



## *Year of Faith: the Laity and the Consecrated Life*

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*“...By faith, across the centuries, men and women of all ages, whose names are written in the Book of Life (cf. Rev 7:9, 13:8), have confessed the beauty of following the Lord Jesus wherever they were called to bear witness to the fact that they were Christian: in the family, in the workplace, in public life, in the exercise of the charisms and ministries to which they were called (PF, 13).”*

In the fifty years since the Second Vatican Council, we have seen a rise in lay activity within the Church. The documents of the Council, especially Chapter 4 of *Lumen Gentium* and the decree on the lay apostolate *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, clearly laid out that the lay Christian faithful were not at the periphery of the Church’s mission, but at its cutting edge, its contact point with the world. The laity are encouraged to be the soul and leaven of the society they live in; by the holiness of their lives, they infuse their family, workplace, public life and leisure with Gospel values and living.

At the same time, in many dioceses and Church based institutes we have seen lay people take on roles that were once the field of religious communities. Schools or hospitals that used to be staffed entirely by religious Sisters are now served entirely by lay faculty or staff. If a religious is still present, she is often in an administrative position far removed from the classroom or hospital room, leading some to think that religious life is no longer a necessary part of the Church, but just a remnant of a bygone era. However, Paul VI said in *Evangelica Testificatio* 3, “Without this concrete sign there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold...” John Paul II reiterates this in *Vita Consecrata* 105 adding,

*“Beyond all superficial assessments of its usefulness, the consecrated life is important precisely in its being unbounded generosity and love, and this all the more so in a world which risks being suffocated in the whirlpool of the ephemeral. ... The Church and society itself need people capable of devoting themselves totally to God and to others for the love of God.”*

In order for the laity to fulfill their role in the world, they need the witness of men and women religious who faithfully point the way to the Father through a life radically dedicated to following the poor, chaste and obedient Christ (VC 85), so that they do not succumb to the secularizing influence of the present culture.

When the vocations of both marriage and religious life are properly understood, both will flourish. The laity are to infuse the secular order with the Gospel, but how will they know what the Gospel teaches or how to carry it out without the living witness of priests and religious who have given their entire lives to Christ? Religious live the radical self-gift of the vows and prayer, becoming a beacon and encouragement to the laity. Conversely, the faithful living of the marital vows and authentic family life foster and encourage their children's generous response to the vocations God has given them. Furthermore, by their witness of marital fidelity, they strengthen the ongoing faithfulness of religious.

Religious life participates in a singular way in the sacramental nature of the Church. Without this special gift and outward sign of Gospel living, the other members of the People of God would not be able to carry on their own witness in their proper spheres of influence. As the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes asserts in *Essential Elements* 38:

*"In particular, by being an outward, social sign of the mystery of God's consecrating action throughout life, and by being this through the mediation of the Church for the good of the entire Body, the religious life in a special way participates in the sacramental nature of the People of God. This is because it is itself a part of the Church as mystery and as social reality, and it cannot exist without both these aspects."*

In conclusion, all the faithful are called to holiness and to witness to the Gospel, whether as laity in their proper sphere of secular activity or as religious in their consecrated witness to the other members of the Church. All members are necessary to the life of the Church; all contribute to and collaborate with each other in witnessing to Christ. As Paul VI wrote in *Evangelica Testificatio*:

*"Let no one think that religious by their consecration have become strangers to their fellowmen or useless citizens of this earthly city. For even though in some instances religious do not directly serve their contemporaries, yet in a more profound sense these same religious are united with them in the heart of Christ and spiritually collaborate with them. In this way the work of building up the earthly city can always have its foundation in the Lord and can tend towards Him in such a way that those who build this city will not have labored in vain." ET 49*