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On the holiness of the laity

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HOLINESS



By Sr. Mary Garascia, Ph.D.

Is Lay Ecclesial Ministry (ministry directed by lay persons in parishes, dioceses, and other venues) helping the lay faithful be missionaries...galvanizing them for evangelization? Or is it a new form of clericalism?

U.S. Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston posed this question to Bishops and others attending the last Lay Ecclesial Ministry Summit. "It's tough to argue that a century of expanding lay roles in Catholicism has fundamentally transformed the human situation... the question should be, is any of this making the world holier?" commented John Allen in *The Future Church* (p 215-216).

Both ordained men in our Church, and the non-ordained men and women in it, are called to holiness by our common Baptism. But we walk two paths to holiness, two paths formed by the distinct ways of life of the ordained clergy and the non-ordained laity. (Sisters, by the way, are not ordained; I think of us as sort of specialized laity). In Cardinal DiNardo's talk, he affirms with gratitude the thousands of lay persons facilitating church ministry, because today's U.S. Church could not function without them. But the Cardinal and John Allen remind us that becoming holy, for us non-ordained people, is meant to happen in "the world," where we live out our lives and exercise our mission.

A little history: Before Vatican Council II (1962-65), there were a couple decades of lay movements including Sodalities, Serra Clubs, Cursillo, Knights of Columbus, and CCD. But they were closely associated with the ministry of hierarchy (the ordained). Then Vatican Council II made a startling pronouncement. The lay apostolate, it said, is a participation in the saving mission of the Church and not simply a participation in the work of the hierarchy, known as Catholic Action (LG 33). The goal of the lay apostolate is the sanctification of individuals and the renewal of the temporal order (i.e., "the world"), the Council said in multiple places. Pause to appreciate what a shift in spiritual perspective this was. For centuries before, "the world" was viewed as a place where evil lurked, a temporary realm that would pass away (1 Jn 2:16-17). Ordained persons were esteemed holier than lay persons in part because their realm was the Church, an eternal and holy realm, and not the world - the realm of sex, commerce, and politics. But now, the Council is saying, despite the complexities of the realm of "the world," we laity become holier right there, through our worldly relationships and activities, and by helping infuse Gospel values into the worldly culture into which we are born and live out our lives. The world itself, as described by the Council, is a permeable space. It is not perfect by any means, but it is capable of becoming more perfect depending on our apostolic activity in it.

As I reflect on my own long history in parish work, it seems to me that we have not done a very good job promoting and strengthening truly worldly lay spirituality and ministry. I suspect that our most committed parish members, if asked how they see themselves as ministers, would name being involved in some in-Church ministry, like lectors or ushers or catechists. And if asked how they grow in holi-

ness, they might mention being in a scripture class, being faithful to certain devotions, Mass and sacraments, and so on. But how does a lay person become holy and minister by interacting with the world?

Parishes/Dioceses have made some efforts to answer this question by various "family life" ministries. The family is the foundational human experience for all of us. Helping the family to be a healthy and holy place is the primary ministry of parents and grandparents, and everyone else living in families. We have only scratched the surface here!

But there are so many other areas where effort is also needed. Here are a few I think are important.

We spend a large part of our lives in the world of work; we need a better spirituality of work, one that upholds the dignity and purpose of work that is humble as well as work that is "important." We need education in the ethics and life skills (like conflict resolution, for example) that help us operate as disciples of Jesus in whatever work world we find ourselves.

We need broader and deeper conversation and formation about sexuality so that we can form and live out the faithful, generative, and sacrificial relationships that make us holy. We need more encouragement to take up political work; the ordained are prohibited from actively participating in politics because it is the specific responsibility of us, the laity (*Christifideles Laici* no 60). We need encouragement to become small or big leaders in neighborhoods and workplaces, and in every other part of "the world," to address the pressing issues of today, including the environmental crisis and racism, which our U.S. Bishops have just called us to confront. We laity need the support of one another, and so we need to gather with others to pray and reflect on our lives "in the world." Both Popes and our Bishops have recommended membership in Small Faith Communities to us. We need more formation about how to take our lives in the world to prayer.

I am sure you can add many more ways that worldly lay spirituality can be strengthened. Pope Saint John Paul II says: "...faith that does not affect a person's culture is a faith not fully embraced, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived (CL, no 59)." Probably you and I are both dismayed by what we see happening in our culture and our world. It's our mission as laity to do something about all that! And for that we need our beloved ordained, and our lay ecclesial ministers, to form and mission us.

Sister Mary Garascia, PhD (Theology), is a member of the Sisters of the Precious Blood of Dayton Ohio, where she now resides. Until recently she lived and ministered at The Holy Name of Jesus in Redlands. You can follow her weekly Sunday scripture blogs at PreciousBloodSistersDayton.org.

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