebrating the eucharistic assemblies and giving to the world a new way of life where love was the basic observance? What meaning can we give to the collections made in some christian communities in order to send them where was need for such help? Among the early christians, preaching the good news, worshipping together and serving one another both as individuals and as communities were common practices already.

The Pre-Vatican II Structures of the Apostolate of the Laity

This intense apostolic activity of the early christians in the mission of the church began to subside when the Church became the Church of the christian empire. A situation gradually deve-

loped where the lay apostolate gradually became the exclusive right of a few particularly those in the christian government. It became the duty of the christian kings and emperors to defend the Church and conquer lands and peoples for the Faith. It was only when the Church came under attack we might say from within through internal divisions, heresies and schisms and a general secularization emerged isolating christians from the Church that laymen began to act and move in defense of the Church. Lay action and involvement began again to take shape in the XIX century and finally took definite form as Catholic Action during the Pontificate of Pius X. Pius XI gave it a clear and definite direction when the layman's activity in the Church was called the "participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy." Pius XII clarified more the nature and goals of catholic action" and by that time a search for the theology of the lay apostolate seriously took a firm hold in the church. During these times the prevailing idea was that catholic action was composed of the organizations approved and endorsed by the hierarchy in a given nation and coordinated on the diocesan and national levels. It therefore, indirectly excluded an immense majority of church members who were not members of mandated organizations. It also emphasized participation in the apostolate of the Hierarchy instead of a duty and right to participate in the mission of the Church by virtue of the layman's incorporation in that Mystical Body of Christ.

*The Vatican II Thrust on the Apostolate
of the Laity*

a) Every christian has the Right and Duty to be an Apostle.

The Decrees of Vatican II leave no doubt as to the right and duty of every christian to participate in the mission of the Church. (L.G. 33 ff; Const. on S. Lit. 26-33; Dec. on the Inst. of Social Comm.; Dec. on Ecumenism; Bishops Past. Office in the Church 16, 17 and 18; Dec. on Ch. Educ. Art. 3, 5 and 7; Missionary Activity of the Church, Art. 15, 21 and 41 and Apst. Actuositatem). As we mentioned above, the right and duty of every layman with respect to the Apostolate derives from his union with Christ the Head, and that he is assigned to the Apostolate by the Lord himself. The layman's duty and right to the apostolate rest squarely on the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. This is the layman's duty and right regardless of whether there are sufficient number of priests or not.

b) The apostolate of the Clergy and Laity are Different but Complementary.

In the Church we recognize unity of purpose or mission while we acknowledge diversity of service or ministry. Speaking of this A.A. 2 says: "Christ conferred on the apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying, and ruling in His name and power. But the laity, too, share in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own role to play in the mission of whole People of God in the Church and in the world." Since the mission of the Church involves not only salvation in Christ but the renewal of the whole temporal order the apostolate of the laity becomes indispensable precisely in this renewal of the world. Thus, their apostolate takes on a secular character because they live in the world and are responsible to order everything according to the spirit of the gospel.

The elements composing the temporal order have their own intrinsic values and follow their own rules and laws. Unless there are conscientious Christians there, these may withdraw from Christian ethical values creating therefore a culture where Christian values are not reflected, nay even ignored and contradicted. On this, the Council Fathers say: "Many elements make up the temporal order: namely, the good things of life and prosperity of the family, culture, economic affairs, the arts and professions, political institutions, international relations, and other matters of this kind, as well as their development and progress. All of these not only aid in the attainment of man's ultimate goal but also possess their own intrinsic value. This value has been implanted in them by God, whether they are considered in themselves or as parts of the whole temporal order". (A.A. 7) Penetrating these elements of the temporal order with the spirit of the gospel is the special task of the lay apostolate. Hence, the Council Fathers urge the laity to take on the renewal of the temporal order as their own "special obligation." That led by the light of the gospel and by the mind of the Church, and motivated by Christian love, they should act directly and definitely in the temporal sphere. This renewal must be accomplished in such a way that without the slightest detriment to its own proper laws, it can be brought into conformity with the higher principles of the Christian life and adapted to the shifting circumstances of time, place and culture. It is clear that this task cannot be accomplished except by those laymen who are living in these shifting circumstances, in these elements which have their own intrinsic value and governed by their own laws. The Church and her message can only be made present and audible in some situations through the laymen.

