

The Role and Goal of Lay People in the Evangelical Work of the Church in China

Wu Ruocao, Yu Zhiqin

1. The Identity of the Lay Person in the Church

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (*Matt. 28:19*) This is Christ’s calling for all members of the Church, and we should generously respond to His call. “You are the salt of the earth ... the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” (*Matt. 5:13-14*) This is an order from Christ and we should respond with concrete actions. As the People of God, not only should we be concerned about the development of the Church and the salvation of mankind, but we should work hard for the preaching of the Gospel and the glory of God.

When God created the world, He appointed man as the steward of all the earth. For this reason, lay people play an important and indispensable role in the salvific mission. God’s love needs to be known; the Gospel needs to be promulgated. For the sake of man’s salvation and the completion of Christ’s salvific work, God continuously calls those who need Him and whom He needs. In our contemporary society, it is every lay person’s mission to realize the value of human life in his or her profession. Therefore, lay people should assist pastors, who are leaders of the Church, in their work of promoting peace and progress in the world. In this way, they participate in the Kingdom of Christ and in the glory of the Father.

A correct understanding of the laity should be promoted among different levels of the Church. The convening of the Second Vatican Council, together with its liturgical reforms, awakened the Church and opened its door toward the modern world. The publication of the Council documents laid the foundation for the development of the Church and its global influence. In these documents, the Church puts emphasis on the identity of the laity as

the children of God. Their responsibility and mission are three-fold: (1) priesthood, which is reflected in their participation in the various liturgies; (2) prophet, which is shown in their evangelical work; and (3) kingship, which is their role in the family and society. Since then, lay people have cultivated a greater awareness of their important position in the Church. They are the masters and members of one big family, and each of them should contribute to, or even sacrifice for, the Church.

2. Who are Lay People? — Their Identity and Mission

The word “laity” comes from the Spanish word “laico.” In some Church documents, it is used to refer to what we usually call “Catholics.” The word “laity” has a negative connotation in many languages; for example, English uses the phrase “to speak in layman’s terms.” In Chinese, it means “ordinary believers” who are not members of the clergy or religious orders. These concepts or definitions sound rather negative. At the Second Vatican Council, there was a thorough discussion on the concept of the laity. However, the Council Fathers did not provide a concrete definition of the term, and discussion on the identity and mission of laity stayed at the descriptive level.

“The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.” Such is the description of “laity” in No. 31 of *Lumen Gentium*. In this citation, the word “sharers” shows the proactivity of lay people. They actively participate in the priesthood, prophetic office and kingship of Christ. From this, we can see that lay people, being the “frontiers” of the Church, consider the Church as the source of encouragement for human society. The laity not only belong to the Church. They are the Church, since the Church is made up of all the People of God who become its members through baptism.

What characterizes the laity is that they live “in the secular world.” Though they are occupied by the concerns of everyday life, God calls them to put into practice the spirit of Christ and, like yeast in society, preach the Good News in the world. The word “secular” does not mean “profane,” nor does it refer to something degrading. “Secular ministry” and “Church ministry” are simply two different roles in the Church. They represent two ways of service that do not necessarily contradict each other. The Bible points out to us that God’s presence and His grace can be found in both the holy and the secular. (*Col. 1:16*)

The *Code of Canon Law* of 1983 emphasizes right at the beginning that lay people are first of all Christians, just like all other members of the Church. It points out specifically: “Those baptized are fully in the communion of the Catholic Church on this earth who are joined with Christ in its visible structure by the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical governance.” (*Canon 205*) The purpose of calling all Christians outside the clergy as “lay people” is simply to draw a distinction between their offices. The clergy have the authority to carry out ministries that other Church members cannot perform. The difference between the two lies in their identities. However, as the People of God, lay people and clergy are equal in status. They receive the same baptism and profess the same faith, so neither of them is more prominent than the other. It was mentioned at the Second Vatican Council that the laity are not the “opposite” of the clergy, but both are Christians having the same rights and bearing the same responsibilities. Given their special calling and charisma, lay people fulfill their roles in different ministries of the Church. (*1 Cor. 7:7, 12:4-30*) In the Church today, lay people are serving in different ministries and some of them are theologians. Lay Christian communities flourish in different places. It is also said in *Lumen Gentium* that “...the laity have Christ for their brothers ... They also have for their brothers those in the sacred ministry...” (*LG 32*) From this, we can see that members of the different hierarchical levels of the Church are one big family in Christ.

Since the beginning of the world, God has been calling us through different ways. (*Heb. 1:1*) “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (*Matt. 5:48*) Holiness is the

goal that the Lord Jesus commands every lay member of the Church to strive for. (*Christifideles Laici*, 16) It is said in *Lumen Gentium* that “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.” (*LG 40*) The vocation of lay people is to seek the kingdom of God, and to perform their duties according to God’s plan. Therefore, the Church depends on the laity to administer to the affairs that concern them, so that in such matters the will of Christ may be done, and the glory of the Creator and Savior may be manifested.

