

WHAT THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL MEANT BY INDIVIDUAL LAY APOSTOLATES

Presented by:

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1. GREETINGS:

May the Peace, Love and Mercy of Our Risen Lord Jesus Christ the Divine Mercy Incarnate be with you all now and always. Amen.

I bring you the good wishes of my People in the Catholic Diocese of Minna, in Nigeria and the entire Continent of Africa and Madagascar.

2. INTRODUCTION:

The Church is the Body of Christ; the People of God made up of those who are called to be disciples of Our Lord Jesus Christ the Divine Mercy Incarnate either as members of the hierarchical apostolate (Ordained Ministry) or the Lay Apostolate. Although this bears a two-fold distinction, the two are intertwined and support each other in answering the call of Jesus Christ to His Disciples, “Go and make disciples of all the nations...” (Matt 28: 19 – 20). In the words of the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christo (The Mystical Body of Christ)*, the Ordained and Lay Apostolates are called upon to cooperate in building up and perfecting the Mystical Body of Christ. (Cfr. AAS 36, 1943, p. 241).

As members of the Family of the People of God, the Hierarchy of the Church and the Lay Faithful play a complimentary role in seeing to the work of evangelization in the world. In this presentation, our primary focus is on the meaning of Individual Lay Apostolates in the spirit of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council.

3. WHAT IS THE LAY APOSTOLATE IN THE CHURCH?

The Lay Apostolate is the response of the Lay Faithful of the Church to the call of Jesus Christ to be His witnesses in the world. “You too shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1: 8). It is the initiative of the Lay Faithful, including the Consecrated Religious, in cooperation with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, to become active disciples of Jesus Christ in the world, living out the love of Christ through the Deeds of Mercy, either as individuals or in groups/organizations (Acts 11: 19 – 21, cf Rom 16: 1 – 15).

The Lay Apostolate flows naturally from the virtue of being Christian. “The apostolate of the laity derives from their Christian vocation and the Church can never be without it” (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity – Apostolicam Actuositatem No 2*). Vatican II Constitution on the Church – Lumen Gentium No. 33 notes, “**The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church. Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself. Moreover, by the sacraments, and especially by the Eucharist, that love of God and man which is the soul of the apostolate is communicated and nourished. The laity, however, are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth. Thus, every lay person, through those gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church itself "according to the measure of Christ's bestowal" (Eph. 4: 7).** It means that by virtue of his/her baptism, the Christian shares in the Priestly Ministry of Jesus Christ. So s/he is a Priest, a

Prophet and a King in the mold of Our Lord Jesus Christ the Divine Mercy Incarnate (cf 1 Pet 2: 9 – 10, cf. Lumen Gentium – No 31).

Let us listen to the Voice of the Second Vatican Council Fathers, *“From the fact of their union with Christ the head flows the laymen's right and duty to be apostles. Inserted in the Mystical Body of Christ by baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in confirmation, it is by the Lord himself that they are assigned to the apostolate. If they are consecrated a kingly priesthood and a holy nation (cf. 1 Pet. 2:4-10), it is in order that they may in all their actions offer spiritual sacrifices and bear witness to Christ all the world over. Charity, which is, as it were, the soul of the whole apostolate, is given to them and nourished in them by the sacraments, the Eucharist above all.*

The apostolate is lived in faith, hope and charity poured out by the Holy Spirit into the hearts of all the members of the Church. And the precept of charity, which is the Lord's greatest commandment, urges all Christians to work for the glory of God through the coming of his kingdom and for the communication of eternal life to all men, that they may know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (cf. Jn. 17:3).

On all Christians, accordingly, rests the noble obligation of working to bring all men throughout the whole world to hear and accept the divine message of salvation. (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity – Apostolicam Actuositatem No 3).

4. THE INDIVIDUAL LAY APOSTOLATE:

Blessed John Paul II read the Ministry of the Lay Apostolate in the words of Jesus Christ in the Parable of the Vineyard in Matthew 20: 3 – 4, *“You too go into my vineyard.”* According to him, “The call is addressed to everyone: Lay faithful as well are personally called by the Lord from whom they receive a mission on behalf of the Church and the world” (*Christifideles Laici No 2*).

