

POST-SYNODAL  
APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION  
**CHRISTIFIDELES LAICI**  
OF  
HIS HOLINESS  
JOHN PAUL II  
ON THE VOCATION AND THE MISSION  
OF THE LAY FAITHFUL  
IN THE CHURCH AND IN THE WORLD

*To Bishops  
To Priests and Deacons  
To Women and Men Religious  
and to All the Lay Faithful*

## INTRODUCTION

1. THE LAY MEMBERS of Christ's Faithful People (*Christifideles Laici*), whose "Vocation and Mission in the Church and in the World Twenty Years after the Second Vatican Council" was the topic of the 1987 Synod of Bishops, are those who form that part of the People of God which might be likened to the labourers in the vineyard mentioned in Matthew's Gospel: "For the Kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard" (*Mt 20:1-2*).

The gospel parable sets before our eyes the Lord's vast vineyard and the multitude of persons, both women and men, who are called and sent forth by him to labour in it. The vineyard is the whole world (cf. *Mt 13:38*), which is to be transformed according to the plan of God in view of the final coming of the Kingdom of God.

### *You Go Into My Vineyard Too*

2. "And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too'" (*Mt 20:3-4*).

From that distant day the call of the Lord Jesus "You go into my vineyard too" never fails to resound in the course of history: it is addressed to every person who comes into this world.

In our times, the Church after Vatican II in a renewed outpouring of the Spirit of Pentecost has come to a more lively awareness of her missionary nature and has listened again to the voice of her Lord who sends her forth into the world as "the universal sacrament of salvation"(1).

*You go too.* The call is a concern not only of Pastors, clergy, and men and women religious. The call is addressed to everyone: lay people as well are personally called by the Lord, from whom they receive a mission on behalf of the Church and the world. In preaching to the people Saint Gregory the Great recalls this fact and comments on the parable of the labourers in the vineyard: "Keep watch over your manner of life, dear people, and make sure that you are indeed the Lord's labourers. Each person should take into account what he does and consider if he is labouring in the vineyard of the Lord"(2).

The Council, in particular, with its rich doctrinal, spiritual and pastoral patrimony, has written as never before on the nature, dignity, spirituality, mission and responsibility of the lay faithful. And the *Council Fathers*, re-

*echoing the call of Christ, have summoned all the lay faithful, both women and men, to labour in the vineyard:* "The Council, then, makes an earnest plea in the Lord's name that all lay people give a glad, generous, and prompt response to the impulse of the Holy Spirit and to the voice of Christ, who is giving them an especially urgent invitation at this moment. Young people should feel that this call is directed to them in particular, and they should respond to it eagerly and magnanimously. The Lord himself renews his invitation to all the lay faithful to come closer to him every day, and with the recognition that what is his is also their own (*Phil 2:5*) they ought to associate themselves with him in his saving mission. Once again he sends them into every town and place where he himself is to come (cf. *Lk 10:1*)"(3).

*You go into my vineyard too.* During the *Synod of Bishops*, held in Rome, 1-30 October 1987, these words were re-echoed in spirit once again. Following the path marked out by the Council and remaining open to the light of the experience of persons and communities from the whole Church, the Fathers, enriched by preceding Synods, treated in a specific and extensive manner the topic of the vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world.

In this assembly of bishops there was not lacking a qualified representation of the lay faithful, both women and men, which rendered a valuable contribution to the Synod proceedings. This was publicly acknowledged in the concluding homily: "We give thanks that during the course of the Synod we have not only rejoiced in the participation of the lay faithful (both men and women auditors), but even more so in that the progress of the Synodal discussions has enabled us to listen to those whom we invited, representatives of the lay faithful from all parts of the world, from different countries, and to profit from their experience, their advice and the suggestions they have offered out of love for the common cause"(4).

In looking over the years following the Council the Synod Fathers have been able to verify how the Holy Spirit continues to renew the youth of the Church and how he has inspired new aspirations towards holiness and the participation of so many lay faithful. This is witnessed, among other ways, in the new manner of active collaboration among priests, religious and the lay faithful; the active participation in the Liturgy, in the proclamation of the Word of God and catechesis; the multiplicity of services and tasks entrusted to the lay faithful and fulfilled by them; the flourishing of groups, associations and spiritual movements as well as a lay commitment in the life of the Church; and in the fuller and meaningful participation of women in the development of society.

At the same time, the Synod has pointed out that the post-conciliar path of the lay faithful has not been without its difficulties and dangers. In particular, two temptations can be cited which they have not always known how to avoid: the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world.