This is our challenge! How can we have 25,000,000 Catholics exclusive of children to renew the temporal order in our Philippine situation instead of the 1,000,000 more or less involved in the

different associations composing our organized apostolate of the Laity in the Philippines presently? Shall we do this by disbanding the present associations and starting a new mass movement that will open the entrance to the uninvolved millions? Or could we assume that the tested experience and proven loyalty of those now presently involved in the ranks of organized lay apostolate could be open to a new spirit and dynamism so that through them we can arouse a greater involvement of the greatest number of the laity? Whatever be the decision of this assembly, let us never forget that whether a catholic joins or not an organized apostolate, the testimony of a christian life as an individual, as a family man and as a member of civic groups remains as a duty and a right of every member of the church. It must be mentioned that the Church has always blessed these organizations and practical realism will dictate that we have not only national but international groups to act effectively.

*The Threefold Thrust of the Apostolate of the
Laity Today*

Following the orientation derived from the decrees of the Vatican Council and the implementing instructions emanating from the Holy See and from our Episcopal Conference, there has emerged from the local churches a threefold thrust in the apostolate of the Laity, to wit: Formation, Liturgy and Service. This thrust reflects the threefold office of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King which He conferred upon the apostles and their successors and therefore to the Church in which the lay apostolate share. It also reflects the three main components of christian life, namely to know God, worship Him and serve Him by following His basis commandment to love one another. Above all, this threefold thrust reflects the main goals of evangelization and mission of the Church. In this regard, Pope Paul VI declares in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 28; Consequently evangelization cannot but include the prophetic proclamation of a hereafter, man's preaching of hope in the promises made by God in the new Covenant in Jesus Christ, the preaching of God's love for us and of our love for God; the preaching of brotherly love for all men — the capacity of giving and forgiving, of self-denial, of helping one's brother and sister which springing from the love of God, is the kernel of the Gospel; the preaching of the mystery of evil and active search for good. The preaching likewise — and this is always urgent — of the search for God himself through prayer which is principally that of adoration and thanksgiving, but also through communion with the visible sign of the encounter with God which is the Church of Jesus Christ;

and this communion in its turn is expressed by the application of those other signs of Christ living and acting in the Church which are the sacraments."

I would legitimately presume, brother and sister collaborators in the Lay Apostolate, that as leaders in your respective dioceses, you have studied what the Episcopal Commission on the Apostolate of the Laity and your National Council have recommended as the structure of our lay apostolate on the parish, diocesan and national levels. This threefold thrust seems to us to be the most appropriate and fit today. The details relating to the categorization of association will be assigned to one group and work only in that group or whether the members of each association will be allowed to choose his or her own group according to his or her gifts and talents, this could be better left to workshops where through a fraternal sharing of experiences we can come to a consensus that could be a guideline for all. We must remember that new methods and structures usually lend themselves to conflicting reactions. So long as we have unity in the basic structures, diversity in details could be allowed to suit the needs and resources of every place. I fervently hope some consensus could be achieved in this convention.

In view of the progress of social institutions and fast moving phase of modern life, the national and global nature of the Church's mission requires forms at the national and international levels. We would be terribly handicapped and unable to meet national and international urgent issues if we do not have adequate national and international instrumentalities.

The Basic Christian Communities

It has been said that our apostolate of the laity as presently structured has tended to establish some kind of "elitism" within its ranks contrary to the communitarian communion of the Church. It is also generally felt that we have not reached the grassroots of our Christian communities, that we have not established basic christian communities.

Undoubtedly, if we are to be faithful to the orientation of Vatican II that the whole temporal order be renewed in the spirit of the gospel and that the gospel truth, justice and christian love become a leaven in our christian communities, we must face squarely this problem. Moreover, we cannot forget that our Lord himself made the preaching of the gospel to the poor as a special sign of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God on earth.

What are these christian communities? What are their characteristics? What are their goals and their relation to the Church?

The Last Synod of Bishops in 1974 devoted considerable attention to these basic communities or "comunidades de base". A wealth of information came from the bishops representing the whole world. According to the statements aired in the Synod such communities flourish more or less throughout the Church, particularly in South America. They differ greatly among themselves, both within the same region but more so from one region to another. In some regions they have appeared and developed within the Church, preserving solidarity with her life, nourished by the Bread of life, namely, the Word of God and the Holy Eucharist, and united with her pastors. In these cases, they have sprung from the need to live the Church's life more intensely or from the aspiration and search for a more human dimension which larger ecclesial communities can only offer with difficulty, especially in big modern cities where life in artificiality and anonymity. Their aim could be deepening of faith, meaningful worship, fraternal charity, prayer and sharing with each other their hopes and anxieties. They could be people living in small villages, or people already linked by age, culture, or profession, social situation: married couples, young people who already are united in their struggle for justice, brotherly aid to the poor, human development. They could be drawn to each other because of their dissatisfaction with the empty pleasures of the world and a fresh search for meaning in life. These elements may be intensified further by the lack of priests in remote communities.

