Reflections on the Lay Vocation

by Robert White

I am most pleased to be able to speak to you today during this symposium to mark the 25th anniversary of our “alma mater”—where we have lived in community (albeit in different periods and times) and tried to make the most of our studies in Rome as a time of preparation for service in the Church and the world. Notwithstanding the fact that this is the first time that I have met some of you old-timers, one thing that has inspired me in our conversations is that we all share a profound sense of vocation—a call from the Triune God within the communion of the Church to live out our baptism—as laity. Although others have already addressed some of the aspects of lay ecclesial ministry, I feel privileged to reflect on a rhetorical question that I have had to ask myself over the past few years: is baptism enough to be a “real” Christian in the Church and in the world? Obviously, I do not intend to exclude the other sacraments of initiation when I ask this question—in fact, I presuppose them as the foundational experiences of God’s salvific grace that transform us over a lifetime of discipleship, penance, and prayer.

Often when I meet people, particularly when questions about faith and the Church arise, they immediately assume that I am a priest or religious. When I respond that I am not, much to the confusion of the questioner, I always add that I am a baptized, confirmed, and regularly “eucharist-ing” Christian layman, who also frequently goes to confession. Somewhere between the glazed-over look at my response or the smirk, I am forced to confront over and over again the fact that even after fifty years since the Second Vatican Council, many people on the popular level have still not understood that the vocation of the laity is in fact a vocation—independent of holy orders or religious vows—and that it is not just a stepping stone to an authentic response to God’s call. When I say this, I am not speaking about the Church’s magisterial teaching on the topic or even the great theological tradition. It was the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, after all, that reiterated the nature of the vocation of the baptized. Rather, my comments are directed to the common popular understanding that many of my fellow Christians have about the topic.

Having said this, I can begin to understand at the same time why on the popular level so many Catholics still do not consider the lay state a true vocation. I think that this is because vocation and profession are confounded in the thought of many. One only needs to look at the years of formation and education that accompany any woman or man before they make their final profession as a religious, or the fact that seminaries as institutions exist principally to assist in the preparation of men with the skills necessary for the sacrament of holy orders, to understand why many people thus see religious life and priesthood as professions. The word profession then comes to substi-

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1 *Lumen Gentium*, 40: “All Christians in whatever state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of charity, and this holiness is conducive to a more human way of living even in society here on earth.”
tute the word vocation in the minds of many on the popular level. The laity, on the other hand, are not required to undertake such kind of training, education, and formation to live out their vocation in the Church and the world, and so they are not seen as having the profession of living a Christian vocation. The majority of Christians who are baptized as infants are left on their own once they have participated in catechesis to prepare for the other sacraments of initiation; they are not required to search for continued means of formation and education. Therefore, the laity are viewed as not having a profession-vocation by many. The laity qua laity are understood not to be living a vocation because they have not gone beyond the life of the sacraments of initiation, and the lifelong sacraments of Eucharist and Penance, in order to embrace a recognizable Christian profession of religious life or holy orders. Even the rise of secular institutes, societies of apostolic life, and lay movements over the past half-century has not changed this discourse greatly. Many Catholics incorrectly identify these as religious orders and therefore continue to see the lay state independent of belonging to one of these as other than a vocation.

Although I do not pretend to be able to change the tide of popular opinion in this brief paper, I would like to propose five characteristics of the lay vocation of all of the baptized based on my theological education, my experience as a pastoral assistant in parish ministry, my engagement in retreat and faith formation programs with a religious community, my life at the Lay Centre over these past years, and my engagement in teaching university students. Let me be clear, I am not attempting to describe what should be the characteristics of some lay persons (for example, those in secular institutes, societies of apostolic life, lay movements, or even lay ecclesial ministers), but of all baptized Catholic Christians. Also, given the brevity of this presentation, I will discuss each of these themes in broad strokes using the ancient theology of the three-fold office of Christ, who is priest, prophet, and king, in whom all of the baptized are graced by the Spirit to exercise to the glory of God the Father.²

