

THE CHURCH SPEAKS TO THE LAY MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF PREACHERS

SCRIPTURE: 1 Pt. 3:15-16:

Venerate the Lord, that is, Christ, in your hearts. Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply, but speak gently and respectfully. Keep your conscience clear, so that, whenever you are defamed, those who libel your way of life in Christ may be shamed. (NAB.)

SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (Apostolicam Actuositatem, 18 Nov. 1965), n° 6, which is entitled, "The Apostolate of Evangelization and Sanctification":

6. The Church's mission is concerned with the salvation of men; and men win salvation through the grace of Christ and faith in him. The apostolate of the Church therefore, and of each of its members, aims primarily at announcing to the world by word and action the message of Christ and communicating to it the grace of Christ. The principal means of bringing this about is the ministry of the word and of the sacraments. Committed in a special way to the clergy, it leaves room however for a highly important part for the laity, the part namely of "helping on the cause of truth" (3 Jn. 8). It is in this sphere most of all that the lay apostolate and the pastoral ministry complete each other.

Laymen have countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very witness of a Christian life, and good works done in a supernatural spirit, are effective in drawing men to the faith and to God; and that is what the Lord has said: "Your light must shine so brightly before men that they can see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Mat. 5:16).

This witness of life, however, is not the sole element in the apostolate: the true apostle is in the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, wither to unbelievers to draw them towards the faith, or to the faithful to instruct them, strengthn them, incite them to a more fervent life; "for Christ's love urges us on" (2 Cor. 5:14), and in the hearts of all should the apostle's words find echo: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16).¹

At a time when new questions are being put and when grave errors aiming at undermining religion, the moral order and human society itself are rampant, The Council earnestly exhorts the laity to take a more active part, each according to his talents and knowledge and in fidelity to the mind of the Church, in the explanation and defense of Christian principles and in the correct application of them to the problems of our times.

¹Cf. Pius XI, Encyclical Letter Ubi arcano, 23 Dec. 1922: AAS 14 (1922) p. 659; Pius XII, Encyclical Letter Summi Pontificatus, 20 Oct. 1939: AAS 31 (1939) pp. 442-443.

(From Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., [©1975], pp. 772-773.)

THE CODE OF CANON LAW: Book III, "The Teaching Office of the Church," Title 1, "The Ministry of the Divine Word":

Can. 759 -- In virtue of their baptism and confirmation lay members of the Christian faithful are witnesses to the gospel message by word and by example of a Christian life; they can also be called upon to cooperate with the bishop and presbyters in the exercise of the ministry of the word.

Can. 766 -- Lay persons can be admitted to preach in a church or oratory if it is necessary in certain circumstances or if it is useful in particular cases according to the prescriptions of the conference of bishops and with due regard for can. 767, § 1.

Can. 767 -- § 1. Among the forms of preaching, the homily is preeminent; it is part of the liturgy itself and is reserved to a priest or to a deacon; in the homily the mysteries of faith and the norms of Christian living are to be expounded from the sacred text throughout the course of the liturgical year. (§§ 2 and 3 refer to the obligation to have a homily at every Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, and the desirability of having homilies at other Masses.) § 4. It is the duty of the pastor or the rector of a church to see to it that these prescriptions are conscientiously observed.

Book II, "The People of God," Title V, "Associations of the Christian Faithful":

Can. 298 -- § 1. In the Church there are associations distinct from institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, in which the Christian faithful, either clergy or laity, or clergy and laity together, strive by common effort to promote a more perfect life or to foster public worship or Christian doctrine or to exercise other apostolic works, namely to engage in efforts of evangelization, to exercise works of piety or charity and to animate the temporal order with the Christian spirit.

§ 2. The Christian faithful should enroll especially in associations which are erected or praised or recommended by competent ecclesiastical authority.

Can. 301 -- § 1. Competent ecclesiastical authority alone has the right to erect associations of the Christian faithful which set out to teach Christian doctrine in the name of the Church or to promote public worship or which aim at other ends whose pursuit by their nature is reserved to the same ecclesiastical authority. (§ 2 says that competent ecclesiastical authority can erect associations of the faithful for any spiritual purpose it wants.)

§ 3. Associations of the Christian faithful which are erected by competent ecclesiastical authority are called public associations.

Can. 303 -- Associations whose members lead an apostolic life and strive for Christian perfection while living in the world and who share the spirit of some religious institute under the higher direction of that same institute are called third orders or some other appropriate name.

Can. 305 -- § 1. All associations of the Christian faithful are subject to the vigilance of competent ecclesiastical authority, whose duty is to take care that integrity of faith and morals is preserved in them and to watch lest abuse creep into ecclesiastical discipline; therefore that authority has the right and duty to visit them in accord with the norm of law and the statutes; such associations are also subject to the governance of the same authority according to the prescriptions of the following canons.

§ 2. Associations of any kind whatever are subject to the vigilance of the Holy See; diocesan associations and also other associations to the extent that they work in the diocese are subject to the vigilance of the local ordinary.

Can. 311 -- Members of institutes of consecrated life who preside over or assist associations in some way united to their institute are to see to it that these associations give assistance to the works of the apostolate in a diocese, especially cooperating, under the direction of the local ordinary, with associations which are ordered to the exercise of the apostolate in the diocese.

