



## **Summary Apostolicam Actuositatem Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People**

*By Deacon Ed Sheffer*

*Apostolicam Actuositatem* ultimately states that the laity needs to play a more active role in the Church and specifically in the world. I think in order for the laity to become much more purposeful they would do well to better understand the documents that came out of the Second Vatican Council.

Take a moment and just think about the separation taking place between the world and the message of the Gospel. The laity has an extremely important responsibility to reveal what it means to be a Christian. As Pope Paul VI said fifty years ago: *The laity are the bridge to the modern world.*

### **Summary**

#### **Chapter One: The Vocation of Lay People to the Apostolate**

A Christian has but one real goal as an apostle of Christ - to spread the Word of Christ – the Gospel. They are to share Christ's love so that others may participate in His redemption and enter into relationship with God. Every single member of the Church has a role to play. Participating in that role is essential and beneficial to us individually and to the entire Church. The laity receives this duty directly from Christ himself, not from the Ordained. Through Baptism and Confirmation we receive the Holy Spirit. The Spirit provides us specific gifts necessary so that we can contribute. Out of love we cooperate and submit to God's will.

The life of a lay person is to be lived in both Christ and in culture and society. These are not separable. If the life we live is not directing us to faith, hope and love, we would do well to alter how we are living. To live in faith means we must strive to see Christ in everyone. This starts by valuing all life. To hope is to see that human suffering can be altered. To hope is to long for love. In hope we find meaning in the struggles of life. We hope for love, because the culmination of Christian life is love. Love is foundational to ultimately choosing good over evil. To be able to love at the deepest level requires surrender. There is no deeper love without humility. It is by gaining humility that one begins to know their truest self. In understanding self, one begins to discern that gratitude is due for all that we receive. When a person realizes that it all comes from God, they mature in their sense of justice.

## **Chapter Two – Objectives**

We are meant to communicate God's grace to the world, revealing Jesus and his words. It is designed by Christ to begin with Liturgy. Who we are to be is highlighted through Liturgy. We are sent from Liturgy to give witness by our lives. This witness is meant to invite others to participate in the life of Christ in his Church.

Our mission includes other aspects of our life such as family, friends, culture, arts, work, politics, and international realities. In many ways the world is blinded by sin and as a result people have become selfish and see life only one way – their way. The Church has a duty to offer moral clarity and provide spiritual aid. It is, however, the members of the Church who most of all can bring the world to its created purpose. The summit of the Christian message is love. Everything we do as Christians should be motivated by love. The higher degree of love involves having compassion for those in need. The pinnacle of love is surrender of self, in order to provide what is of a higher good.

The dignity of humans requires that they have food, drink, clothing, shelter, medicine, access to work, education, and freedom. It is our duty to provide comfort and opportunity in ways we can. No matter what a person's station in life, we are all loved equally by God. None of us are better than anyone else. The purest notion of love is to seek what is just. In aiming for what is just, we begin to alleviate the need for charity. In eliminating the causes for injustice, we cooperate with God's love.

## **Chapter Three – The Various Fields of the Apostolate**

Laypeople apostolize by inviting others to Church, instructing others in the faith, passing along skills that nurture souls, and by sharing their material blessings.

Laypeople need to work with their Pastor. They should feel comfortable bringing their struggles and the needs of others to the Church. There can be a problem sometimes in being open to see the truth about what causes the struggle.

Marriage and family life is also a relevant way in which the laity have an ability to apostolize. The intimate act of sexual intercourse is a basis for human relationship that offers grace. It is a part of the mystery of the Church. Conjugal love gives testimony to God's love. Additionally, a home is the place where a child should learn to be faithful and where they should experience and develop love. A big part of it rests in being nourished by family prayer life.

## **Chapter Four – The Different Forms of the Apostolate**

In one way or another each of us is called to some form of ministry. The truth of one's ministry for all Christians is made clear by how they express faith in every action of their day.

Groups that offer love of neighbor give powerful witness to the Body of Christ. It is in staying close to one another that we in faith remain strong. Everyday life with the Spirit of Christ is our aim.

### **Chapter Five – The Order of the Observed**

All lay individual and/or organized efforts need to function in relationship to Church hierarchy. They must foster unity. The hierarchy needs to promote work of the laity and give spiritual direction.

Pastoral activities that involve teaching the faith and liturgical functions can be entrusted to the baptized. Bishops and Pastors are meant to work closely with laypeople in building up the Church.

### **Chapter Six – Training for the Apostolate**

Laypeople must be well trained in ministerial work. They need to understand doctrines that relate to their specific ministry. Laypeople should pursue ministry that makes use of their talents. Lay ministers are much more viable when they get whatever training in theology, ethics, philosophy and technical skills is necessary. All lay ministers need to understand another purpose for their call to ministry is to foster their willingness to love.

### **Comments**

You may have been asking yourselves what is *lay apostolate*? You won't hear the term *lay apostolate* anymore; it has been replaced by the term *lay ministry*.

Lay ministry belongs to everyone. In other words, everyone is an apostle with a small "a". You can't really be a Christian without also being an apostle. An apostle must live and proclaim Christ. However, I think the challenge for many lay people rests in the fact that they feel like they need to separate their faith from their daily lives.

Let's stop and think about something. It is said that we are to seek the will of God. If that is true, then it is reasonable to assume that we need to be open to the truth of that will. With that said, there is always some form of call from God, through Christ, that is prompted by the Spirit. It is our free will which allows for us to be open or closed to this call. We can choose to respond or not, to be drawn into a love relationship with God or to walk away from it. I think there is a terrible misunderstanding by many laypeople, as well as by some clergy. The work of the Church is not meant to *trickle down* through the clergy to the laity. The faithfulness to God's call depends on the laity's living in union with Christ, involving one's self in his mission. And to an extent, it relies on the willingness of clergy to foster lay ministry.

Fifty years ago, Pope John XXIII set Vatican II apart from all other Vatican Councils. One of the primary reasons is because he placed laity as a major issue of consideration. Vatican II has been referred to as the *Council of the Laity*. There is a Catholic theology of the laity evolving as a result of Vatican II. The laity is the Church, heck they comprise 99% of it! The lay are members

equal to anyone Ordained! For years I have prayed for vocations to the priesthood. I have begun to pray for good lay ministry vocations as well. I work side-by-side with many lay ministers who love Christ and strive to serve him. I pray for more ministers who have a profound love of Christ and his Church. I am grateful for all those lay ministers I have been blessed to have known.

The final thoughts I want to leave you with are these: The greatest responsibility for the laity does not rest in performing service in Church. The greatest impact by far can only take place when they are sent out into the world after every Sunday Mass. More than ever faithful lay Catholics are needed in the world. Why - To fight the growing indifference to religion. Sadly, Vatican II has not been truly embraced. The world is much more secular, material, and consumer driven. Look for yourselves! Where is the meaning for life found in most people? People value what is materially gained or not. People are not concerned with who they are becoming, or who anyone else is becoming. And with all the great advances in technology, there is a sad underlying truth: technology now controls man more than man controls it. The *ying* and the *yang* is this: there are more baptized lay people active in ministry in the Church than ever before, yet there are more ex-Catholics than ever before. Think about this, and make a decision for yourselves. Most of the people you know will not hear the Gospel in church. If they have any hope at all of hearing it, it will be from you. Remember too – you cannot give to anyone else what you do not have! Are you a bridge that brings Catholicism to the world?

If you would like to read the Decree in full:

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html)