In the course of its work, the Synod made constant reference to the Second Vatican Council, whose teaching on the lay faithful, after twenty years, has taken on a surprisingly contemporary character and at times has carried prophetic significance: such teaching has the capacity of enlightening and guiding the responses that today must be given to new situations. In reality, the challenge embraced by the Synod Fathers has been that of indicating the concrete ways through which this rich "theory" on the lay state expressed by the Council can be translated into authentic Church "practice". Some situations have made themselves felt because of a certain "novelty" that they have, and in this sense they can be called post-conciliar, at least chronologically: to these the Synod Fathers have rightly given a particular attention in the course of their discussion and reflection. Among those situations to be recalled are those regarding the ministries and Church services entrusted at present and in the future to the lay faithful, the growth and spread of new "movements" alongside other group forms of lay involvement, and the place and role of women both in the Church and in society.

At the conclusion of their work, which proceeded with great commitment, competence and generosity, the Synod Fathers made known to me their desires and requested that at an opportune time, a conclusive papal document on the topic of the lay faithful be offered to the Universal Church(5).

This Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation intends to take into account all the richness of the Synod work, from the *Lineamenta* to the *Instrumentum Laboris*, from the introductory report, the presentations of individual bishops and lay persons to the summary reports after discussion in the Synod hall, from the discussions and reports of the "small groups" to the final "Propositions" and the concluding "Message". For this reason the present document is not something in contradistinction to the Synod, but is meant to be a faithful and coherent expression of it, a fruit of collegiality. As such, the Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops and the Secretariat itself have contributed to its final form.

This Exhortation intends 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.

### ***The Pressing Needs of the World Today: "Why do you stand here idle all day?"***

3. The basic meaning of this Synod and the most precious fruit desired as a result of it, is the *lay faithful's hearkening to the call of Christ the Lord to work in his vineyard*, to take an active, conscientious and responsible part in the mission of the Church *in this great moment in history*, made especially dramatic by occurring on the threshold of the Third Millennium.

A new state of affairs today both in the Church and in social, economic, political and cultural life, calls with a particular urgency for the action of the lay faithful. If lack of commitment is always unacceptable, the present time renders it even more so. *It is not permissible for anyone to remain idle.*

We continue in our reading of the gospel parable: "And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?'. They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us'. He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too'" (Mt 20:6-7).

Since the work that awaits everyone in the vineyard of the Lord is so great there is no place for idleness. With even greater urgency the "householder" repeats his invitation: "You go into my vineyard too".

The voice of the Lord clearly resounds in the depths of each of Christ's followers, who through faith and the sacraments of Christian initiation is made like to Jesus Christ, is incorporated as a living member in the Church and has an active part in her mission of salvation. The voice of the Lord also comes to be heard through the historic events of the Church and humanity, as the Council reminds us: "The People of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord, who fills the whole world. Moved by this faith it tries to discern authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the events, the needs, and the longings which it shares with other people of our time. For faith throws a new light on all things and makes known the full ideal to which God has called each individual, and thus guides the mind towards solutions which are fully human"(6).

It is necessary, then, to keep a watchful eye on this our world, with its problems and values, its unrest and hopes, its defeats and triumphs: a world whose economic, social, political and cultural affairs pose problems and grave difficulties in light of the description provided by the Council in the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*.(7) *This*, then, is the vineyard; *this* is the field in which the faithful are called to fulfill their mission. Jesus wants them, as he wants all his disciples, to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (cf. Mt 5:13-14). But what is the *actual state of affairs* of the "earth" and the "world", for which Christians ought to be "salt" and "light"?

The variety of situations and problems that exist in our world is indeed great and rapidly changing. For this reason it is all the more necessary to guard against generalizations and unwarranted simplifications. It is

possible, however, to highlight *some trends that are emerging in present-day society*. The gospel records that the weeds and the good grain grew together in the farmer's field. The same is true in history, where in everyday life there often exist contradictions in the exercise of human freedom, where there is found, side by side and at times closely intertwined, evil and good, injustice and justice, anguish and hope.

### ***The Lay Faithful and Their Secular Character***

15. The newness of the Christian life is the foundation and title for equality among all the baptized in Christ, for all the members of the People of God: "As members, they share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ, they have the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection. They possess in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity"(28). Because of the one dignity flowing from Baptism, each member of the lay faithful, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility for the Church's mission.

But among the lay faithful this one baptismal dignity takes on *a manner of life which sets a person apart, without, however, bringing about a separation* from the ministerial priesthood or from men and women religious. The Second Vatican Council has described this manner of life as the "secular character": "The secular character is properly and particularly that of the lay faithful"(29).