In this exhortation the place of the lay people in the Church is well articulated; in other words, their role is inevitable. They are not mere recipients but active members of the Church with rights and obligation. They are agents of evangelization in the mission of the Church.

There is a saying that goes, “action speaks louder than words” so too does the role of the lay in the world. They may not go up the pulpits every Sunday to speak about Jesus Christ and the kingdom, but through their life style and behaviour in the society, they manifest an unchallengeable witness to the world especially in various sectors where they work and serve the people. This they may carry out either as individuals (Individual Lay Apostolate) or as a group (Group Lay Apostolate/Organizations) in the Church.

The Lay Apostolate becomes possible through the recognition, manifestation and call to action of the individual gifts, talents and charisms that God gives to each individual (1 Cor 12) for the common good of the Community (cf Eph 4: 16). According to the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, *“The Holy Spirit sanctifies the People of God through the ministry and the sacraments. However, for the exercise of the apostolate he gives the faithful special gifts besides (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7), "allotting them to each one as he wills" (1 Cor. 12:11), so that each and all, putting at the service of others the grace received may be "as good stewards of God's varied gifts," (1 Pet. 4:10), for the building up of the whole body in charity (cf. Eph. 4:16). From the reception of these charisms, even the most ordinary ones, there arises for each of the faithful the right and duty of exercising them in the Church and in the world for the good of men and the development of the Church, of exercising them in the freedom of the Holy Spirit who "breathes where he wills" (Jn. 3:8), and at the same time in communion with his brothers in Christ, and with his pastors especially. It is for the pastors to pass judgment on the authenticity and good use of these gifts,*

not certainly with a view to quenching the Spirit but to testing everything and keeping what is good” (cf. 1 Th. 5:12, 19, 21). (Vat II Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity – Apostolicam Actuositatem No 3).

On this note then, we look at **Individual Lay Apostolate in the mind of the Second Vatican Council** as the recognition of the charisms the Holy Spirit endowed on each Christian Lay Faithful and the utilization of the same for the work of evangelization and the good of the human community. In line with the teachings of Blessed John Paul II, we can say that the Individual Lay Apostolate plays an essential and irreplaceable role in the proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom of God and in this way the Church of Christ is made present in the various sectors of the world as a sign of hope and of love (*cf. Christifidelis Laici no. 7*).

According to Vatican II, the individual lay apostolate, to be exercised by the individual, which flows abundantly from a truly Christian life (cf. Jn. 4:11), is the starting point and condition of all types of lay apostolate, including the organized apostolate. It is at the foundation of the Church’s activity in the world. It is of utmost importance in the work of evangelization that nothing can replace it.

The individual apostolate is everywhere and always in place; in certain circumstances it is the only one appropriate, the only one possible. Every lay person, is called to some form of apostolate in the Church and s/he is obliged to it, even if s/he has not the opportunity or possibility of collaborating in associations or groups. The apostolate, through which the laity build up the Church, sanctify the world and get it to live in Christ, can take on many forms. (*Vat II Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity – Apostolicam Actuositatem No 16*).

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIVIDUAL LAY APOSTOLATES IN THE CHURCH:

As has been observed above, the individual lay apostolate is very important in the life of the Church, especially in Her witnessing in the world. Let us examine some of the reasons why it is at the very foundation of the Church’s activities.

- a) ***Witnessing in the world:*** The Individual Lay Apostolate is a person’s way of bearing witness to Jesus Christ in the world. The individual either as a person or in a group undertakes to contribute to the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world through the utilization of his/her gifts, charisms, resources, time and energy. This is carried out as an activity in the wider world community. In his address to the Second World Congress on Lay Apostolate, Pope Pius XII observed that the lay person, through his/her act of fulfilling the mission of the Church can properly apply him/herself the Lord's words: "you are the salt of the earth," and "You are the light of the world." (Matt. 5: 13- 14). The individual lay apostolate offers the Church the opportunity to apply Gospel values and principles to the everyday life of the universal community through the instrumentality of individual Christians who are professionals, workers and active players in the life of the world.

