

The Priesthood of the Faithful

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were no people but now you are God's people. ~ 1 Peter 2:9-10

BY THEIR Baptism all Catholics are joined to Christ and made members of his Church. They all share the same dignity as sons and daughters of God. By being joined to Christ, all the faithful share in his priesthood. Referring to those joined to Christ, Holy Scripture says, "*you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*" (see beginning verses).

In Old Testament times, God commanded the People of Israel to be "*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (Ex 19:6). The Israelites had a completely unique relationship with God. But God was not playing favorites. Rather, God wanted them to be a light to the other nations. He revealed himself as the true God in miraculous ways to the Israelites because he planned to use them to draw all the other nations back to himself. They were to spread his truth throughout the land and be an example of holi-

"The laity are able to offer their daily lives lived in the world as spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God."



The Sower, by Domenico Mastroianni, 1876-1962

ness to the other nations.

Though the Israelites were often unfaithful to their calling to be a light to all nations, God promised that he would never revoke his covenant with his chosen people (see Jer 31:35-36). Moreover, already in the Old Testament he foretold that he would make a new covenant with them, giving them a new heart and putting his own Spirit within them (see Jer 31:31-34; Ez 36:26) to enable them to enjoy a new and deeper kind of relationship with him.

With the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, God established this new Covenant with Israel, and at the same time made it possible for all nations to be joined to the new

People of God, the Church. The whole Church has been formed by God to be "a royal priesthood and a holy nation," now composed of both Jews and Gentiles "grafted in" to the tree of Israel (see Rom 11:11-32; Eph 2:11-22). This means that all Christians are called by God to give witness to him as the true God, and to be examples of holiness.

Though a large part of the Jewish people did not recognize the Messiah, the Bible tells us that they are still beloved because of God's irrevocable covenant with them (see Rom 11:28-29; CCC 839). In addition, Jesus will only return after he has been recognized by "all Israel" (Rom 11:25-27; see also Mt 23:37-39; CCC 674). As Christians, we are to draw all people back to God and to pray that Israel may be reunited with her Messiah in the Church.

The Laity

Most Catholics are called by God to live out their Christian lives as members of the laity. The term "laity" refers to all of the Catholic faithful who are not called by God to either the clergy (via Holy Orders) or to forms of religious life recognized and approved by the Church.

The key characteristic of the laity is what may be called their "secular" nature. In other words, the lay Catholic's vocation is lived out primarily in the world. This means that the laity seek out and work to establish the Kingdom of God in their day-to-day activities and circumstances in the world. This refers to all of the various professions and occupations, and all of the ordinary things that make up family and social life. In this way the laity works to spread the Gospel and sanctify the world from within.

Mission of the Laity

The laity also has a specific mission or apostolate. This apostolate can be correctly understood only in light of the mission of the whole Church. Christ established his Church for the purpose of spreading his Kingdom over all the earth, and for making his saving grace available to all humanity in every age. The apostolate of the Church consists in everything the Church does to spread the Kingdom of Christ throughout the world.

The apostolate of the laity is simply a sharing in this

one saving mission of the whole Church. All members of the Church are united in this one mission commanded by Jesus Christ to the apostles: "All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:18-20). For all Catholics, carrying out this mission is both a right and an obligation. By their Baptism and Confirmation, the laity is assigned to this apostolate by the Lord Jesus himself. Through their reception of the sacraments of initiation, the laity comes to fully share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly roles of Je-

sus Christ. But how, exactly, do they share in these three roles of Christ?

The Priestly Role — The Church teaches that Christ makes it possible for all the faithful to share in his role as priest, but in different ways. The royal priesthood or priesthood of the faithful is shared by all the baptized. The ministerial priesthood is a sacrament and is a unique participation in the priesthood of Christ. It is primarily for the service of

the Church. The priesthood of the laity is different. Central to the laity's priesthood is the teaching of Holy Scripture about offering spiritual sacrifices: "Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pt 2:4-5).

Through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the laity are able to offer their daily lives lived in the world as spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. This means all their prayers, daily occupations, their married and family lives, activities for the Gospel, recreations, and daily hardships — all of these things can be offered to the Lord as spiritual sacrifices.

This reaches its highest expression in the celebra-

"The simple witness of Christian family life can draw people to Christ."



