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The Formation of the Laity: Toward an Efficacious Co-Responsibility

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The Church's evangelizing mission is the responsibility of *all* the baptized. All women and men, risen with Jesus Christ in the waters of Baptism and sealed with the indelible mark of the Holy Spirit, must know ourselves empowered to proclaim the Gospel, to give witness of what God has done in our lives, and to be instruments of God's Reign in the here and now of our shared history. This is a moment of grace; a moment that affords us the opportunity as church leaders, teachers and theologians to discern together, in a spirit of synodal dialogue, the vocation to ecclesial and ministerial co-responsibility. All the baptized are called to evangelize as a common goal and in a spirit of communion. We are called to be Church. Inspired by our faith in Jesus Christ, we are called to build a world where everyone lives with dignity and finds fulfillment. We do this in light of our shared baptismal vocation, which finds expression through various particular callings discerned and embraced.

I want to start this reflection by emphasizing our shared vocation as baptized women and men, and the implications of this vocation in the way we relate to God, others, and the created order. Whether lay, consecrated or ordained, all the baptized are responsible for the Church's evangelizing mission as we share in the *tria munera* of Jesus Christ: Priest, Prophet and King. Any reflection about formation of the laity must begin here.

We are privileged to live in a moment of history in which we share a rather strong and dynamic ecclesial consciousness about the identity and role of the laity. There is no doubt that the Second Vatican Council, and the pontificates that followed the Council until today, have played a major role in sharpening that consciousness. Three important developments should be noted. One, we have made major inroads embracing language that allows us to speak of lay women and men in our own terms and in our own rights. The lay ecclesial status should not be defined merely as that of the baptized who are not ordained or those who are not consecrated—aware that the non-ordained consecrated are lay faithful, although in a qualified manner in light of their vows and life commitment. Second, the laity and our apostolic activity are essential to any contemporary understanding of the Church's life and its structures. One cannot speak of church without either. Third, lay women and men are not merely “collaborators” or “assistants” to the ordained and their ecclesial work but *co-responsible* on matters related to the life of the Church and its

mission. We are co-workers. Rooted in our baptismal identity, the laity have voice and agency, therefore we are co-responsible for the same mission along with other baptized members called to distinct ecclesial vocations (e.g., the ordained).

1. Paradigm Shift #1: Through the Eyes of the Laity

Our Catholic tradition continues to make major inroads in the way we understand the role of the laity within and beyond ecclesial structures. It has not been an easy or smooth pathway, yet we are thinking about these matters with much creativity. For centuries, the central reference point for most matters related to evangelization, ministry and responsibility for the Church's works and visible structures has been the ministry of the ordained, with particular emphasis on the role of the Magisterium. At the same time, the apostolic work of non-ordained consecrated women and men who belong to religious orders, and other similar associations, has inhabited an in-between space between the way ordained and non-vowed religious lay people live and practice their baptismal vocation. Thus, they have modeled very interesting ways of apostolic and ministerial activity, and participate in exciting experiences of formation that are not always available or possible for the rest of the laity.

Many reflections—theological and practical—about the role of the laity in the Church have been developed and put forward by ordained and vowed religious ecclesial leaders and theologians. It is not accidental that such reflections, which tend to dominate our shared understanding of who the laity are, our role in the Church, and the type of formation we need, start with the experience of ordained and vowed religious as a paradigm. We shall not forget that we all speak from our most immediate experience and see the world through the lenses most available to us.

My sense is that there are also other ways to speak creatively about lay women and men as co-responsible in the Church's evangelizing mission, and the type of formation that our Church needs to promote the agency of this particular sector of the People of God. To do that requires a paradigm shift: *start with the laity, our everyday experience, our understandings of God in the particular contexts where we live, how we are and how we build church in lo cotidiano (the quotidian, the everyday); what kind of needs we think should be prioritized when evangelizing; our burning questions and concerns; our hopes and joys.* We need more lay women and men writing about how we dream the Church. We need more lay women and men writing theologies of ecclesial leadership, ministerial life, evangelization, and apostolic life from our perspective as lay people and for the entire Church. This does not mean that we are to discard the rich reflections about the laity that already exist. Catholicism is stronger when multiple perspectives, born out of different experiences, mediated through different lenses, enrich our common understanding.