Lay people are called to be “workers” in God’s vineyard. (*Matt. 20:4*) Though they may be the “late comers,” they bear the same responsibility and have the same mission in the Church as the clergy. On the other hand, the Church recognizes and acknowledges their identity as the laity. Through baptism, they participate in the threefold office of Christ, and through their profession of faith and participation in the sacraments, they remain in the Church in which Christ is the centre and submit themselves to the administration of the Church.

3. The Evangelical Mission of Lay Christian Communities in the Church of China

One major achievement of the Second Vatican Council is the flourishing of lay Christian communities. Many young and enthusiastic Christians are willing to serve the Church as dedicated lay people. Inspired by their different charismatic gifts, these lay Christian communities and movements assist the local pastors in the Church’s evangelical mission.

“Secular Institutes, although not Religious institutes, involve a true and full profession of the evangelical counsels in the world. This profession is recognized by the Church and consecrates to God men and women, lay and clerical, who live in the world. Hence they should make a total dedication of themselves to God in perfect charity their chief aim, and the institutes themselves should preserve their own proper, i.e., secular character, so that they may be able to carry out effectively everywhere in and, as it were, from the world the apostolate for which they were founded.” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 11)

These communities seek the perfection of charity while living in the secular world. They try to sanctify the world and, in particular, seek holiness from within. They do not change their identity as lay people due to their dedication, but they observe the rules of the dedicated religious life. They express their dedication in their evangelical activities. Just like yeast in society, they infuse the spirit of the Gospel into their daily-life matters, and thereby help to develop and strengthen the Mystical Body of Christ. Lay people participate in the evangelical ministry of the Church both in and through the secular world. They give witness to Christ through their Christian lives and dedication. In their respective professions, they administer to daily-life events according to God's will. In this way, they help transform the world through the Gospel and serve the Church according to their circumstances.

Currently, lay Christian communities in the Church include Focolare, Neocatechumenal Way, Opus Dei, Sacred Heart of Jesus, Grupo Claraeulalias, Home of Charity, etc. With members coming from all walks of life and serving in different sectors of modern society, these communities play a significant role in the missionary activities of the Church.

4. Introduction to Grupo Claraeulalias of Fuzhou Diocese

Grupo Claraeulalias consists of female Catholics who are willing to follow Christ's call through a special way of life. Each member contributes her effort for the coming of God's kingdom according to her situation of life. Therefore, we aspire to be mature ladies and good Christians through our humble service to the Church.

The charism of our community is reflected in its way of life. There are two to four hours for silence and personal prayer each day. Through this, we obtain power and inspiration from God to serve the Church in its pastoral work!

The community provides formation in a motherly way, so that all members may proactively and creatively make use of their potential to serve the Church. Under the guidance of the diocese, we seek to serve the kingdom of God.

Father Alfredo Rubio de Castarlenas of the Archdiocese of Barcelona founded Grupo Clareaulalias on July 12, 1979. The archbishop of Barcelona acknowledged it as a lay Christian community on April 7, 1986, and its constitution was formally accepted on February 29, 1988.

The community's name, made up of the names of Saint Eulalia and Saint Clara, reflects the community's aim: to imitate the example of the two saints who lived in the spirit of the Franciscan order. In China, it is called 默爾達社團. Their patron is "the Mother of Light and Hope," whose feast day is on the eve of Easter.

Besides individual services, Grupo Clareaulalias members also take part in the mission of promoting religious vocation in the diocese, regardless of whether it is for diocesan clergy or religious orders. The community seeks to support all kinds of vocation!

We pay special attention to the spiritual, theological and missionary formation of our members, as well as the development of their talents and personalities. We hope they may become God's effective instruments in preaching the Good News. In terms of personal formation, we use as our basic material the book 《活著真好》 (*It's good to be alive*) by Father Alfredo Rubio de Castarlenas, our founder.

This community was first established in Spain, but there are members all over the world living under the same spirit. Together we build up a harmonious network of brotherly love and friendship, and we support each other in Christ.

Our members serve the Kingdom of God in various areas:

- education, such as by teaching religious studies, philosophy and education in universities
- mass media or communication
- religious radios and channels
- arts
- parish or social welfare organizations
- retreat centers
- publishing magazines and books
- charity funds
- homes for the elderly
- non-profit social organizations
- youth work.

We contribute to the Church's evangelical work in different fields!

5. Conclusion

Lay people participate in the life of the parish in the spirit of communion. Nowadays, lay people can contribute much to the Church. To re-ignite the fire of evangelization for non-believers as well as Catholics on the verge of giving up their faith, lay people should make a greater effort to build up the Church community within their parishes. A parish that is truly a Church community for people in the neighborhood will conduct its life and activities in such a way that it is deeply concerned about the people's expectations and the dramatic events they undergo every day. In some countries, society is often shaken by schism and dehumanization. A person who feels lost and hesitant often desires an intimate relationship in which he may experience care and love. The parish is where such hopes may be fulfilled. Lay people's participation in the vocation and mission of the parish not only makes it the "meeting place in the world" for all Christians, but also a "symbol" and "instrument" of communion. In other words, the parish becomes a place that welcomes and serves all people.

We lay people are willing to serve the crowd under the leadership of our pastors! As witnesses to the call of the Second Vatican Council, we are willing to contribute our best and respond to the call of the Church!