JUPITERIMAGES

tion of the Holy Eucharist. It is here that the laity can offer all of these things to God the Father along with the priest's offering of the Body and Blood of Christ. In this way, the laity is able to offer and consecrate the whole world to God.

This idea of offering spiritual sacrifices is at the heart of the Church's call for the laity to actively participate in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The laity's participation in the Mass as readers and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion is important. But the interior participation of the heart and mind in worship is much more important.

The Prophetic Role — The laity shares in the prophetic role of Christ when they spread the Gospel of Christ by their words and the witness of their lives. They are to do this in the workplace and in their daily social and family lives. The uniqueness of their prophetic witness is that it takes place in the ordinary circumstances of the world. As an expression of this prophetic role, the sacrament of Matrimony and Christian family life is very powerful and important. The example of a Christian family loudly proclaims the Kingdom of God and points to the hope and life of Heaven. The simple witness of Christian family life can draw people to Christ. It can also help other people to see their own need for conversion, and point them to the mercy, love, and truth of Christ.

The Kingly Role — The laity share in the kingly role of Christ as they work to establish the rule of Christ in their own lives, in the lives of others, and ultimately throughout the entire world. The laity is also called to spread the Kingdom of Christ by shining the light of the Gospel into those areas of the secular world that act as obstacles to the spreading of his Kingdom.

The Three Goals of the Lay Apostolate

There are three goals for the lay apostolate: evangelization, the renewal of the temporal order, and works of charity. The first goal is evangelization. The simple testimonies of a good Christian life and charitable deeds have the power to draw people to faith in God. This is a way of being salt of the earth and light of the world (see Mt 5:13-16).

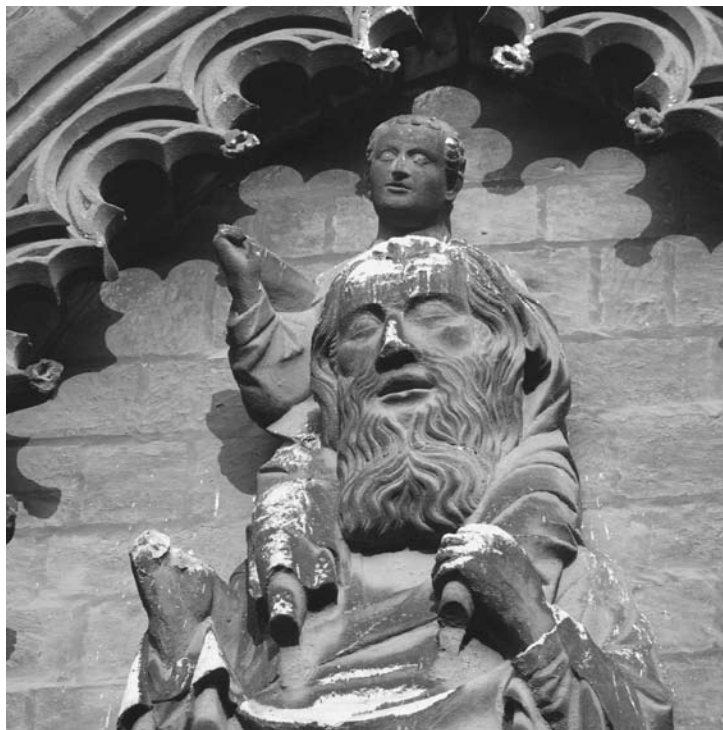
However, the laity is also called to proclaim Christ and his Gospel by their words. The laity must be ready and willing to tell others about Jesus and his saving Gospel. All the baptized share in the great

commission of Christ to "make disciples of all the nations" (Mt 28:19).

This witness to Christ can take several forms: witnessing to those who do not know Christ; teaching other Catholics about the faith and encouraging them in their own relationships with Christ; explaining and defending Catholic beliefs wherever they are challenged or misunderstood. Evangelization was a central concern for Pope John Paul II. He said that in many countries where Christianity once flourished, there have been radical changes. Whole

countries now need to be re-evangelized. This responsibility belongs to the laity in a special way, for they are the ones living in the world. Holy Scripture says that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tm 2:4). The laity is made up of those who "rub shoulders" with the people that Christ wants to hear the Gospel and become his disciples: friends, co-workers, neighbors, relatives, even people we don't know. Let us pray to the Holy Spirit that, like the apostles on the day of Pentecost, he will give us the ability to proclaim the Gospel of Christ

"We must live as true disciples of Christ every day of the week."