This paradigm shift is grounded in two foundational ecclesiological convictions. One, lay women and men are co-responsible for the life and mission of the Church, and for all the members of our ecclesial community, because we are baptized. Our baptismal identity makes us co-responsible for the Church's work, mission, structures and people. At the same time, because we are baptized, we have the right to credibly participate in processes that make the Church's work, mission, structures and people effective. Two, lay women and men, as baptized and as disciples of Jesus Christ, along with the ordained and the consecrated, are the Church, the People of God. We need to improve language that refers to the laity as people "who help the Church to advance

its mission” or people to whom “the Church serves or accompanies.” We need to move beyond language that treats the laity in ancillary ways. Any effort of collaboration or outreach among the baptized is an exercise of ecclesial communion and mutual accompaniment. The People of God journeys with the People of God. From this perspective, we can hold the laity more accountable to care in co-responsible ways for other lay people, the consecrated and the ordained as well as their works.

The paradigm shift proposed here, centering the experience of the laity to speak about the laity in light of our participation in Jesus Christ’s life and mission, requires that those involved in efforts of faith and ministerial formation, not only of lay people but also of ordained and the consecrated ecclesial leaders, be prepared to acknowledge and affirm the following principles.

First, the Holy Spirit lives, acts and moves in every baptized person. It is God’s Holy Spirit, received at Baptism, renewed through sacramental participation and prayer life. All lay women and men are people of the Spirit; the same Spirit that sustains the vocation of the ordained and the consecrated; the same Spirit that guides and renews the Church in history. This we shall call the *pneumatological principle*.

Second, lay women and men, as people of faith, in light of the particular contexts, experiences, and circumstances in which our lives unfold, within and beyond ecclesial structures, experience life in accord to the vocations to which we are called within our lay state. Such experience, allows us to know and interpret reality in distinct ways. Romancing, marriage, love making, giving birth, raising children, supporting grandchildren, journeying with a spouse or a child through illness, experience the particular suffering associated with the loss of a spouse or a child, (non-consecrated) single life at the service of others, engaging in politics; laboring in non-ecclesial spaces to sustain families and transforming local environments as well as the larger world, among several other activities, afford lay women and men particular wisdom and insight into the mystery of the human and the mystery of God that will be hardly accessed otherwise. This we shall call the *epistemological principle*.

Third, and closely linked to the experiences just mentioned, lay women and men go through history exploring ways to make sense of reality and how we experience God in the everyday in language that is not always theological or biblical, yet remaining grounded in these more ecclesial grammars. As we engage in these meaning-making exercises, which are part of our regular spiritual quest as laity, we find ourselves engaged in exercises of lay theological imagination that often involve the arts, literature, the digital world, technology, media, and diverse philosophical and religious traditions, among other resources, available in the immediacy of the pluralistic spaces we inhabit. The engagement of these resources is not exclusive to the laity, yet our socio-historical position in the everyday allows us to engage them with a distinct creativity and a particular level of freedom proper to our lay state. This we shall call the *theopoetic principle*.

Fourth, lay women and men live and practice our baptismal vocation most of the time in spaces that demand witnessing the Gospel without explicit references to religious language and without the sanctuary that settings such as the pulpit, the ecclesiastical structure, the Catholic school, or the confessional organization provide. We do this in the factory, the hospital, the office, the

secular classroom, the sports field, the bank, the board meeting, the farm, the laboratory, the room where life-and-death decisions are made, the chamber where policy that will affect millions is drafted, etc. Witnessing our faith convictions in these spaces, particularly in an increasingly secularized world, affirming life and truth, proclaiming that God is really with us, that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, makes us simultaneously brave and vulnerable. Embracing such responsibility requires a distinctive sense of evangelical parrhesia. This we shall call the *prophetic principle*.

These four principles—pneumatological, epistemological, theopoetic, and prophetic—call for a particular trust in lay women and men as authentic vessels, interpreters and stewards of the one and only Church’s evangelizing mission. As such, we are more than collaborators; we are co-workers, which takes us into a second paradigm shift.

2. Paradigm Shift #2: From Collaborators to Co-Workers

As co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord, lay women and men, in communion with the ordained and the consecrated, share the Good News and give witness of Jesus Christ to sanctify the world. Co-workers not only have a shared understanding of the mission, but share in the same mission. A shared mission does not erase the distinct roles and vocations to which we are called within the same ecclesial community. St. Paul’s powerful image of the body illustrates this point well: “As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ... there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I do not need you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I do not need you’” (1 Corinthians, 12:12; 20b-21).