Can. 312 -- § 2. ...the consent given by a diocesan bishop for the erection of a house of a religious institute also allows for the erection, in the same house or church attached to it, of an association proper to the institute.

Can. 313 -- A public association as well as a confederation of public associations is constituted a juridic person by the decree by which it is erected by competent ecclesiastical authority in accord with the norm of can. 312; it also thereby receives a mission to pursue the ends which it proposes for itself in the name of the Church, to the extent that such a mission is required. [Note: Every Christian is expected to speak up for God, as indicated by the scriptural and conciliar selections on p. 1 above, but this refers to the Christian in his private capacity. To speak for God as a representative of the Church requires a canonical mission, in accord with Rom. 10:13-15: "'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' But how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe unless they have heard of him? And how can they hear unless there is someone to preach? And how can men preach unless they are sent?" (NAB.) Can. 313 means that the Holy See, by approving the Rule, grants to the Dominican Laity a "share in the mission of this Order" of Preachers (quoting from the Preamble to the Rule). Since therefore lay members of the Order of Preachers speak for God not only in their private capacity but as canonically approved representatives of the Church, it is incumbent upon them to know, propose, explain and defend, as attractively as possible, the Church's own authoritative positions, and not merely private or dissenting views.]

Can. 315 -- Public associations on their own initiative can begin undertakings in keeping with their character, and they can direct them in accord with their statutes, but under the further direction of the ecclesiastical authority mentioned in can. 312, § 1. [Note: According to can. 312, § 1, this authority for us is the Holy See.]

Can. 317 -- § 3. In associations which are not clerical, lay persons can exercise the office of moderator; the chaplain or ecclesiastical assistant shall not assume that role unless the statutes provide otherwise. [Note: This is the official English translation. The Latin means not that lay persons can or cannot be moderator, but rather that lay persons have it as their competence to be moderator, so that being moderator pertains to them unless the statutes of the group state otherwise. The Third Order of Preachers, aka. the Dominican Laity, is not a clerical association. The moderator among us is called the prior or prioress, from the Latin, "prior inter pares," "first among equals," a phrase dear to the Order because it evokes the democratic mode of procedure given us by St. Dominic himself.]

Can. 320 -- § 1. Associations erected by the Holy See can be suppressed only by the Holy See. [The Third Order was erected as a public lay association under the jurisdiction of the Friars when Pope Innocent VII on 26 June 1405 approved the Rule issued in 1285 by Munio de Zamora, Master of the Order of Preachers. Since then all changes in the Rule have had to be submitted to the Holy See for its further approval, for what the Holy See has established, no lower authority can alter simply on its own.]

§ 2. [Does not apply.]

§ 3. A public association is not to be suppressed by competent authority without having heard its moderator and other major officials.

Can. 327 -- Lay members of the Christian faithful are to esteem greatly associations established for the spiritual purposes mentioned in can. 298, and especially those which propose to animate the temporal order with the Christian spirit and in this way greatly foster an intimate union between faith and life.

Can. 328 -- Those who preside over associations of the laity, even those associations erected in virtue of an apostolic privilege, are to see to it that they cooperate with other associations of the Christian faithful, where it is expedient, and willingly assist the various Christian works especially those in the same territory.

Can. 329 -- Moderators of associations of the laity are to see to it that the members of the association are duly formed for the exercise of the apostolate which is proper to the laity.

(From Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Edition. Washington, D.C.: Canon Lay Society of America, [c 1983].) [The items in square brackets are by the compiler of these 4 pp., Fr. Bartholomew de la Torre, O.P., 5 Nov. 1984.]

[CONCLUDING COMMENTS:

As we see from the preceding selections from the Code of Canon Law, the lay member of the Order of Preachers is given a share in that Order's own canonical mission to proclaim, in the name of the official Church, that Church's own proclamations. Though not all Christians are commissioned to speak in the name of the Church herself, we see from the scriptural and conciliar selections on p. 1, above, that all Christians are called to express in their own name, i.e. in their own private capacity as committed believers, the Catholic faith they live by. And so with Moses, the Dominican friar, sister or lay person cries out, "O that all the people might prophesy, and that the Lord would give them his spirit!" (Num. 11:29, Douay-Rheims trans.) Nevertheless, history shows that the verbal witnessing of all other Catholics is greatly affected by the vitality or lack thereof with which the Order of Preachers enters into its own proper mission, preaching. In every field specialists are needed so that the achievements of the non-specialists working in that field can be maintained and advanced. The Order of Preachers, including its lay branch, is the only group specially and specifically singled out by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the ministry of the word. For we are the only Order of Preachers the Church has ever approved, the only group to which she has granted that most important title. That that noble title carries with it a great responsibility, that of being the Church's specialists in the critical task of preaching. And just as history shows that the general quality of ecclesiastical preaching rises or falls with the Order's success or failure at that task, so also will the Catholic laity succeed in answering the conciliar call to speak out for God only to the degree that the Dominican Laity is proficient in its own ministry of the word. Though God could have arranged it otherwise, the Spirit has set up the Order of Preachers as the principal channel whereby the charism of preaching is to flow to the Church. If we Dominicans but cooperate with grace, the Spirit will work through all of us, friars, sisters and lay people, to shape our preaching and that of all the Church. Our success will flow from and is to be measured by not learning or eloquence directly, but by our cooperating generously with grace!

Fr. Bartholomew de la Torre, O.P., 5 Nov. 1984, Wash., D.C.]