To understand properly the lay faithful's position in the Church in a complete, adequate and specific manner it is necessary to come to a deeper theological understanding of their secular character in light of God's plan of salvation and in the context of the mystery of the Church.

Pope Paul VI said the Church "has an authentic secular dimension, inherent to her inner nature and mission, which is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Word Incarnate, and which is realized in different forms through her members"(30).

The Church, in fact, lives in the world, even if she is not of the world (cf. *Jn 17:16*). She is sent to continue the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which "by its very nature concerns the salvation of humanity, and also involves the renewal of the whole temporal order"(31).

Certainly *all the members* of the Church are sharers in this secular dimension but *in different ways*. In particular the sharing of the *lay faithful* has its own manner of realization and function, which, according to the Council, is "properly and particularly" theirs. Such a manner is designated with the expression "secular character"(32).

In fact the Council, in describing the lay faithful's situation in the secular world, points to it above all, as the place in which they receive their call from God: "There they are called by God"(33). This "place" is treated and presented in dynamic terms: the lay faithful "live in the world, that is, in every one of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very fabric of their existence is woven"(34). They are persons who live an ordinary life in the world: they study, they work, they form relationships as friends, professionals, members of society, cultures, etc. However, the Council considers their condition not simply an external and environmental framework, but as a reality *destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of its meaning*(35). Indeed it leads to the affirmation that "the Word made flesh willed to share in human fellowship ... He sanctified those human ties, especially family ones, from which social relationships arise, willingly submitting himself to the laws of his country. He chose to lead the life of an ordinary craftsman of his own time and place"(36).

*The "world" thus becomes the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation*, because the world itself is destined to glorify God the Father in Christ. The Council is able then to indicate the proper and special sense of the divine vocation which is directed to the lay faithful. They are not called to abandon the position that they have in the world. Baptism does not take them from the world at all, as the apostle Paul points out: "So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God" (*1 Cor 7:24*). On the

contrary, he entrusts a vocation to them that properly concerns their situation in the world. The lay faithful, in fact, "are called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the Gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially in this way of life, resplendent in faith, hope and charity they manifest Christ to others"(37). Thus for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well. In fact, in their situation in the world God manifests his plan and communicates to them their particular vocation of "seeking the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God"(38).

Precisely with this in mind the Synod Fathers said: "The secular character of the lay faithful is not therefore to be defined only in a sociological sense, but most especially in a theological sense. The term *secular* must be understood in light of the act of God the creator and redeemer, who has handed over the world to women and men, so that they may participate in the work of creation, free creation from the influence of sin and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in a family, in a profession and in the various activities of society"(39).

The lay faithful's *position in the Church*, then, comes to be fundamentally defined by their *newness in Christian life* and distinguished by their *secular character*(40).

The images taken from the gospel of salt, light and leaven, although indiscriminately applicable to all Jesus' disciples, are specifically applied to the lay faithful. They are particularly meaningful images because they speak not only of the deep involvement and the full participation of the lay faithful in the affairs of the earth, the world and the human community, but also and above all, they tell of the radical newness and unique character of an involvement and participation which has as its purpose the spreading of the Gospel that brings salvation.

### ***Called to Holiness***

16. We come to a full sense of the dignity of the lay faithful if we consider *the prime and fundamental vocation* that the Father assigns to each of them in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit: the vocation to holiness, that is, the perfection of charity. Holiness is the greatest testimony of the dignity conferred on a disciple of Christ.

The Second Vatican Council has significantly spoken on the universal call to holiness. It is possible to say that this call to holiness is precisely the basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the gospel(41). This charge is not a simple moral exhortation, but an *undeniable requirement arising from the mystery of the Church: she is the choice vine*, whose branches live and grow with the same holy and life-giving energies that come from Christ; she is the Mystical Body, whose members share in the same life of holiness of the Head who is Christ; she is the Beloved Spouse of the Lord Jesus, who delivered himself up for her sanctification (cf. *Eph 5:25 ff.*). The Spirit that sanctified the human nature of Jesus in Mary's virginal womb (cf. *Lk 1:35*) is the same Spirit that is abiding and working in the Church to communicate to her the holiness of the Son of God made man.

It is ever more urgent that today all Christians take up again the way of gospel renewal, welcoming in a spirit of generosity the invitation expressed by the apostle Peter "to be holy in all conduct" (*1 Pt 1:15*). The 1985 Extraordinary Synod, twenty years after the Council, opportunely insisted on this urgency: "Since the Church in Christ is a mystery, she ought to be considered the sign and instrument of holiness... Men and women saints have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult circumstances in the Church's history. Today we have the greatest need of saints whom we must assiduously beg God to raise up"(42).