According to the Vatican II Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People No 6, “*Laymen have countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very witness of a Christian life, and good works done in a supernatural spirit, are effective in drawing men to the faith and to God; and that is what the Lord has said: "Your light must shine so brightly before men that they can see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven"” (Mat. 5:16).*

The Council Fathers noted further that the lay apostolate is multi-faceted when they said, “This witness of life, however, is not the sole element in the apostolate; the true apostle is on the look-out for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers to

draw them towards the faith, or to the faithful to instruct them, strengthen them, incite them to a more fervent life; "for Christ's love urges us on" (2 Cor. 5:14), and in the hearts of all should the apostle's words find echo: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16).

A typical example is the group that has brought us here, The Springtime of Faith Foundation and the Family Apostolate of Jerry Coniker in Bloomingdale, Ohio, USA. In my country Nigeria we have individual apostolates that have made great impact in the life of our Country and in Africa like the Holy Family Society founded by Sir David Osunde, KSS.

- b) ***Supporting the work of evangelization:*** Through individual lay apostolates the Church receives support for Priests, Religious and Missionary groups who are working in areas of primary evangelization. In our present day reality, lay apostolates have become sources of support for the renewal of the faith in places where Christianity and the vocations have significantly gone down. Good examples are: The Pontifical Missionary Societies in Rome Italy (founded by a lady for the Missions), the Companion of Priests, individual lay missionaries working in Parishes and communities. We have catechists working in mission churches in many parts of the world. Here in the Western world we have lay evangelizers in parish communities where there are no Priests or support the pastoral work of Priests.
- c) ***Deeds of Mercy:*** The Individual Lay Apostolate makes authentic the teaching of looking after Jesus Christ in the poor in our communities (cf Matt 25: 31 – 46). Individuals and groups of Lay faithful make the presence of the Church felt through works of charity in hospitals, prisons, poor communities and poor families. We have groups like the Society of St Vincent de Paul (SSVP).
- d) ***Praying in the Community:*** Through the activities of individual Lay apostolates the Church has continued to maintain families as the domestic Church and communities through the Small Christian Community initiative. We have the Block Rosary Crusade (BRC), the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Groups/Individuals and the Legion of Mary which was started by Frank Duff to promote the Rosary and Marian Movements in parishes and families.
- e) ***Life of Holiness:*** Speaking in holiness, the Council Fathers wrote, "The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life (of which he is the author and maker) to each and every one of his disciples without distinction: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48). For he sent the Holy Spirit to all to move them interiorly to love God with their whole heart, with their whole soul, with their whole understanding, and with their whole strength (cf. Mk. 12:30), and to love one another as Christ loved them (cf. Jn. 13:34; 15:12). The followers of Christ, called by God not in virtue of their works but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons of God in the baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received from God. They are told by the apostle to live "as is fitting among saints" (Eph. 5:3), and to put on "as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience" (Col. 3:12), to have the fruits of the Spirit for their sanctification" (cf. Gal. 5:22; Rom. 6:22). (***Lumen Gentium No 40***).

The Individual Lay Apostolate challenges the Christian to the fullness of Christian life and to the vocation of love especially in our world in which holiness and Christ-like love are

losing their meaning. The Christian through holiness as a virtue, brings that needed positive difference in our human community. The call to holiness is urgent because through it, the individual will be able to preach and spread Christian values and morality more eloquently in the world (cf Col 3: 1 – 10, Eph 4: 17 – 24).

It is on this platform that the Church celebrates those who, following in the footsteps of Christ and conformed to His image, doing the will of God in everything, devote themselves wholeheartedly to the glory of God and to the service of their neighbour. They are called the SAINTS. We have a list of them, normal individuals who lived ordinary lives in an extraordinary way. Our Mama the Blessed Virgin Mary is a Super example of an individual that carried out a great individual apostolate of holiness.

6. CONCLUSION:

In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the Individual Lay Apostolate is of extreme importance in the work of evangelization of the Church. Today we can see the great contribution individual apostolates are making in achieving the Mission of the Church. We can testify to the renewal of family and social values in response to the activities of lay apostolates in the Church and society.

Let us take this as a renewal of the call of Our Lord Jesus Christ the Divine Mercy Incarnate to all of us to make use of our gifts, charisms and talents in the service of God and neighbor. Let us remember to spend one hour daily with Jesus Christ the Divine Mercy Incarnate.

7. BLESSING:

May the Risen Lord Jesus Christ bless you. May Mary the Mother of Mercy obtain for us special Easter 2012 graces to continue our service to the Family of the People of God.

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