Who Are the Laity in the Church, and Just What Are They To Do?

The Society of Mary and Social Justice - Part 2

In Baptism, we are anointed to share in Christ's ministry as priest, prophet, and servant-king. How does the laity exercise this ministry that is proper to them?

Before I continue, I understand that not everyone is familiar with what is meant by the laity. Let me say a few words about that. From chapter four of the Constitution of the Church, we learn the meaning of the word laity and the nature and obligation of the lay apostolate.

> "***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.*** The faithful are by Baptism made one Body with Christ and are constituted the People of God***; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetical, 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."
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> The laity, "***by their special vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God***...They are called there by God so that by exercising their proper function, and being led by the spirit of the Gospel, ***they can work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way, they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity***...It is their special task to order and to throw light upon temporal affairs so that they may be made and grow according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and Redeemer."

There you have it. Now you know who makes up the laity in the Church and, more importantly, what they are called to do. The laity is given a mission, which is to sanctify the world.

For the past few decades, the role of the laity that has received the most attention is lay ministry. We now have laity involved as readers, acolytes, musicians, retreat leaders, members of boards, deacons, principals, teachers, spiritual directors, finances, catechists, etc. I think you get the picture. All of that has been very good and much needed. There is no question about that.

The people of God, including the clergy, religious, and laity or all the baptized, have focused much of their discussion on the need to reform the Church. There have been and continues to be robust conversations about married clergy, the ordination of women, curbing sexual abuse, how the Second Vatican Council should be interpreted, and the appropriateness of any of the Church's teaching on doctrine and morality. Take your pick.

My concern is that the primary mission of the laity has been lost in the shuffle. That mission is to sanctify the world to reflect better the values and priorities of the reign of God. That may explain why many laity find their identity and energy with a political party or a particular ideology. Both provide a sense of mission that even has a salvific dimension to it. A specific ideology or a political party's platform becomes the "gospel." It alone can change or save the country and the world, including the Church.

The laity already has a mission given in Baptism to which Christ called them by name to carry out but in *his* name with all that implies. That is why it is crucial for the baptized to be transformed into Christ's image and likeness. By living up to the name of Christian, Christ can work through them to sanctify the world in this time and place in history.

Yes, you can be a Democrat or a Republican or a conservative or a liberal, but there is one Lord to whom we owe our allegiance: Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. Whatever is in a party's platform or found in an ideology compatible with the Gospel is to be affirmed. Whatever is not should be critiqued accordingly. The Church's social teachings aim to help the laity make those distinctions and assist them in their mission to sanctify the world. Baptism is the context for reading and implementing the Church's teachings on social justice, not that of a political party or ideology.

In the following meditation, I will look more closely at the spirituality of Baptism and its implication for the laity whom Christ has called to sanctify the world.