

## **Second Vatican Council and theology of the laity**

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Among the many achievements of the Second Vatican Council was its elaboration of a theology of the laity. Never before had an ecumenical council devoted itself to teaching on the dignity of the laity and their role in the mission of the Church.

In the council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church we read: "To be secular is the special characteristic of the laity...It is the special vocation of the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. They live in the world, in each and every one of the world's occupations and callings and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, form the context of their existence." (L.G. 31)

This is an extraordinary teaching. It proclaims to all that the mission of Christ's people is not carried out only within the confines of the structures of the Church, but also - and of necessity - in the world. If the ministry of the ordained is exercised primarily in the Church, the ministry of lay people is exercised primarily in the secular structures of the world. It is the complementarity of these two offices, that of the ordained and that of the lay state, that enables the total Christ - Head and members - to continue His work of salvation until the end of time.

The council's Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People further specifies the various arenas in which the mission of the laity is to be carried out. "All that goes to make up the temporal order - personal and family values, culture, economic interests, the trades and professions, political institutions, international relations, and so on, as well as their gradual development - all these are not merely helps to humanity's last end, they possess a value of their own, placed in them by God, both in themselves or as parts of the integral temporal structure..." (A.A. 7)

The council clearly teaches that in every circumstance and vocation of life there exists the inherent opportunity to sanctify the world when lay people bring the Gospel to bear in all the places where they live and work and recreate. This is particularly of marriage and family life. The same council calls the family a kind of "domestic church" because it is in the Christian home that husband and wife reflect the love of Christ for His Church and it is there that children are formed by Christian teaching and by prayer. Is it any wonder that the Church regards the family as the fundamental cell of society and of the Church and thus holds family life in such esteem?

It is precisely on account of the importance of marriage and family life that we are so alarmed at the state of these institutions today and at the growing lack of regard for them that so characterizes our times. How did it come to be that so many marriages - as many Catholic as non-Catholic - end in divorce? Why does cohabitation appear to be a viable choice for so many - even for Catholics? Why now are we witnessing the attempts here and in other countries to redefine marriage to include the union of two people of the same sex. While there is no simple answer to these questions, one explanation is undeniable, even though many would disregard it out of hand.

In his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the Church's age-old prohibition of contraception. To do otherwise, the Pope said, would not only deny the moral tradition of the Church, it would implicitly encourage promiscuity and deviances of all kinds. Why? The answer here is simple. If marriage is separated from procreation and if sex is separated from both (and this is exactly what artificial birth control does), we will have opened the door to increased fornication, adultery and, yes, homosexual unions. And that, of course, is exactly what has happened. Was Paul VI a prophet? Indeed he was. Sadly he was ignored by the world, but even more sadly he was ignored by many Catholics. We are now seeing the results of the rejection by so many of the profound truths contained in *Humanae Vitae*.

If, as some say, sex has nothing necessarily to do with procreation, then sex has nothing to do necessarily with the union of a man and a woman. And so we have before us the prospect of the legal sanctioning of homosexual unions. If nothing else, it is the next logical step in the agenda of those who are determined to bring an end to marriage and family life as this has been understood by virtually every civilization that has ever existed.

In the face of this newest threat to the sanctity of marriage Pope John Paul II not only has reiterated that homosexual unions are not marriages of any kind and that homosexual activity is gravely sinful, he has called upon Catholic legislators and other Catholic officeholders to stand against the destruction of marriage and family life. In other words, the pope has called upon Catholic lay people in the political arena to live their vocation as enunciated by the Second Vatican Council and to stand for the truth. The response of most Catholic politicians to the pope's call has been sadly predictable. "No, Holy Father! Stay out of this," has been the resounding reply. According to the *Denver Post* (Aug. 1, 2003), in our own state of Colorado only one Catholic politician at the state level has publicly supported the pope's reiteration of the definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman. It seems that seeking first reelection is more important than seeking first the kingdom of God.

If we, clergy as well as laity, are to be true to our baptismal dignity and call, we cannot sit quietly by while those determined to do so seek to legally undermine the sacred institution of marriage. First, we must embrace the divinely revealed truth about marriage, about human sexuality and about procreation. Then we must conscientiously seek to preserve and foster that truth in our families, in our pulpits, in the halls of our legislatures and, of course, when we cast our votes at the polls.