St. Joseph and the Christ Child

boldly and without fear (see Acts 2; Eph 6:19-20).

The call to evangelize is one that must not be avoided. God has placed each Christian in the world with a special mission to build up his Kingdom. In the Old Testament, Esther was admonished by her uncle that she had been made queen to save her people: *“For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter; but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”* (Est 4:14). No Christian may “keep silence” and consider that his or her vocation has been fulfilled.

The second goal is the renewal of the temporal order. The temporal order refers to everything related to the living out of daily life here on this earth. Things like daily family life, the workplace, social life, politics, entertainment, etc. Basically it refers to all the things that go into making up cultures and countries.

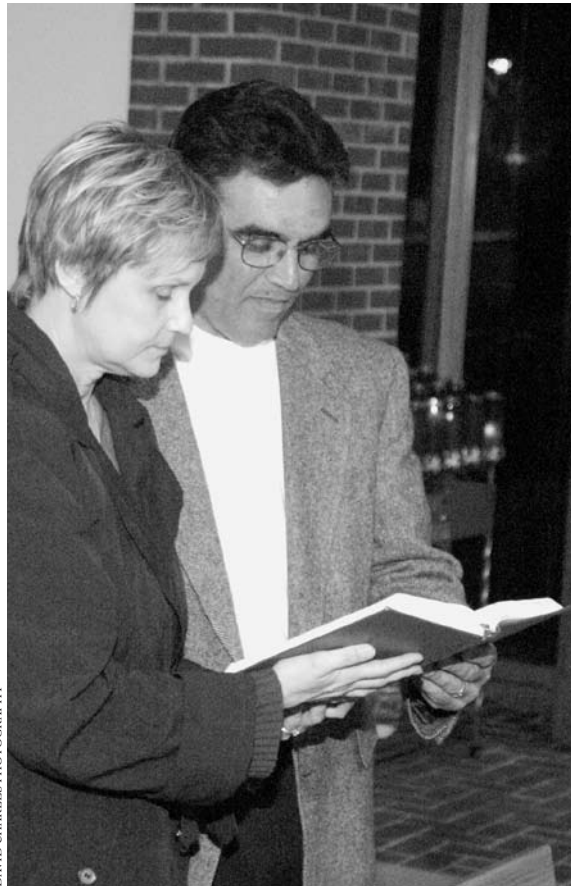
The Church teaches that, throughout human history, humankind has often abused the things of this life. People have come to believe many things about God, humanity, and morality that are simply wrong. These wrong ideas and beliefs have led many people into living lives far from God. It has also led to many people putting more trust in science and technology than in God and his Word. It is the task of the whole Church to direct the temporal order back to God. Because the laity lives out Christian lives in the world, this task belongs especially to them.

The third goal is that of charitable works and social aid. Christian charity calls us to reach out to those in need, whatever those needs may be (see Mt 25:31-46). The Church’s social teaching provides a wealth of guidance and wisdom in this area.

The Spiritual Life of the Laity

The laity must place top priority on their own spiritual life. Their efforts in the apostolate must be the fruit of their own closeness to God. Jesus said, *“Abide in me, and I in you. 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).

“Christ is the true vine and the source of our spiritual life.”



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

Christ is the true vine and the source of our spiritual life. We are the branches who need the vine. We must stay connected to him. Otherwise, we will not bear fruit, neither in our own lives, nor in the lives of others. The primary ways that we “abide” in Jesus are through personal prayer, reading Holy Scripture, and living a sacramental life.

The Church also teaches that there can never be a split between our Christian life and the life we live in the world. We cannot live two parallel lives: one spiritual and the other secular. We must live as true disciples of Christ every day of the week, in every area of our lives.

Summary

In summary, then, all the baptized belong to a royal priesthood and a holy nation. They share in the Church’s mission of making “disciples of all nations.” They share in

Christ’s role as priest, prophet, and king. And they are called to evangelize the world to Christ, renew the temporal order, and minister to the material, spiritual, and social needs of others.

Let us ask the Lord to bless all our efforts in the apostolate. And as we come to the table of the Lord’s Body and Blood, let us together offer our whole lives as “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

(CCC 3, 784, 839, 871-873, 897-913, 1268, 1546, 2038, 2820, 2822)