

## How can the Church Help Lay People to Grow in Holiness in the Secular World?

To answer this question, we need to recall what we Catholics mean by “secular.” In common use, the word frequently carries with it a negative connotation toward religion, frequently conjuring images of either an oil-and-water separation of religion from public life or of a hostility toward faith and traditional morality. The same is true of the word “world” or “worldly.” But for the Popes of the last fifty years, the words “secular” and “world” are seen primarily as positive terms that depict a creation that “God so loves” (John 3:16) and wishes to save from its own folly.

In our Catholic language, “secular” generally means two things.

Secular can refer both to the realm of the “non-religious” (as opposed to the more negative sense of secular as the irreligious or sacrilegious) and to the things of “this world,” distinguished from those things of “the world to come” (what we often call heaven). In this sense, religious would include “churchy” things like liturgy, sacraments, parishes, rosaries, bishops, monks, or prayer, while secular would include marriage and family, politics, economics, business, culture, the military, or science—indeed, the whole universe itself is the realm of the “secular.”

The Second Vatican Council affirmed that, unlike clergy and religious who are called by God to dedicate their lives primarily to the sacred goods of religion, the laity are called by God to dedicate their lives primarily to secular goods of this world. The Council says that Catholic laity are natural insiders of the secular world, who have a “secular genius” that uniquely positions them to make the Gospel of Jesus Christ present and active in society in a transformative way. And they become saints, in the words of Pope Pius XII, primarily by being “the front lines of the Church” in the world.

These secular geniuses are raw material for a secular holiness, as they seek holiness by being secular. And in a Church whose canonized saints are overwhelmingly priests, bishops, deacons, religious, and laity who look like religious, we anxiously await a new age of saints whose lives were secular from beginning to end.

But make no mistake! This path is very challenging. And while we often reflexively think of the secular front lines where faith meets culture—including hot-button issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and capital punishment—the greater portion of the mission field extends into the innumerable mundane daily details of personal, professional, and civic life. Striving to be a faithful person who is truthful and patient, forgiving and fair, chaste and merciful, while loving enemies and remaining courageous, being generous to the poor, engaging in fraternal correction when called for, and refusing to participate in gossip or any unethical behavior in the face of peer pressure—*this type of holiness is not for the faint of heart!*

So what can the Church do to support these secular geniuses becoming secular saints? Provide spiritual support and vision. Make accessible teaching drawn from Catholic social doctrine, which spells out clear principles for “doing the world God’s way,” as the late Fr. Aidan Kavanagh often said. In addition, the Church must consistently direct its educational and formational institutions to foster vibrant faith communities capable of forming and sustaining

world-wise men and women of Christian character who are empowered to think with the mind of Christ in all circumstances. And the Church needs to honor those immersed in the secular world as its “front line workers,” laborers in the Vineyard who plant mustard seeds and set up outposts of the Kingdom behind enemy lines.

The core mission of the laity is to evangelize by building a civilization of love and justice, leavening the earth with a culture of life. The Church’s best energies should be in service to these great builders of the heavenly Kingdom.



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