

Bishops Issue Report Praising Role of Laity

Following is the text of the nation's bishops' agreed statement containing their reflections on the role of the laity in the U.S. in the 1980s. In issuing the statement, the bishops cautioned that they did not intend "rigidly to define or bestow false praise." Their statement was meant to mark the 15th anniversary of the Decree on the Laity promulgated by the Second Vatican Council. Bishop Matthew H. Clark has hailed the statement, saying that it "reaffirms the directions given in (the Vatican Council's) document."

Among the most enduring contributions of the Second Vatican Council is its description of the church as the people of God. "This was to be the new people of God. For, those who believe in Christ, who are reborn not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed through the word of the living God, not from the flesh but from water and the Holy Spirit are finally established as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people... you who in times past were not a people, but we are now the people of God."



This image, drawing on a rich biblical and historical tradition, gives marvelous expression to the role of the church as the sign of the kingdom of God. It was this kingdom which Jesus came to announce and to inaugurate by his life, death and resurrection. "After John's arrest, Jesus appeared in Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. 'This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand. Reform your lives and believe in the Gospel.'"

Jesus established the church to bear witness to God's kingdom especially by the way his followers would live as the people of God. "This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you."

The image of the people of God has many dimensions. Its meaning is best grasped through a variety of experiences. Each sheds light on the whole and enables us to appreciate and live it more deeply.

At the present time the light shed on the meaning of the people of God by the laity is especially noteworthy and exciting. In an exercise of our charism of "bringing forth from the treasury of revelation new things and old," we bishops praise the Lord for what is happening among the laity and proclaim as well as we can what we have been experiencing and learning from them.

While focusing on the laity, we wish to address the whole church. We affirm the vision of the Second Vatican Council and the importance it gives to the laity. We look forward to what is still to come under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, making the church more and more the perfect image of Christ. We also acknowledge that these continuing developments may require new concepts, new terminology, new attitudes and new practices. In prayerful dialogue with all our sisters and brothers we are prepared to make those changes which will aid in building the kingdom.

As the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity of Vatican II says:

"Indeed, everyone should painstakingly ready himself or herself personally for the apostolate, especially as an adult. For the advance of age brings with it better self-knowledge, thus enabling each person to evaluate more accurately the talents with which God has enriched each soul and to exercise more effectively those charismatic gifts Holy Spirit has bestowed on all for the good of others."

One of the chief characteristics of lay men and women today is their growing sense of being adult members of the church. Adulthood implies knowledge, experience and awareness, freedom and responsibility, and mutuality in relationships. It is true, however, that the experience of lay persons "as church members" has not always reflected this understanding of adulthood. Now, thanks to the impetus of the Second Vatican Council, lay women and men feel themselves called to exercise the same mature interdependence and practical self-direction which characterize them in other areas of life.

We note the response of many lay persons to different opportunities for faith development. There is the "coming to faith in Jesus" and a strengthening of commitment to him and his mission which we commonly call evangelization. There is also the adult catechesis movement which allows persons to grow and deepen their faith, and there are those who in faith are seeking greater understanding through theological reflection. These and other adult lay persons have taken responsibility in their parish or diocese by serving in leadership positions on committees and boards.

Adult Christian living is also noticeable, through not always as publicized, in the daily struggle to live out Christian values in family, neighborhood, school, government and work. This is a hopeful sign because the laity are uniquely present in and to the world and so bear a privileged position to build the kingdom of God there: "You are the light of the world... Your light must shine before all so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father."

The adult character of the people of God flows from baptism and confirmation, which are the foundation of the Christian life and ministry. They signify initiation into a

community of believers who, according to their state of life, respond to God's call to holiness and accept responsibility for the ministry of the church.

"Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. By this holiness a more human way of life is promoted even in this earthly society."

The Second Vatican Council clearly proclaimed the universal call to holiness. Not only are lay people included in God's call to holiness, but theirs is a unique call requiring a unique response, which itself is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is characteristic that lay men and women hear the call to holiness in the very web of their existence, in and through the events of the world, the pluralism of modern living, the complex decisions and conflicting values they must struggle with, the richness and fragility of sexual relationships, the delicate balance between activity and stillness, presence and privacy, love and loss.

The response of lay people to this call promises to contribute still more to the spiritual heritage of the church. Already the laity's hunger for God's word is everywhere evident. Increasingly, lay men and women are seeking spiritual formation and direction in deep ways of prayer. This has helped to spur several renewal movements.

These developments present a challenge to the parish because, for the most part, the spiritual needs of lay people must be met in the parish. The parish must be a home where they can come together with their leaders for mutual spiritual enrichment, much as in the early church: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' instruction and the

communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

We call special attention to the effect this should have on liturgy. The quality of worship depends in great measure on the spiritual life of all present. As lay women and men cultivate their own proper response to God's call to holiness, this should come to expression in the communal worship of the church.

Simultaneously, as lay persons assume their roles in liturgical celebration according to the gifts of the Spirit bestowed on them for that purpose, the ordained celebrant will be more clearly seen as the one who presides over the community, bringing together the diverse talents of the community as gift to the Father.

Whatever else the growing spiritual life of the laity entails, it certainly means a more intense sharing among the whole people of God of the gifts of the Spirit. And this we wish to reinforce.

"From the reception of these charism or gifts, including those which are less dramatic, there arise for each believer the right and duty to use them in the church and in the world for the good of humankind and for the upbuilding of the church."

Baptism and confirmation empower all believers to share in some form of ministry. Although the specific form of participation in ministry varies according to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, all who share in this work are united with one another. "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so too we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually

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Reagan Urged to Defend Rights, Oppose Torture

New York (RNS) — Seventy-one major religious leaders have asked President-elect Reagan to warn right-wing governments allied with the United States that his administration will not relax American human rights concerns or condone torture and political terrorism.

They said that repressive regimes in some countries had misconstrued statements by some Reagan spokesmen to mean that American foreign policy will forego criticism of human rights violations in the interest of stimulating business development.

American religious leaders told Reagan that recent in-

cidents of political terrorism in El Salvador, Haiti and South Korea provided "increasing and alarming evidence that military governments in many countries are viewing your election as a green light for suppression of legitimate dissent, and for widespread arrest and imprisonment, torture and murder."

Their letter reminded him that the cited instances of repression occurred "in countries which are allies of the United States, governments which receive aid and support from our government."

"The world needs to hear you say that you do not regard these methods as either necessary or justifiable to secure a favorable business climate," the appeal said.

The statement, signed by Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Jewish officials, was drafted by Clergy and Laity Concerned, an interfaith advocacy group for social justice concerns.

The letter to Reagan also suggested that "rightly or wrongly, there is again speculation that your election signaled a rollback of America's commitment to civil rights and equal justice for all."

While pointing out that

"some persons connected with your own campaign have encouraged this thinking," both at home and abroad, the religious leaders welcomed reports that a Reagan aide had warned the South Korean government against carrying out the death sentence for sedition against opposition politician Kim Dae Jung.

But, "more is needed," they

said. "Similar calm but firm words to other countries, notably in Latin America, might save thousands of lives."

Among the signers were Bishop Peter L. Gerety of Newark, Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit, Bishop Francis Mugavero of Brooklyn, and Father James Noonan, superior general of Maryknoll.



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