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“The Lay Faithful and the New Evangelization”

Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Vicar General of Opus Dei, reflects on the role of lay people in transmitting the Gospel message, in light of Vatican II.

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The new evangelization, urged by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, points to the very mission of the Church, which can be summed up precisely as the *traditio Evangelii*, the

transmission of the Gospel. Here the word “Gospel” is understood not only in its intellectual content, but in its broad Pauline meaning of *the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith* (Rom 1:16). The new evangelization of countries and environments already evangelized in the past, but now in great measure secularized, presents particular demands, necessarily connected to the Church’s permanent salvific mission. At the same time, the complex reality in which we live requires new pastoral and apostolic initiatives, adequate to the challenges presented by modernity and post-modernity.

The laity’s participation in evangelization

One of the dimensions of the royal priesthood of the faithful, to which St. Peter refers (see *1 Pet 2:4-10*), is the prophetic function: *that you may*

declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (Ibid.). This “declaring” is what transmitting the Gospel means. The laity’s participation in the Church’s mission does not mean primarily or principally that they are to share in the functions of the sacred ministers, although this is possible and, at times, useful. Furthermore, the ministers themselves do not encompass the entire mission, but they too participate in it. Both share the weight and honor of the Church’s whole mission: the *traditio Evangelii*. But each carries it out partially, according to their proper function in the Church.

What is specific to the laity’s participation in the task of evangelization was expressed as follows by Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium*, 35: “Christ, the great Prophet, who proclaimed the

Kingdom of his Father both by the testimony of his life and the power of his words, continually fulfills his prophetic office until the complete manifestation of glory. He does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in his name and with his authority, but also through the laity whom he made his witnesses and to whom he gave understanding of the faith (*sensus fidei*) and an attractiveness in speech so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life.” The evangelizing capacity and responsibility (the *munus propheticum*) of the lay faithful is not delegated by the hierarchy, but comes directly from Jesus Christ, through Baptism and Confirmation.

The understanding of the faith (*sensus fidei*), which *Lumen Gentium* points to as the immediate origin of the exercise of the lay faithful’s prophetic function, is the capacity

conferred on believers through theological faith and the gifts of the Holy Spirit to assent to revealed truths, to discern with ease what is in conformity or not in conformity with that revelation, to grasp its deepest implications (not through theological reflection but spontaneously, by a kind of connaturality), and to apply the faith to one's life. The grounding of the laity's prophetic function in the *sensus fidei* also highlights the fact that this is not a participation in the magisterial mission proper to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but a direct participation in the prophetic *virtus* of Jesus Christ, at the same time as its exercise is carried out "under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority" (*Lumen Gentium*, 12).

The "attractiveness in speech" to which *Lumen Gentium* also refers, is not a matter only or principally of the "attractiveness" of a pleasant or humanly convincing speech, but

above all of the assistance of the Holy Spirit who, without conferring any official authority on the evangelizing word of the laity, makes it a vehicle of the Word of God and, as such, not only a transmitter of ideas, but an efficacious force in transmitting the faith that saves.

The evangelizing task's essential dependence on faith and the help of the Holy Spirit brings us to the indispensable service that only the ministers of the Church can and should provide to the laity, through preaching the Word of God with Christ's authority, in its various forms, and the celebration of the sacraments. For the Church is a priestly people organically structured, which carries out its mission in the world with a distinction of functions that are at the same time interdependent.

In daily family and social life

As we saw in the words cited above from *Lumen Gentium*, it is in the context of their daily life that the lay faithful exercise their specific evangelizing role. In the words of one who, according to John Paul II, was a precursor of Vatican II in his teaching on the laity, “The layman’s specific role in the mission of the Church is precisely that of sanctifying secular reality, the temporal order, the world, *ab intra*, in an immediate and direct way” (St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Conversations*, no. 9).

The laity’s prophetic function, as well as that of the pastors, is a participation in the *munus propheticum Christi*, and Christ is the Revealer and the Revelation of God, not only through his words but also through all of his works. Therefore, and not only as a matter of human effectiveness, evangelization has to be carried out with the witness of

one's life and with one's word, and the evangelizing mission of the laity has its own characteristics—and a special efficacy—in the fact of being carried out within secular realities.

