

What Ever Happened to the “Lay Moment”?

Stephen P. White Thursday, August 26, 2021

For two thousand years, the Church has been proclaiming the Good News. Billions of souls have been converted by the power of the Gospel and have come to faith in Christ. Saints innumerable have lived and died as witnesses to this truth: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”

Yet the Church today, especially in the developed world, struggles to proclaim the Gospel. Why? Why does it seem that, at least in some parts of the world, the Church has stalled out in her mission to evangelize?

One partial explanation, I think, is that **the Church does proclaim the Gospel, but our materialistic age has been inoculated against receiving it. It is hard to proclaim salvation to a world enamored of the idea that it can save itself. And the illusion of control is an age-old temptation.**

A related challenge is the **mistaken notion that the salvation offered by the Church is a worldly salvation. When the Church’s works of justice – her care for the poor and sick, her solicitude for the broken and marginalized, the entirety of her social doctrine – are separated from the proclamation of Christ’s own suffering, death, and resurrection, bad things happen. Christianity gets reduced to a kind of social activism (or a prosperity Gospel) and the Church’s message of salvation becomes obscured by what Pope Francis calls a “demonic worldliness.”**

When it comes to the role of the laity in the church, this worldliness presents a particular challenge.

By our Baptism, we are all commissioned to proclaim the Gospel – the laity no less than the clergy. The laity, by virtue of our secular vocation, are specially tasked with proclaiming the Gospel to the world from within the world. This was the challenge, and the opportunity, presented by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*: the laity are to transform the world, to evangelize it from within.

This is why the Council emphasized that the lay faithful share in the priestly mission of Christ: “[A]ll their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne – all these become ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’.”

This is why the Council insisted that the laity share in the prophetic mission of Christ: “[E]ven in the program of their secular life let them express [hope in the Resurrection] by a continual conversion and by wrestling ‘against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness.’”

And this is why *Lumen Gentium* connects the kingship of Christ to the laity’s mission to order temporal affairs in accord with the Kingdom of Christ, “so that serving Christ in their fellow men they might by humility and patience lead their brethren to that King for whom to serve is to reign.”

Precisely because the lay faithful carry out their mission embedded within the secular realm, their proclamation of the Good News, “takes on a specific quality and a special force in that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world.”

That’s all well and good (and true, as it happens) but why hasn’t this vision of the lay vocation been the hallmark of the Church since the Council? Why has the “Lay Moment” we’ve been hearing about for so many decades never quite produced the hoped-for transformation?

One interesting answer to that question was recently offered by [Amy Welborn](#) ^[1] (herself riffing on a [worthwhile essay by Dr. Larry Chapp](#) ^[2].) In short, instead of getting busy being leaven in the world, the laity have spent the years since the Council mostly arguing over who-gets-to-do-what within the Church:

The Second Vatican Council’s vision of a more deeply engaged missionary Church in the modern world has fallen short so far because Catholic laity settled, fairly quickly, on visibility **within the life of the church** as the choice definition of living out the baptismal promise.

So, in a blink of an eye, your “engaged laity” was all about having an impact on the life of the *Church* rather than the world – whether that be through liturgy committees, diocesan commissions, getting to wear an alb when you’re lecturing.

I think this is spot-on. Questions about who-gets-to-do-what in the Church are not unimportant. The abuse crisis has underscored the dangers

of an insular, self-dealing clerical culture. And laymen and women do invaluable work in parishes and chanceries everywhere. But **struggles about who-gets-to-do-what have a way of reducing ecclesiology to a function of power, thereby supplanting one form of clericalism with another.** Empowering the laity doesn't mean aping the clergy.

The mission of the Church is not the responsibility of the diocesan pastoral center or some committee in the parish. It can't be delegated or outsourced or professionalized. The mission belongs to all of us.

And this brings us back to the initial question of why the Church struggles so mightily to do what she has always done and preach the Gospel. If preaching the Gospel is our responsibility as laity, then that means **those of us “in the world” may have to become less comfortable in it. There are no shortcuts to the Gospel. There is no “safe” way up Calvary. We have to become less worldly ourselves.**

A mature view of what it means for the laity to share in the kingly, priestly, and prophetic ministries of Christ means understanding that **to serve is to reign.** It means offering spiritual sacrifice. And **it means wrestling tirelessly against the world rulers of this darkness and against the spiritual forces of wickedness. That's the vision of the lay vocation laid out in *Lumen Gentium*.**

It's worth asking: if the laity lived that mission more fully, how might the Church be changed for the better? How might the world?

***Image:** *The Forerunners of Christ with Saints and Martyrs* ^[3] by (probably) Fra Angelico, c. 1423-24 [National Gallery, London]. This was the inner right predella panel of the San Domenico Altarpiece in Fiesole, Italy, Blessed Fra Angelico's birthplace.