

NATIONAL CATHOLIC LAITY COUNCIL; GHANA

International Conference for the Promotion and Formation of the Laity: Best Practices

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General Formation among the Catholic Population in Ghana

1. INTRODUCTION

From the Second Vatican Council, the apparent focus of the Church has been on the laity, admitting them into equal status with the clergy and making them co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord. They therefore are expected to take up responsibilities in the Church and also in the world in name of the Church. As Pope Pius XII indicated the laity are in the forefront of the Church and they are the Church. Such participation in the affairs of the Church requires that the laity are properly formed to be able to carry out such responsibilities. Vatican 2 and other magisterial documents underline the secularity of the apostolate of the laity. They should be able to bring Christ to all the pathways of life and form the temporal order with the mind of Christ. In this brief report I would like to underline how the laity are formed to make them equal to the tasks the Church envisages for them in the world. In so doing I would like to look at efforts made by parish communities, and also those undertaken by the lay societies/associations, and end with the interventions undertaken on behalf of the bishops' conference by the National Catholic Laity Council.

2. PARISH BASED FORMATION ACTIVITIES

Parish based laity formation programs invariably are those linked with the reception of the sacraments. I will therefore dwell on instruction for the reception of Baptism, Confirmation and for Holy Matrimony.

2.1. Instruction for Baptism

Since most Catholics are baptised as infants, catechetical preparation for baptism are limited to the very few who actually did not have the benefit of infant baptism or became Catholics at a later age in their lives. Catechetical instruction for baptism tended to be based on the penny catechism and memorisation of church prayers and responses. In recent years however, many parishes have begun using the Catechism of the Catholic Church as the text for the instruction of catechumen. They do not really have to be able to recite responses to questions, but be able to give an account of why Catholics are expected to hold certain beliefs.

2.2. Instruction for Confirmation and Holy Eucharist

Instruction for the reception of the sacraments of Confirmation and the Eucharist are undertaken by parish and school authorities. In most cases candidates have to undergo weekend classes for a period of two years to be considered ready for the reception of the sacraments. Material for instruction are generally drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Candidates are also taken through aspects of Church History, especially the missionary spread of the Church in Africa.

2.3. Instruction for Holy Eucharist

The reception of the sacrament of Holy Matrimony is another occasion for lay instruction handled by the parishes. In the last few years the practice all over the country has been for prospective couples to undergo marital counselling for a period of up to six months before their bans are proclaimed. Materials for instruction are also drawn from the Catechism of Catholic Church, but may vary from parish to parish. In many parishes trained lay marriage counsellors help with preparation of candidates for matrimony.

3. DIOCESAN BASED FORMATION PROGRAMMES

Some of the dioceses in Ghana have instituted programmes for the formation of the laity. There dotted around the country pastoral centres run by the dioceses for the formation of the laity. In the Archdiocese of Kumasi for example there is a centre referred to as Christian village, which has several departments which offer programmes such as the Dullex Programme, and courses for marriage counsellors. There is also a youth centre, a catechetical centre and a retreat centre. The catechetical centre runs a two-year programme for catechists in the archdiocese. Many of the dioceses run Biblical Apostolate (BA) courses. BA courses are actually coordinated from the National Catholic Secretariat but administered under the auspices of diocesan authorities. Some dioceses have what they call the Theology courses for the laity, which offer rudimentary courses in theology for the laity.

4. FORMATION BY THE LAY SOCIETY/ASSOCIATIONS

It may be noticed that parish based formation leaves big gaps in the Christian instruction of Catholics in the country. One may talk of homilies preached at masses as the only other source providing some formation. But the lay societies/associations (sodalities) are those who provide some aspects of the formation required for adult Christian life. In Ghana it is possible to put the existing sodalities into four: youth societies/associations, liturgical societies, devotional societies, and friendly/charity societies.