It is tempting to assume that lay women and men’s main—only? —realm to witness our faith is located beyond ecclesial structures, “in the world.” This metaphor, however, echoes an untenable cosmology, and its concomitant anthropology, that presumes simultaneous forms of existence “in the world” and “outside the world.” Is the latter actually possible? The division of these realms seems artificial. The Church as the People of God exists in history. We exist in the world; we are the world. Even if we were to read the metaphor through the lens of a Johannine theology, in which those “outside the world” are those who reject God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we need to be careful not to use it naively or inappropriately when referring to the life and participation of the laity in the mission of evangelization. Lay women and men live and practice our baptismal vocation in spaces that are not always ecclesial or ecclesiastical, yet we do this as co-workers in the vineyard, in partnership with the ordained and the consecrated who also have a responsibility for temporal matters, although within the framework, limitations and possibilities imposed by their particular vocations.

Lay women and men are also co-workers in the Church’s evangelizing mission intra-ecclesially. If at some point in history it was assumed that this mission was the purview primarily of the ordained members among the community of baptized, and the non-ordained members were to assume a passive role, waiting to be invited to assist or support that work, that is not the vision and challenge that the Second Vatican Council has put forward, particularly in *Lumen Gentium*, inviting us to understand the Church as People of God. As members of Catholic parishes, dioceses, educational institutions, organizations, and other ecclesial structures, we share in the responsibility for their care, success, effectiveness and direction. The vision and input of the laity on these matters are as necessary as those of the ordained and the consecrated.

Some lay women and men are called to participate more explicitly in the Church's ministerial activity. They are lay ecclesial ministers. As such, they discern a vocation and are authorized by their bishops to participate in the ministerial activity of the local church where they live and serve. In order to do this, they undergo appropriate theological and ministerial formation. Lay ecclesial ministry is a particular vocation within their larger baptismal vocation. These pastoral leaders fulfill important ministerial roles in the life of the Church, proper to the lay state, enriching the mission of evangelization in distinct ways. Lay ecclesial ministry is an authentic vocation in the life of the Church, rooted in the richness and power of Baptism, and as such it should not be considered as a stopgap when confronted with scarcity of ordained or consecrated ministers. Neither it should be considered a ministry competing or replacing other recognized ministries in the life of the Church. The flourishing of lay ecclesial ministry is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church in our time. Such flourishing is to be promoted alongside the flourishing of the ministry of the ordained and the consecrated members of the Church.

3. Two Dimensions of Lay Formation

With these paradigm shifts in mind, we are now better positioned to reflect on the formation that is necessary to support, accompany and empower lay women and men to be effective co-workers in the Church's evangelizing mission. This formation, I believe, needs to have two complementary dimensions. One, formation for Christian discipleship and agency. Two, formation for lay ecclesial leadership. Let us say more about each.

A. Formation for Christian Discipleship and Agency.

The formation of the laity begins with the firm commitment to provide moments, spaces and resources for all the baptized to have an encounter with Jesus Christ here and now. Only those who have experienced the merciful and transforming love of the Lord in their lives, those who are firmly convinced of his resurrection and the implications of the Paschal Mystery for human existence, can call themselves Christian disciples.

Lay women and men do not enter processes of faith and ministerial formation as *tabulae rasae*. The starting point of our formation as disciples is our own lives as shaped by the realities and circumstances that we encounter every day. Every process of formation starts with our own lives. Let us return to the four principles identified earlier: pneumatological, epistemological, theopoetic, and prophetic. Formation for Christian discipleship and agency...

- Provides language to help the baptized identify and name how the Holy Spirit works in our lives;
- affirms the wisdom and insights of the laity as building blocks and points of encounter with the core principles of the Christian tradition;
- shapes the imagination of the laity to make creative connections between processes of meaning-making and the cultivation of a spiritual life; and,
- empowers the laity to witness with joy and courage the truth and the values of the Gospel, starting with our own families and faith communities, yet projecting us to the many other realms in which our lives unfold.

