



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS  
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONFERENCE  
ORGANIZED BY THE DICASTERY FOR LAITY, FAMILY AND LIFE**

*Synod Hall*

*Saturday, 18 February 2023*

**[Multimedia]**

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Dear brothers and sisters, good day and welcome!

I thank Cardinal Farrell and I greet you, representatives of the Episcopal Commissions for the Laity, leaders of ecclesial associations and movements, officials of the Dicastery and all present.

You have come here from various countries to reflect on the *shared responsibility* of pastors and lay faithful in the Church. The title of your Conference speaks of a “call” to “move forward together”, thus setting the subject within the broader context of synodality. The path that God is indicating to the Church is precisely that of a more intense and concrete experience of communion and journeying together. He asks the Church to leave behind ways of acting separately, on parallel tracks that never meet. Clergy separated from laity, consecrated persons from clergy and the faithful; the intellectual faith of certain elites separated from the faith of ordinary people; the Roman Curia from the particular Churches, bishops from priests; young people from the elderly, spouses and families disengaged from the life of the communities, charismatic movements separated from parishes, and so forth. This is the worst temptation at the present moment. The Church still has a long way to go to live as a body, as a true people united by the same faith in Christ the Saviour, enlivened by the same Spirit of holiness and directed to the same mission of proclaiming the merciful love of God our Father.

This last aspect is critical: *a people united in mission*. This is the insight that we must always cherish: the Church is the *faithful holy People of God*, as *Lumen Gentium* affirms in nos. 8 and 12.

The Church is neither populist nor elitist, but the faithful holy People of God. We cannot learn this theoretically, but through lived experience. Only then may we seek to explain, as best we can; but if we do not live it we cannot explain it. A people united in mission, then. Synodality has its origin and ultimate purpose in mission: it is born of mission and directed to mission. Let us think of the earliest days, when Jesus sends the Apostles and they all return happy, for the demons “fled from them”: it was mission that brought about that sense of the Church. Sharing in mission brings pastors and laypersons closer together; it builds a unity of purpose, manifests the complementarity of the differing charisms and thus awakens in all the desire to move forward together. We see this illustrated in Jesus himself, who from the beginning surrounded himself with a group of disciples, men and women, and, with them, carried out his public ministry. Never alone. When he sent the Twelve to proclaim the kingdom of God, he sent them “two by two”. We see the same thing in Saint Paul, who always proclaimed the Gospel with co-workers, including laypersons and married couples. Not by himself. This has been the case at times of great renewal and missionary outreach in the Church’s history: pastors and faithful together. Not isolated individuals, but a people that evangelizes, the faithful holy People of God!

I know that you have also discussed the training of laypersons, which is indispensable for exercising shared responsibility. Here too, I would stress that such training must be directed towards mission, not just towards theories, otherwise they will fall into ideology. And that is a terrible scourge: ideology in the Church is plague-like. To avoid this, formation must be mission-oriented, not academic, limited to theoretical ideas, but practical as well. It must arise from hearing the *kerygma*, be nurtured by the word of God and the sacraments, help people to grow in discernment, as individuals and in community, and engage from the beginning in the apostolate and in various forms of testimony, however simple, which can lead to closeness to others. The apostolate of the laity is primarily that of witness! The witness of one’s own experience and history, the witness of prayer, the witness of serving those in need, the witness of closeness to the poor and the forgotten, and the witness of welcome, above all on the part of families. That is the right training for mission: going out towards others, learning “on the ground”. And at the same time, an effective means of spiritual growth.

From the beginning, I have said that “I dream of a missionary Church” (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 27; 32). “I dream of a missionary Church”. Here, an image from the Book of Revelation comes to mind, when Jesus says: “I am standing at the door, knocking; if you [...] open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you” (*Rev* 3:20). Today’s drama in the Church is that Jesus keeps knocking on the door, but from *within*, so that we will let him out! Often we end up being an “imprisoning” Church, which does not let the Lord out, which keeps him as “its own”, whereas the Lord came for mission and wants us to be missionaries.

It is in this perspective that we can properly approach the issue of shared responsibility on the part of laypersons in the Church. The need to enhance the role of the laity is not based on some theological novelty, or due to the shortage of priests, much less a desire to make up for their

neglect in the past. Rather, it is grounded in a correct vision of the Church, which is the People of God, of which the laity, together with the ordained ministers, are fully a part. The ordained ministers, then, are not masters, they are servants: shepherds, not masters.

This means recovering an “integral ecclesiology”, like that of the first centuries, when everything was unified by membership in Christ and by supernatural communion with him and with our brothers and sisters. It means leaving behind a sociological vision that distinguishes classes and social rank, and is ultimately based on the “power” assigned to each category. The emphasis needs to be placed on unity, not on separation or distinction. The layperson is more than a “non-cleric” or a “non-religious”; he or she must be considered as a baptized person, a member of the holy People of God, for that is the sacrament which opens all doors. In the New Testament, the word “layperson” does not appear; we hear of “believers”, “disciples”, “brethren” and “saints”, terms applied to everyone: lay faithful and ordained ministers alike, the People of God journeying together.

