

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF CAPE TOWN

ON

THE LAY APOSTOLATE (FEBRUARY 1988)

My dear people,

About every three years the Synod meets in Rome to reflect on a theme of major importance for the Church. These reflections are put into a document and sent to the Church as a whole.

The Synod subject was the Vocation and Mission of Lay People in the Church and in the World. I should like to share thoughts with you based on the Church's teachings in recent years, especially the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Laity.

What is the vocation of the lay person?

To accomplish Christ's mission of redemption and renewal of the world, the Church must do two things: It must bring the message and grace of Christ to people; and it must penetrate and perfect society with the spirit of the Gospel. And Lay people themselves are called to be apostles who help the Church in its mission of renewal and transformation.

So the lay person has a twofold calling: First, to be a believer, and second to be a citizen with a Christian conscience. All Christians share the splendid task of bringing the divine message of salvation to people throughout the world. Each of you is called by God to work together to improve and develop society in its many affairs. There are the good things in life, culture, economic affairs, the arts and professions, political institutions, international relations, and in this country the burning issue of justice. All these things need to be developed to ensure progress for all.

Lay people carry a special obligation in the work of the renewal. Inspired by the gospel, by Christian love, and by their own sense of responsibility, they must co-operate with other citizens to build a better world, using their particular skills to make this possible.

But we should also remember that everywhere and in all things, lay people as citizens must seek the justice that is God's kingdom. An outstanding example of the lay apostolate is that of Christian social action in which changing society is renewed according to higher principles of Christian life. The Church's entire effort to bring about justice and peace in South Africa flows from the gospel and is directed at giving to all people their full human dignity for lay people to express their God-given vocation to extend the work of the Church.

Who exercises this vocation?

There are many people in different professions and circumstances who should bring about Christian transformation of the world.

The family is vital to this transformation. Vatican II stresses that Christian families give priceless testimony to Christ before the world by remaining faithful to the gospel and by being models of Christian marriage throughout their lives.

This regard for the family is based on its God-given mission to be the nucleus of society. The family fulfils its mission by showing mutual affection for its members and through its common prayer to God. The family also honours its special vocation through liturgical worship, catechetics, active hospitality, by promoting justice and compassion for all their brethren in need, whether they be old and sick, oppressed, strangers, orphans, adolescents, couples experiencing difficulties.

Young people are terribly important to the lay apostolate since they have great influence on modern society. This calls for an appropriate involvement in lay action which the youth are wonderfully well equipped to do. They have their own personalities to express. They have a zest for life, an energy and a sense of their own social and cultural responsibility. If this zeal is filled with the spirit of Christ it can lead to a very fruitful youth apostolate. Young men and women become active apostles of youth by acting out their apostolate among themselves and by questioning the social environment in which they live.

The social milieu is another form of the lay apostolate, for lay people are called to infuse a Christian spirit in the customs, laws and structures of their community. This is a special apostolate, which can never be done by others. Lay people know the problems of lay people. It is through their efforts in society that lay people deepen their testimony of words with their testimony of life itself. It is through their work, profession, studies, companionship and leisure that lay people have a special opportunity to help their brothers and sisters.

The parish is where apostolates of the Church meet in community and unite different people in the universality of the Church. The parish bonds them together in their humanity and in their spiritual life. By working closely with priests, lay people share with the community their own problems and the problems of the world, as well as the question of human salvation. Through the apostolate of the parish lay people and religious can work together with enthusiasm to support every apostolic and missionary undertaking sponsored by the parish.

How is this vocation lived?

Christians can do many things to help to transform the world we live in.

The witness of one's own life is a way for lay people to announce the gospel and to make people holy. The testimony of Christian life and of good works done in the spirit of a divine mission, have the power to draw people to belief and to God, for the Lord says: "Even so let your light shine before men, in order that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

By announcing Christ lay people become true apostles of Christ. You can do this by speaking to non-believers to lead them to faith, by teaching and strengthening believers to encourage them toward a more fervent life. We are forcefully reminded of this ministry in (2 Cor 5:14), when St Paul says: "For the love of Christ impels us"

and again when he says something that should echo in every Christian heart: “For woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1Cor 9;16).

Explaining Christian principles is another important lay task necessary to counter problems and serious errors that tend to undermine the foundations of religion, moral order, and of human society. The threat is so great that lay people are exhorted to be more diligent in explaining and defending Christian principles.

Christian love. The greatest commandment in the law is to love God with one’s whole heart and one’s neighbour as oneself ((Mt 22:37-40). Christ, too, made his commandment to love your neighbour his own commandment which he enriched with new meaning. He wanted to identify himself with his brethren as the object of this love when he said: “As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me”(Mt 25:40).

Prayer and penance. Each of us should remember that we can make an impact on people and contribute to the salvation of the world by public worship and prayer, by penance and by our free acceptance of the labours and hardships of life. It is through such acts that the Christian grows in likeness to the suffering Christ (2 Cor 4:10; Col 1:24).

The Lenten Appeal is one of the traditional ways in which we show our gratitude to the Lord and our love for our brethren. It is also tradition to give generously as you can so that others may live in greater Christian dignity.

My dear people, you are invited to reflect on your special calling to bring the gospel and holiness to the people of the world. It is a way in which each of you can openly bear witness to Christ and promote the salvation of the world. In doing this you are called by God to be an apostolate that burns with the spirit of Christ; to be a kind of bread that will transform and renew all our lives.

(Signed) + STEPHEN NAIDOO CSsR
Archbishop of Cape Town.