Everyone in the Church, precisely because they are members, receive and thereby share in the common vocation to holiness. In the fullness of this title and on equal par with all other members of the Church, the lay faithful are called to holiness: "All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of

Christian life and to the perfection of charity"(43). "All of Christ's followers are invited and bound to pursue holiness and the perfect fulfillment of their own state of life"(44).

The call to holiness is *rooted in Baptism* and proposed anew in the other Sacraments, principally in the *Eucharist*. Since Christians are re clothed in Christ Jesus and refreshed by his Spirit, they are "holy". They therefore have the ability to manifest this holiness and the responsibility to bear witness to it in all that they do. The apostle Paul never tires of admonishing all Christians to live "as is fitting among saints" (*Eph 5:3*).

Life according to the Spirit, whose fruit is holiness (cf. *Rom 6:22;Gal 5:22*), stirs up every baptized person and requires each to *follow and imitate Jesus Christ*, in embracing the Beatitudes, in listening and meditating on the Word of God, in conscious and active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, in personal prayer, in family or in community, in the hunger and thirst for justice, in the practice of the commandment of love in all circumstances of life and service to the brethren, especially the least, the poor and the suffering.

### ***The Life of Holiness in the World***

17. The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their *involvement in temporal affairs* and in their *participation in earthly activities*. Once again the apostle admonishes us: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (*Col 3:17*). Applying the apostle's words to the lay faithful, the Council categorically affirms: "Neither family concerns nor other secular affairs should be excluded from their religious programme of life"(45). Likewise the Synod Fathers have said: "The unity of life of the lay faithful is of the greatest importance: indeed they must be sanctified in everyday professional and social life. Therefore, to respond to their vocation, the lay faithful must see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ"(46).

The vocation to holiness must be recognized and lived by the lay faithful, first of all as an undeniable and demanding obligation and as a shining example of the infinite love of the Father that has regenerated them in his own life of holiness. Such a vocation, then, ought to be called an *essential and inseparable element of the new life of Baptism*, and therefore an element which determines their dignity. At the same time the vocation to holiness is *intimately connected to mission* and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful in the Church and in the world. In fact, that same holiness which is derived simply from their participation in the Church's holiness, represents their first and fundamental contribution to the building of the Church herself, who is the "Communion of Saints". The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring labourers who work in the Lord's vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God's grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history.

Holiness, then, must be called a fundamental presupposition and an irreplaceable condition for everyone in fulfilling the mission of salvation within the Church. The Church's holiness is the hidden source and the infallible measure of the works of the apostolate and of the missionary effort. Only in the measure that the Church, Christ's Spouse, is loved by him and she, in turn, loves him, does she become a mother fruitful in the Spirit.

Again we take up the image from the gospel: the fruitfulness and the growth of the branches depends on their remaining united to the vine. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (*Jn 15:4-5*).

It is appropriate to recall here the solemn proclamation of beatification and canonization of lay men and women which took place during the month of the Synod. The entire People of God, and the lay faithful in particular, can find at this moment new models of holiness and new witnesses of heroic virtue lived in the ordinary everyday circumstances of human existence. The Synod Fathers have said: "Particular Churches especially should be attentive to recognizing among their members the younger men and women of those Churches who have given witness to holiness in such conditions (everyday secular conditions and the conjugal state) and who can be an example for others, so that, if the case calls for it, they (the Churches) might propose them to be beatified and canonized"(47).

At the end of these reflections intended to define the lay faithful's position in the Church, the celebrated admonition of Saint Leo the Great comes to mind: "Acknowledge, O Christian, your dignity!"(48). Saint Maximus, Bishop of Turin, in addressing those who had received the holy anointing of Baptism, repeats the same sentiments: "Ponder the honor that has made you sharers in this mystery!"(49). All the baptized are invited to hear once again the words of Saint Augustine: "Let us rejoice and give thanks: we have not only become Christians, but Christ himself... Stand in awe and rejoice: We have become Christ"(50).

The dignity as a Christian, the source of equality for all members of the Church, guarantees and fosters the spirit of *communion* and fellowship, and, at the same time, becomes the hidden dynamic force in the lay faithful's apostolate and mission. It is a *dignity*, however, *which brings demands*, the dignity of labourers called by the Lord to work in his vineyard: "Upon all the lay faithful, then, rests the exalted duty of working to assure that each day the divine plan of salvation is further extended to every person, of every era, in every part of the earth"(51).