While we can imagine programs, special courses and lectures that address these important dimensions of lay experience, formation for Christian discipleship and agency takes place

naturally as part of the regular curriculum of Church life. It happens in the liturgy as we all celebrate the mysteries of our faith, particularly the Eucharist, listen and meditate upon God's Word proclaimed and explained, and experience communion through prayer and ritual celebration. It happens through solid catechesis, in which we encounter the beauty of the tradition, explore it through different lenses and make it our own in dialogue with our fellow sisters and brothers. In particular, adult catechesis is vital to form the laity, especially since adults are raising the new generations and are constantly confronted with questions and challenges that require our informed witness. It happens through the experience of building intentional communities of disciples where the baptized pray and learn together, support one another and cherish the value of being with one another, regardless of our differences. It happens when lay people are invited to bring faith into action through service in our immediate families, faith communities, and neighborhoods, especially taking care of the poor and those most vulnerable among us.

This curriculum is not necessarily novel. It has been part of the DNA of the Church's evangelizing activity since early Christianity. It is a formation curriculum that stands on the pillars of *leitourgia*, *didaché*, *koinonia* and *diakonía*. We all do this, without a doubt. The challenge is to do it better, which will require more investment of resources as well as planning. Good liturgy, good catechesis, good communities, and good experiences of service do not happen by accident.

B. *Formation for Lay Ecclesial Leadership.*

There is so much that needs to be done to advance the Church's evangelizing mission. As our communities grow and diversify, so does the need for adequately formed pastoral leaders. Ordained pastoral leaders cannot do it all. Consecrated pastoral leaders cannot do it all. Lay pastoral leaders cannot do it all. We need each other; we need our gifts and our distinct vocations in order to be effective.

Catholicism has a long tradition of investing in the formation of ordained and consecrated pastoral leaders. The rise of universities helped our Church to recognize the value of intellectual formation, particularly in the fields of theology and philosophy, as part of ministerial training. The Council of Trent inspired the model of seminaries to form qualified ordained ministers. Religious orders in recent centuries have developed creative and effective models to train their members in light of their charisms. However, the formation of the laity, particularly those called to serve as lay ecclesial ministers, has not had the same impetus or level of investment. In many ways, it is expected that lay people take care of seeking and funding their own theological and ministerial formation. The level of formation of lay leaders for ecclesial leadership varies from country to country depending on access to educational institutions and availability to resources. There is an enormous gap between what we invest in the formation of the ordained and the consecrated and what we invest in the formation of the laity, particularly lay ecclesial ministers. Closing such gap is not only a matter of good pastoral practice, but also of justice. The Second Vatican Council and much of the reflection in recent decades about the protagonic role of laity seek to change that. This is why we are in this important meeting.

Lay ecclesial ministers are increasingly serving the ecclesial community in roles performed mainly by ordained or consecrated pastoral leaders until recent. More instances of ecclesial

service carried out by lay pastoral leaders are considered to have a ministerial character (e.g., pastoral associates; instructors of theology; directors of Catholic schools; youth ministers). The recent institution of the Ministry of Catechist by Pope Francis, and the expansion of access to the ministries of Lector and Acolyte to lay people not on the path to ordination, signal a trend toward more ecclesial co-responsibility, not only within the realm of the liturgy, but also in questions of administration, teaching and even governance. Participation of the laity in these roles cannot be taken lightly. We need to be more intentional in terms of the type of formation we offer these pastoral leaders. The Code of Canon Law, canon 231, states: “lay persons who devote themselves permanently or temporarily to some special service of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation which is required to fulfill their function properly.” Just as we affirm the importance of working together in ministry, we should affirm the importance of fostering some parity at the level of ministerial formation.

4. Re-Imagining Formation of Lay Co-Workers

Here are two practical ways in which we could aim at achieving such parity while strengthening the formation of the laity to be better witnesses of the Gospel, and to serve properly in ecclesial contexts –in the case of those called to lay ecclesial ministry.

A. Incorporate Standard Dimensions of Ministerial Formation into Lay Formation Efforts.

As we form priests, deacons and consecrated pastoral leaders in seminaries, universities and houses of formation, Catholics have identified four fundamental areas that need to be part of every formation program: Human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. The formation of lay women and men, whether for discipleship or lay ecclesial ministry, should not be the exception. Allow me to read how the Catholic Bishops of the United States in their 2005 document, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, provide clear goals for the formation of the laity in those four areas. What is said in the following lines about the lay ecclesial minister, I believe applies to every instance of lay formation in the Church:

“Human formation seeks to develop the lay ecclesial minister’s human qualities and character, fostering a healthy and well-balanced personality, for the sake of both personal growth and ministerial service.”