The first of these characteristics is related to the common priesthood of all of the baptized. Regular participation in the Church’s liturgical and sacramental prayer, particularly Sunday Eucharist, frequent praying of the Liturgy of the Hours, and regular celebration of the Sacrament of Penance should be hallmarks of the Christian life. If the goal and intention of the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council was to help Christians rediscover the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Christian life³ and to restore the Liturgy of the Hours to once again become truly the prayer of the whole People of God,⁴ then participating in these liturgies worthily and with devotion must be a foundational characteristic of living out one’s baptism. Although Catholics are familiar with the Eucharist and know about Reconciliation, there is a lacuna when speaking of the Divine Office. The laity should be taught how to pray the Liturgy of the Hours—but in my own experience, many do not even know that it exists. The liturgy as the prayer of the body of Christ should be an intrinsic part of the Christian life. How many would profit from being introduced to this treasure of the Church’s spiritual tradition! Of course, cultivating personal prayer is also proper for the baptized. After all, what does it mean to live out baptism if not to live in the dynamism of the Spirit who dwells in the heart of the Christian, leading us to know Jesus more profoundly as Lord, in whom we are made sons and daughters of God the Father? The life of the baptized is profoundly marked by the relationship constituted by their insertion into the life of the Trinity, lived in the communion of saints that is the Church.

The second characteristic is related to the office of the baptized as prophet. Fundamentally this involves cultivating an awareness among all of the baptized of their vocation to live out their Christian faith in their everyday life in the world. In other words, all of the baptized are called by God to participate in the Church’s mission and ministry in a wonderful variety of ways, under the guidance of the magisterium of the Church and in collabora-

² This idea was first expressed by Eusebius of Caesarea, Hist. eccl. 1.3.8, in Philip Schaff, ed., Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series (New York, 1890), 1:86.
³ LG, 11.
⁴ Sacrosanctum Concilium, 99.
tion with ordained ministers and consecrated religious. Although for some lay people this will mean becoming oblates, tertiaries, or members of lay movements, in practice it means how each and every lay person learns to live the Christian life in their everyday circumstances of work, study, family, and society. The Second Vatican Council referred to this as the universal call to holiness. I link this idea of vocation to that of the office of prophet insofar as the whole of the witness of the Scriptures, from the call of the prophet Elijah in the still whisper (1 Kings 19: 12-13) to the dramatic conversion of the Apostle Paul (Acts 9: 3-19), shows that before one can live out their vocation there has to be a fundamental awareness that one has been chosen and called by name. In fact, coming from the United States and having lived my whole life either there or in Western Europe, I think that there are two challenges to such an awareness among the baptized: the prominence of individualism and the emphasis placed on self-determination. Both have a tendency to undermine the ecclesial nature of the lay vocation. To overcome the first, one must acknowledge that God does not call anyone apart from the communion—even if their vocation can challenge the complacency or sinfulness of the members of the Church. In fact, the very covenantal nature of the sacrament means exercising it with and for the good of the whole People of God. To overcome the second, one needs an authentic perception of how the living out of the baptismal vocation is not in conflict with the discernment of the magisterium at any given historical moment. The same Spirit who inspires charisms inspires the hierarchical structure of the visible Church.

The third characteristic is also related to the office of prophet. This is the fundamental call of all of the baptized to be witnesses—or martyrs—of Christ in the world. As the very name suggests, to be a Christian is to be another “christ.” This means that all of the baptized are empowered by the grace of the Spirit to become other christs in the world. Thus, the universal call to holiness is none other than the call to allow God to transform our lives and form them in the pattern of the “new Adam” in whom we are made children of the Father and coheirs to the Kingdom. Although this is nothing new, it takes on even greater significance in the context of North American and Western European societies that are becoming more and more secularized, losing the traditions of historically Christian cultures. As the great tradition of the Church attests, it has been through the selfless witness of holy laywomen and laymen throughout the ages—especially the martyrs—that the seeds of the Church have been planted and the Gospel has been proclaimed in many diverse cultural contexts. Thus, all Christians have a role in the evangelization of culture and society. First and foremost, the baptized are called to give witness to the Good News to each other and to the world at large by the manner in which they live their lives—or through their actions. Secondly, the baptized are charged with the mission of announcing the beauty and splendor of the truth through their words in exhortation, preaching, and teaching. Too often, the laity have been complacent to leave the call to give witness to the professionals in vows or holy orders in order to live as they please in the world. For example, I cannot tell you how many times fellow Christians have suggested that because I am not a religious or priest that I should be free to do whatever I want. However, this is a profound misunderstanding of the vocation of every baptized person. Although lay persons do sin, just as all of the other members of the Church, this is not an excuse for immoral behavior, for the order of the baptized is at the same time the order of penitents. In fact, the vocation to bear witness

5 LG, 40: “The classes and duties of life are many, but holiness is one—that sanctity which is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God, and who obey the voice of the Father and worship God the Father in spirit and in truth.”