4.1. Youth Societies/Associations

In Ghana there are a number of youth associations, but only five of them are organised on the national level. These are Catholic Youth Organisation (CYO), Young Christian Students (YCS), Young Christian Workers (YCW), International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS) Pax Romana, and Council for Social and Religious Advancement (COSRA). The youth associations are organised hierarchically, at the parish level into the Parish Youth Council (PYC). There is the Diocesan Youth Council (DYC) and at the national level the coordinating body is the Ghana National Catholic Youth Council (GHANCYC). GHANCYC has developed a programme of formation which they refer to as the New Integrated Youth Formation Programme (NICYFOP). The programme, which is in two sets, consists of modules which target the human, spiritual, social and intellectual development of the Catholic youth. There are national sensitization programmes which dispose lower level formators to the content of the modules and train them on methodology and delivery. At the parochial level each youth society/association is supposed to use the NICYFOP document as the text for instruction administered at workshops, seminars and retreats.

As part of youth formation programmes in the Ghanaian church some dioceses have instituted what they refer to as Summer School programmes. In August of every year, secondary level students are invited to the summer schools. Students are given instruction in their academic courses, citizenship and in Catholic doctrine, prayer and life.

4.2. Liturgical societies

These are societies like the Choir, Lectors and the Mass Servers. As part of their practice for divine worship, some of these societies make time to take members through instruction relating to their roles in the worship and how these should impact their lives in the world. Some of them also organise retreats, workshops and seminars for their members to support their Christian formation and help them understand the spiritual dimension of their service in the church.

4.3. Devotional Societies

These include societies like St Anthony's Guild, Legion of Mary, Confraternity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR). These societies are organised hierarchically and are have parish, deanery, diocesan, provincial and national organizations. The societies appear to have quite robust formation programmes, mostly aligned to their respective charisms. For example, the CCR, which is devoted to biblical study, prayer and evangelization have a good regime of training and formation for their members (which sometimes include even the clergy). Formation for the Legionaries include giving care to the sick, elderly and infirm and communicating the gospel to such people living under quite vulnerable circumstances.

4.4. Friendly/Charity Societies

Friendly/Charity societies include Society of St Vincent de Paul, Knight and Lady Auxiliaries of St John International, Knight and Ladies of Marshall, Catholic Women Association, Christian Mothers Association, St Teresa's Society. Catholic Men Confraternities. Each of these societies follow their own charisms and order of formation. While instruction in Catholic doctrines is basic to all of them, their respective formations depend on their chosen charisms. The Knights of Marshall for example place emphasis on mystical psychology, Christian Mothers tend to emphasise marriage and parenting.

5. THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC LAITY COUNCIL

The National Catholic Laity Council (NCLC) was established by the Ghana Catholic Bishops Conference (GCBC) to be responsible for laity formation and to coordinate the lay apostolate. in the whole country. The council is organised hierarchically from the parish through deanery, diocesan, provincial to the national level. At the parochial level laity council is actually a meeting of leaders of the lay associations and basic Christian communities, who come together every three months to appraise their respective activities in the cause of the formation of their members and the apostolate. They also preview action plans for the next three months. Parish councils are organised into deanery councils and then into diocesan laity councils, provincial councils and then into the national laity council.

The NCLC publishes a study material each year based on specific themes for the instruction of the laity nationwide. For this purpose, there is organised a national plenary assembly and a study session, where the study material is introduced to diocesan leaders and leaders of the national lay associations, who in turn are supposed to organise seminars for leaders of the parish laity councils and for the diocesan lay association leaders respectively. Each parish in the month of June or July is expected to organise a week of laity instruction, referred to as laity week celebration. The material for instruction is from the document provided by the national council.

Additionally, the national laity council organises bi-quarterly leadership seminars on specific themes for the benefit of leaderships of diocesan laity councils and diocesan lay associations. The dioceses are also expected to replicate those seminars for the benefit of leaderships of parish laity councils and lay associations.

Another formation activity undertaken by the laity council is the organisation of laity congresses. The national laity council organises a national congress once every three years. The last national laity congress was organised in August 2016 under the theme, “*The laity and the new evangelization in the context of the church’s works of mercy*”. Delegates came from every parish of the dioceses in the country. Dioceses also regularly hold their congresses on selected themes and use the opportunity to educate the laity on different aspects of the apostolate.

6. CONCLUSION

Since this report is about best practices it is not the place to talk about problems and challenges to laity formation in the country. It should suffice to say that there are serious gaps in the formation of Catholics in the country even though there are strong efforts in that direction. The national laity council is floating the idea of a virtual college for the formation of the laity. The college will run courses on many aspects of church life and focus on the human, spiritual intellectual and social development of the laity.

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