“Spiritual formation aims to arouse and animate true hunger for holiness, desire for union with the Father through Christ in the Spirit, daily growing in love of God and neighbor in life and ministry, and the practices of prayer and spirituality that foster these attitudes and dispositions. It promotes and strengthens that fundamental conversion that places God, and not oneself, at the center of one’s life. Openness to this ongoing conversion is a prerequisite for fruitful spiritual formation.”

“Intellectual formation seeks to develop the lay ecclesial minister’s understanding and appreciation of the Catholic faith, which is rooted in God’s revelation and embodied in the living tradition of the Church. It consists chiefly of study of the sacred sciences but draws also upon a wide range of other disciplines: philosophy, literature and the arts, psychology, sociology, counseling, medical ethics, culture and language studies, business administration, leadership and organizational development, law, and so on. While the

sacred sciences are the main focus here, we recognize the value of these other disciplines and encourage their study and use whenever relevant for effective ministry.”

“Pastoral formation cultivates the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that directly pertain to effective functioning in the ministry setting and that also pertain to pastoral administration that supports direct ministry.”

B. *Create Spaces to Form Ecclesial Ministers Together.*

Much of ministerial formation in our church happens in isolated and fragmented ways. We isolate candidates for ordination in seminaries, separate programs of diaconate formation, and have separate houses of formation for the consecrated. Universities and other centers of higher education that form lay leaders at the theological and ministerial level seldom engage in partnerships with seminaries and houses of formation. Such fragmentation and isolation are not exclusive of ministerial formation. Our catechetical programs for children are often disconnected from what we do to form young people through youth and young adult ministry efforts. In turn, those efforts rarely connect with adult formation programs or family catechesis, when these exist. Ecclesial movements are incredible and dynamic sources of ecclesial energy and formation, yet they largely attract baptized Catholics who identify with their spiritualities and pastoral commitments. Small ecclesial communities have the potential to form disciples and pastoral leaders, yet some operate in disconnection with more standard formation efforts in parishes and dioceses.

There is wisdom in having special instances when a particular group of Catholics preparing for ministry or for Christian discipleship need to have separate moments to discuss specific aspects of their formation, to shape identity and build community. However, if we are going to move into a new era of formation for discipleship and for ecclesial leadership, with more participation of the laity into existing programs and structures, perhaps imagining new ones, we need to address such patterns of fragmentation and isolation.

One way to address such reality is to design and promote programs in which candidates for ordination, as well as consecrated women and men, study theology and ministry alongside lay people. Candidates for ordination can benefit significantly by engaging in intellectual, spiritual and pastoral conversations with women, single and married, with couples who have children and grandchildren, with professionals in different fields who seek to explore ways to bring theological and ministerial insights into their work. In turn, lay women and men can grow in our understanding and appreciation of those who have been called to ordained and religious life. This already happens in many universities and pastoral institutes throughout the world. It happens in some diocesan seminaries, and ideally more will be open to do so in the future. These ecclesial leaders will eventually find themselves in parishes, schools and organizations, working together shoulder to shoulder, advancing the same evangelizing mission. Even if lay people in those programs are not planning on serving as lay ecclesial ministers, they will likely be supporting the future pastoral leaders in their ministries. Not training together during those years of formation seems like a missed opportunity.

Another way to address fragmentation and isolation as we form disciples and pastoral leaders—lay, consecrated and ordained—is to connect more intentionally the different instances of faith

formation in our communities to those of ministerial formation at the diocesan, religious on higher educational levels, among others. This will require a commitment from those involved in ministerial formation efforts to work more closely with directors of religious education, pastors and other pastoral agents in faith communities to strengthen their efforts. Discernment of a ministerial vocational should be naturally integrated into all instances of formation for discipleship.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that we are living in a very important moment of the history of our Church. We can say with a great level of confidence that the Holy Spirit is leading us. This is a Kairos; a time of grace that allows us to learn more and appreciate more the role of lay women and men as co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord. In a spirit of synodal listening and discernment, my hope is that the ideas offered in this reflection will inspire further conversation and creative approaches to the formation of lay women and men for discipleship and ecclesial leadership in your own local churches. We are co-workers in the same mission. We all are the Church, therefore responsible for building strong communities of faith with the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to each of us, individually and communally. We need each other. God bless you.