In ordinary life, with its varied family, professional and social relationships, the lay faithful have ample scope to announce the Gospel through their life and words, contributing—each in the measure of his or her possibilities—to orienting social and professional institutions, the means of communication, etc., with the spirit of Christ. Especially important here is the transmission of the Gospel from person to person, in a dialogue of sincere friendship, like leaven in a mass of dough: acting as “a leaven in the world” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2).

This way of transmitting the Gospel is of particular efficacy, also because it responds to an important

anthropological reality:
interpersonal dialogue, whereby one seeks to transmit to another person a good that one has received. This apostolic dialogue arises naturally when there is sincere friendship. This is not a matter of instrumentalizing friendship, but of helping one's friends share in the great good of faith in Christ. As Benedict XVI said in his homily at the solemn beginning of his pontificate, "There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know him and to speak to others of our friendship with him" (April 24, 2005).

The transmission of the Gospel always requires—and in a special way in interpersonal dialogue—respect for the intimacy and freedom of everyone, a respect that is a demand of justice and charity. The

contrary, trying to impose one's own convictions by trickery or violence, is obviously opposed to the spirit of the Gospel. That type of proselytism—one that fails to respect freedom—is completely unacceptable.

Nevertheless, proselytism in its original and proper meaning is not only something good, but a necessary demand of the evangelizing mission that Jesus entrusted to his disciples. In fact, for Christians, the word “proselytism” has meant and frequently means missionary activity. Even in civil contexts—juridical and political—proselytism is viewed positively as an intrinsic component of religious freedom.

Facing the challenges of de-Christianized societies

The new evangelization in countries of ancient Christian tradition faces grave, complex and varied challenges. The most radical one is

the spread of atheism in its various forms and religious indifference, which are affecting the faith of not a few of the baptized, producing in them at least a loss of the meaning that the existence of God should have in their lives. There are many possible ways to confront this challenge, but the essential thing is that each one understands and teaches others that the Gospel is not only or primarily a collection of truths and moral norms. It is not merely a system of thought and of conduct. The Gospel is, above all, Jesus Christ himself (see *1 Cor* 1:24).

The existence of God can be known, although with difficulty, by human reason alone, and in the new evangelization it is useful to sometimes confront, in one way or another, the great philosophical question of God's existence. Nevertheless, the key thing is to make known Jesus Christ who died

and arose, showing—at a level that is possible and adequate in each case—the historical truth of his Resurrection, which is the most decisive “demonstration” of God’s existence.

Without trying to list all the challenges, theoretical and practical, confronted by the new evangelization (not only by the laity, of course, but by the whole Church), one of the most radical ones is the relativistic mentality in its multiple expressions. In the task of evangelization it is always good to begin with the shared aspects upon which we can establish a sincere dialogue with others. This is the case, for example, of the widespread awareness of human rights. It is not difficult to make people see that, if one fails to recognize absolute values (and ultimately God), not even the concept of human rights makes sense. Law itself, in all its

expressions, will be nothing but—according to the description given by Karl Marx—“a decorative apparatus of power.”

To confront these and other challenges, a solid doctrinal formation is needed; but this is not enough. Evangelization, and personal apostolate in general, requires that word and dialogue be united to the testimony of a consistent Christian life. Therefore, building on the foundation of Baptism and the strength of Confirmation, an intense sacramental life is needed (the Eucharist, Penance); and also prayer, the indispensable condition for personal identification with Christ, which will awaken in the laity their own apostolic responsibility. Thus they will become aware, as Benedict XVI has recently written, that “*Caritas Christi urget nos* (2 Cor 5:14): it is the love of Christ that fills our

hearts and impels us to evangelize. Today as in the past, he sends us through the highways of the world to proclaim his Gospel to all the peoples of the earth (cf. *Mt 28:19*)” (*Porta Fidei*, no. 7).

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