In this one People of God that is the Church, the fundamental element is our belonging to Christ. In the moving accounts of the Acts of the early martyrs, we often find a simple profession of faith: “I am a Christian”, they would say, “and thus I cannot sacrifice to idols”. These were the words, for example, spoken by Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, [1] and by Justin and his companions, laypersons. [2] These martyrs did not say: “I am a bishop”, or “I am a layperson” — “I am from Catholic Action, I am from that Marian Congregation, I am a member of the Focolare Movement”. No, they said simply: “I am a Christian”. Today too, in a world that is increasingly secularized, what truly distinguishes us as the People of God is our faith in Christ, not our state of life considered in itself. We are the baptized; we are Christians; we are the disciples of Jesus. Everything else is secondary. “But, Father, also being a priest?” — “Yes, that too is secondary” — “And what about a bishop?” — “Yes, that is secondary” — “Even a Cardinal?” — “That too is secondary”.

Our common belonging to Christ makes us all brothers and sisters. As the Second Vatican Council states, “the laity by divine condescension have Christ as their brother... they also have as their brothers those who, placed in the sacred ministry.... exercise in God’s family the office of pastors” (*Lumen Gentium*, 32). Brothers and sisters with Christ, and brothers and sisters with priests, fraternity with everyone.

In this unitary vision of the Church, where we are first and foremost baptized Christians, the laity live in the world and at the same time belong to the faithful People of God. The Puebla Document expressed this nicely: laypersons are men and women “of the Church in the heart of the world”, and men and woman “of the world in the heart of the Church”. [3] True, the laity are called to live their mission chiefly amid the secular realities in which they are daily immersed. Yet that does not mean that they do not also have the abilities, charisms and competence to contribute to the life of the Church: in liturgical service, in catechesis and education, in the structures of governance, the administration of goods and the planning and implementation of pastoral projects, and so forth.

For this reason, pastors need to be trained, from their time in the seminary, to work collaboratively with laypersons, so that communion, as a lived experience, will be reflected in their activity as something natural, not extraordinary and occasional. One of the worst things a shepherd can do is to forget the people from which he came, to lack that memory. We can address to him that much-repeated word from the Bible: “Remember”. “Remember where you were taken from, the flock from which you were taken in order to return and serve it, remember your roots” (cf. *2 Tim*, 1).

This experience of shared responsibility between laypersons and pastors will help to overcome dichotomies, fears and reciprocal mistrust. Now is the time for pastors and laypersons to move forward together, in every sphere of the Church’s life and in every part of the world! The lay faithful are not “guests” in the Church; it is their home and they are called to care for it as such. Laypersons, and women in particular, must be better appreciated for the skills and for the human and spiritual gifts they bring to the life of parishes and dioceses. They can assist, with their “everyday” language, in the proclamation of the Gospel by engaging in various forms of preaching. They can cooperate with priests in training children and young people, helping engaged couples in preparation for marriage, and accompanying couples in marital and family life. They should always be consulted whenever new pastoral initiatives are planned at all levels, local, national and universal. They should be given a voice in the pastoral councils of the particular Churches and should be present in diocesan offices. They can assist in the spiritual accompaniment of other laypersons and contribute to the training of seminarians and religious. Once I heard a question: “Father, can a layperson be a spiritual director?”. Indeed it is a lay charism! A spiritual director may be a priest, but the charism is not priestly as such; spiritual accompaniment, if the Lord gives you the spiritual ability to do so, is a lay charism. Together with their pastors, laypersons must bring Christian witness to secular life: to the worlds of work, culture, politics, art and social communications.

We could put it this way: laity and pastors together in the Church, laypersons and pastors together in the world.

I am reminded of the last pages of Henri de Lubac’s book, *Méditation sur l’Église*. There, he explains that the worst thing that can happen to the Church is the spiritual worldliness that goes by the name of *clericalism*, which “would be infinitely more disastrous than any simply moral worldliness”. If you have time, read those last three or four pages of de Lubac’s *Méditation sur l’Église*. Quoting various authors, he seeks to show that clericalism is the ugliest thing that can happen to the Church, worse even than those times of papal mistresses. Clericalism must be “chased away”. A priest or a bishop who falls into this attitude does great harm to the Church. But it is a contagious disease: for the clericalized laity are a worse plague in the Church even than priests or bishops who have fallen into clericalism. Please, remember that laypersons are laypersons.

Dear friends, with these few observations, I have wanted to point to an ideal, an inspiration to help

us in moving forward. How I wish that all of us might cherish in mind and heart this lovely vision of the Church! A Church that is intent on mission, where all join forces and walk together to proclaim the Gospel. A Church in which what binds us together is our being baptized Christians, our belonging to Jesus. A Church marked by fraternity between laity and pastors, as all work side-by-side each day in every sphere of pastoral life, for they are all baptized.

I encourage you to promote in your Churches all that you have received in these days, in order to continue together the renewal of the Church and her missionary conversion. From my heart I bless all of you and your loved ones, and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.

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[1] Cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 15, 1-43.

[2] Cf. *Acts of the Martyrdom of Saints Justin and Companions*, ch. 1-5: pg 6, 1366-1371.

[3] Third General Conference of the Latin American Bishops, *Final Document, Puebla*, 1979, No. 786.

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