

What is the Role of the Laity in the Church and the World?

There is a beautiful image contained in the New Testament word *ekklesia*, though its beauty is largely lost when it is translated into English as “church.” In Greek, the verb *ekkalein* means “to call out.” Think here of a mother opening the front door of her home to “call out” loudly to her scattered sons and daughters, “Children, come home for dinner!” This is our Catholic Church, a loving Mother who echoes God the Father’s universal calling out to the human race: “Come home, my children! Come and share in the everlasting joy of heaven’s Feast!”

As in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), God’s “calling out” resounds into our broken world of sin, alienation, ignorance, and death. The merciful Father sends His Word down to offer us pardon, reconciliation, love, and truth, sharing with us everything God has to offer—His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

The laity are those who, through faith and Baptism, have said “yes” to God’s inviting call and have entered the House of the Lord as members Christ’s Mystical Body. Each member of the Church Jesus has personally called by name, inviting each through the Holy Spirit to live intentionally as His disciple.

All Christians are invited to join in the ministry of strengthening the bonds of faith, hope, and love that unite God’s Family as one by placing their gifts in service to the Church and collaborating closely with the Church’s ordained ministers. In this way, the laity contribute mightily to the health and vitality of the Church’s inward life and her outward mission.

The Church at heart *missionary*, sent forth by Christ’s command, “Go out and proclaim the Gospel to the whole of creation!” (Mark 16:15). Pope Pius XII said that the laity have a singular role in this world-oriented mission, as God has placed them “on front lines” of the Church, where the battle is fiercest. There, he said, lay men and women become saints by living holy lives deep in the secular world. There, as society’s insiders, the laity give powerful and subversive witness to Christ, leavening the bread of culture with fiery Gospel truth.

You might say that, while it is the role of ordained ministers to prepare abundant Gospel leaven for the lay faithful, it is the role of the lay secular apostle to knead that leaven into the dough of marriage and family, business and politics, medicine and the arts, education and the military, i.e. into *every* facet of secular life.

The laity possess what the Church calls a “secular genius,” as they are the true world-wise experts who, by divine design, have been empowered to transform the world *from within* by making it more truthful, just, loving, compassionate, chaste, generous—that is, by making human culture more like the divine culture, Jesus Christ.

It is only when the internal life of the Church, God’s Family, is healthy and thriving that its external mission out into the world also thrives. As St. John Paul loved to say, healthy *internal* communion = healthy *external* mission.

In close collaboration with their Apostolic Shepherds, every lay apostle is entrusted with fostering both the internal and external health of the Church, joining the Son of the Father in calling out into every corner of the world God so loves, “Children, come home!”



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