In other regions, on the other hand, Comunidades de Base have appeared with a spirit of bitter criticism of the Church, which they disdainfully stigmatize as "institutional" to which they set themselves up as the Church of the people, charismatically led by the Spirit and free from any pastoral guidance from the institutional church. Constituted and oriented this way, this later kind of basic communities offers very little guarantee of remaining a truly christian community. Quiet often their inspiration becomes ideological and become instrument of not only of political options and currents of thought but even of political and ideological polarizations. These communities can hardly be called ecclesial communities even if and when they ironically claim to be basic christian communities and parts of the church.

Within the parish, which still remains as the basic ecclesial unit, the growth of these christian communities — whatever might characterize their group: whether neighborhood, profession, social status or common needs and goals — will be hope for the church if:

a) they seek their nourishment from the Bread of Life, namely, the Word of God and the Eucharist;

b) they retain their attachment to the local church thus preventing their isolation within themselves and therefore of condemning the other ecclesial communities;

c) they recognize the authority of their pastors and of the Magisterium;

d) they continuously aspire to grow in christian life and in the fulfillment of the law of love as the basis of more human relationships;

e) they should refuse to be drawn into political polarization and fashionable ideologies but rather maintain communion with the parish, diocesan, national and even international life of the apostolate. On these conditions, the christian communities will become truly the leaven of our ecclesial communities and from within work out the renewal of the whole temporal order.

*The Motu Proprio of Pope Paul VI
"Apostolatus Peragendi"*

On Dec. 10, 1976, Pope Paul VI issued "Apostolatus Peragendi" which established the Pontifical Council for the Laity on the level of a roman congregation for the service of the Supreme Pontiff and the Church. This replaced the "Consilium de Laicis" which was created on Jan. 6, 1967 experimentally and temporarily at the instance of Vatican II to promote the apostolate of Laity in the whole Church. After ten years of experiment and study it became obvious that the reasons for which the Council was set up have greatly increased, and the questions to be faced and resolved have become much more serious and widespread. Therefore, in the words of Pope Paul "we have decided to give this institution fruits of the Second Vatican Council, a new, definite and higher form". This confirms, if confirmation were really needed, what we have been saying here that the apostolate of the laity today has become much more urgent, truly indispensable for the fruitful achievement of the mission of the church.

A careful study of the structure of this Pontifical Council and the competence accorded to it and the expectations of the Holy Father from it, clearly indicates how much importance and urgency are given to the apostolate of the laity. The competence of this Council covers everything related to the apostolate of the laity in the Church and the discipline of the laity as. For this purpose the secretaries of several other congregations dealing with the lay

people has been attached to this Council as Ex-officio members. Supervisions of Pastoral Councils has been transferred from the S. Congregation of the Clergy to this Council for the Laity.

It is very significant that the Committee for the Family in Rome has been attached to this Council for the Laity, while keeping its own form and identity. This gives concrete reality to what pervades the whole thinking of the Vatican on the Apostolate of the Laity that the family is a very special and very crucial area of the lay apostolate. This clinches the conclusion that the battle for the family is not won in the realm of doctrine alone but in the realm of life, the life of the married couples themselves.

I feel that the lead given by Apostolatus Peragendi should be gradually reflected in our local church on the national level. A careful study of this Motu Proprio by the members of our Episcopal Conference will hopefully lead to appropriate adjustments in our structures.

Finally, fellow collaborators in our common apostolate, let us open ourselves totally to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He has been working in our midst through our christian communities which maintain communion with their pastors. While there are those specifically anointed by God to shepherd the whole flock of Christ, yet we believe that when we are gathered in His Name He joyfully abides in our midst.

In conclusion, allow me to borrow the exhortation of the Council Fathers: "This most sacred Council, then, entreats in the Lord that all laymen give a glad, generous, and prompt response to the voice of Christ, who is giving them an especially urgent invitation at this moment, and the impulse of the Holy Spirit. Younger people should feel that this call has been directed to them in particular, and they respond to it eagerly and magnanimously. Though this holy Synod, the Lord Himself renews His invitation to all the laity to come closer to His every day, and recognizing that what is His also their own (Phil. 2:5), to associate themselves with Him in His saving mission. Once again He sends them into every town and place where He Himself will come. Thus they can show that they are His co-workers in the various forms and methods of the Church's one apostolate which must be constantly adapted to the new needs of the times. May they always abound in the works of God, knowing they will not labor in vain when their labor is for Him".