6 Something noted by Bl. John Paul II in his Post-Synodal Exhortation Christifideles Laici 2: “The call is addressed to everyone: lay people as well are personally called by the Lord, from whom they receive a mission on behalf of the Church and the world.”

7 LG, 6.

8 Bl. John Paul II, Address, 2 March 1987, n. 3.

9 In accord with St Gregory the Great’s homily: “Keep watch over your manner of life, dear people, and make sure that you are indeed the Lord’s laborers. Each person should take into account what he does and consider if he is laboring in the vineyard of the Lord.” Hom. in Evang. I, XIX, 2: PL 76, 1155.

is at the same time the vocation to be converted. For without the grace of God and the willingness to confess their sins, no Christian can give authentic witness to Christ. Ascetical practices, such as almsgiving and fasting, and the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are indispensable to fulfilling the lay vocation.

The fourth characteristic is related to the office of king. Especially given my experience in parish ministry and teaching, I am convinced that catechesis needs to be strengthened to help all of the baptized know their faith tradition more profoundly. A paradigm shift that recognizes the ongoing, life-long need for faith formation and theological education is needed so that all of the baptized can deepen their understanding of who they are and whose they are in the light of faith. In my experiences of pastoral work and teaching, many have shared that I know more about the Catholic faith than anyone they previously met in their lives—if they only knew the truth! This just goes to show the need for engaging catechesis not only in moments of preparation for the celebration of the sacraments but throughout the course of the Christian life. How can the laity be ready to give “an explanation to anyone who asks … for a reason for [their] hope” (Acts 9: 3-19) if they sincerely do not know how to respond to questions about their faith? This kind of catechesis must not only be intellectual, although sound theological formation is indispensable, but also holistic. I think that the approach to catechesis today, especially for adult faith formation, should include spiritual, moral, cultural, and human formation as well. If the laity are to live their vocation in the Church and the world, they need to be engaged by the Church and empowered to do this in ways appropriate to their state in life. If the order of the baptized is truly “royal,” then all of the members of that order need to be formed to “reign” (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6, 5:10) To carry the metaphor forward, a good monarch has to learn to become one through a lifetime of formative experiences that help them to embody this role. The baptized must recognize the need to be helped over the span of their lives to rule over their own sinful/dysfunctional actions in order to collaborate with the Spirit in manifesting the Kingship of Christ over the powers of evil, sin, and death in the world.

The fifth characteristic is also related to the office of king. Given the realities of the economic crisis, poverty in the world, and the increasing pluralism of the United States and Western Europe, I think that the laity has an indispensable role in service and dialogue. This is particularly important as living out the grace of baptism means attending to the needs of others and confronting the realities of society in which we live. In order to be authentically Christian, the life of baptism has to be incarnate in the real socio-economic, religious, and political context in which a Christian lives. Christ’s incarnation is the cause of the possibility both of our redemption and our divinization—not only does Christ assume our mortal nature to free us from the power of death, but the incarnation, specifically Christ’s ascension to the Father in his human nature, also draws our human nature closer to the God in whose image and likeness we have been made. This means that to live the lay vocation is to be aware of the “other” in our midst, whether that means the marginalized, the follower of another religion, or the members of our own family and community. To be Christian means to participate in the kenosis of the Son of God, who in his manhood “humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death on the cross.” (Philippians 2:8.) To be Christian means to care for the poor and those in need. It means to welcome the stranger and the other with charity, the greatest of all the virtues. (1 Corinthians 13:13) It seems to me that two of the greatest ways for the laity to exercise this charity involve commitments to social justice and dialogue on the ecumenical and interfaith levels. Both of these concretize the way in which living as other christs draws us beyond our own material needs and comfort zones. The baptized are able to give their greatest witness to God by how they care for the most vulnerable members of society and how they work to overcome prejudices and build bridges with non-Catholic Christians and non-Christians. The dialogue of life, which we try to live everyday at the Lay Centre, is the only way to live charity in the marketplace, at work, and in the family. Ultimately, it is only when all the baptized commit themselves to this dialogue that the Church can truly be the “universal sacrament of salvation” for the whole world. [11]

In conclusion, although this paper has only been able to briefly address each of the five characteristics that constitute the vocation of all of the baptized, I think that each of these are crucial to the health of the communion of believers and the mission of the Church in and for the world. I recognize that my description is not exhaustive and that I am speaking from my own background and experience. Surely, in the communion of over one billion baptized Catholic Christians, more insights have been garnered and other characteristics might be mentioned. However, I believe that these five characteristics mark the lives of all laity—both those in particular ecclesial commitments and those who are not, whether they are married or single.