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The vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the light of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Christifideles laici

(9:00, September 2)

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Your Eminences, Excellencies,
 Dear brothers in the Episcopacy and fellow priests,
 Dear delegates from the Bishop conferences of Asia,
 Dear representatives from the ecclesial movements and communities,
 Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

I. Introduction

As we know, the former professor of theology, later Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, and now Pope Benedict XVI, has a special ability to grasp the problems that “remain up in the air”: issues that are really pressing and important for theology and pastoral care, yet require further investigation and an in-depth reply.¹ I think that it is enough to compare a few titles of his theological, philosophical and socio-political works in the last forty years and the specific time of those publications to show his acute sensitivity for such issues.²

So, as a young professor in Freising, Bavaria, Joseph Ratzinger touched upon our present topic for the first time - according to my knowledge - with his review³ of Yves Congar’s (OP) work, “*Lay People in the Church*”⁴. Already in 1958 he foresees the

¹ Cf. Th. Weiler, *Volk Gottes - Leib Christi*. Die Ekklesiologie Joseph Ratzingers und ihr Einfluß auf das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, Matthias-Grünewald, Mainz 1997, 121

² Cf. Joseph Ratzinger/Papst Benedikt XVI., *Das Werk*. Bibliographisches Hilfsmittel zur Erschließung des literarisch-theologischen Werkes von Joseph Ratzinger bis zur Papstwahl, hrsg. vom Schülerkreis, bearbeitet von V. Pfnür, Verlag Sankt Ulrich, Augsburg 2009.

³ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Der theologische Ort des Laien*, a review of Y. Congar’s book, *Der Laie*, Entwurf einer Theologie des Lientums, Editrice Schwabenverlag, Stuttgart 1957, in: Wort und Wahrheit 13 (1958) 718 s. (= J. Ratzinger, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Kirche - Zeichen unter den Völkern, vol. 8/2, Verlag Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 2010, 1273-1276).

⁴ Cf. Y. Congar: *Lay People in the Church*, Newman Press, 1965.

focal points that need reform in both “theory and practice” of the Catholic laity of that period. Among the topics covered are the altered status of the Catholic layperson (his “maturity”); the lack of a corresponding development in theology (regarding the laity’s theological and ecclesial placement); the need for clarity in distinguishing between the common and the ministerial priesthood; the secular character of the laity; and the need for a specific lay spirituality.

Three years later, while professor at the University of Bonn, he offers a very original contribution with an article on ecclesiology for a prestigious German theological dictionary *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*. Regarding the ecclesial placement of the lay person, he affirmed: “The position of the lay person is not defined by some type of service of secondary importance, but by the fact that he or she bears the mystery of Christ, the salvific sign of the Church within the world, making this ever present always new situations, in obedience with regards to the call of God.”⁵

Twenty six years after this, we can find very enlightening for our present theme, the addresses made by Cardinal Ratzinger as the then President of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith during the *Seventh General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*. This 1987 Synod addressed the vocation and mission of the lay faithful⁶ and provided the basic working points for the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifidelis Laici* of the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II.⁷

His *first address* took place during the first general congregation of the Synodal Assembly (October 1, 1987). He spoke about the work of the Commission for preparing the *Catechism of the Universal Church*, which he headed.⁸ In the widespread awareness for the need of a “valid” and “current” point of reference in catechetical work we understand the vital necessity of forming the Catholic laity. Thus the catechism is a privileged instrument for faith education.⁹

⁵ Cf. the lexical entry for “Kirche” (1961), in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* II, vol. 6, 172-183, 177.

⁶ Cf. G. Caprile, *Il Sinodo dei Vescovi 1987*, Settima Assemblea Generale Ordinaria (1-30 ott.1987), Edizioni La Civiltà Cattolica, Roma 1989; *Laici per una nuova evangelizzazione*. Studi sull’esortazione «Christifideles Laici» di Giovanni Paolo II, a cura di M. Toso, Editrice Elle Di Ci, Leumann, Torino 1990; E. Glaubitz, *Der christliche Laie*. Vergleichende Untersuchung vom Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil zur Bischofssynode 1987, Reihe: Forschungen zur Kirchenrechtswissenschaft, Bd. 20, Verlag Echter, Würzburg 1995.

⁷ John Paul II, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* on the vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1988 (= ChL); = *L’Enchiridion Vaticanum*, Documenti ufficiali della Santa Sede, vol. 11, 1988-1989, Edizioni Dehoniane EDB, Bologna 1991, 1020- 1243; = *Enchiridion del Sinodo dei Vescovi*, a cura della Segreteria Generale del Sinodo dei Vescovi, edizione bilingue, vol 1 (1965-1988), Edizioni Dehoniane EDB, Bologna 2005, 2601-2799; Cf. P. Neuner, *Der Laie und das Gottesvolk*, Verlag Knecht, Frankfurt am Main 1988; W. Kasper, *Berufung und Sendung der Laien in Kirche und Welt*. Geschichtliche und systematische Perspektiven, in: *StdZ* 205 (1987) 579-593; J. Farnleitner, *Entwicklungen des Laienapostolates in den letzten 20 Jahren und Herausforderungen, denen sich die Laien stellen müssen*, in: *Bausteine zu Christifideles Laici*, Reihe: Laien heute, Vatikanstadt, Heft 32-33 (1989-90), 7-18; L. Karrer, *Die Stunde der Laien*. Von der Würde eines namenlosen Standes, Verlag Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 1999.

⁸ Cf. Caprile, *Il Sinodo*, 80-82; Cf. ChL 34: “In rapporto alle nuove generazioni un contributo prezioso, quanto mai necessario, deve essere offerto dai fedeli laici con una sistematica opera di catechesi.”

⁹ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution «*Fidei Depositum*» with occasion of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, redacted after Vatican II, 11 October, 1992, n. 2, in: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1992.

The Cardinal theologian's *second address* to the Synod took place at the end of its first week (October 6, 1987). In dealing with the meaning of the term "laity" he directs our attention to the fundamental question of the identity and dignity of the lay faithful.¹⁰ [I omit his *third address* (October 29, 1987), in which the Cardinal, as chairman of the committee mentioned above, informed the Synod Assembly of the latest developments in the case of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre.¹¹]

Due to his particular sensitivity as theologian, Cardinal and Pope, I would like his thoughts to accompany us during some crucial points of this journey of ours through the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*. We can ask ourselves: as theologian and pastor what theological developments did Joseph Ratzinger await, and what steps forward did he look for from the Magisterium of the Church in this area?¹²

Here we have a sort of "trialogue" regarding some key issues:

1. the mystery of the Church as Communion
2. the vocation and mission of the laity
3. the two most pressing challenges of the lay faithful in Asia.

Before addressing these three issues, I should say that *Christifideles Laici* represents for our dicastery a kind of "magna charta" or "handbook" for the lay apostolate.¹³ Its long-lasting value can be summarized as follows: "In the first place, it provides an organic summary of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on the laity, in the light of the subsequent Magisterium and practice of the Church. In the second place, in its approach to new movements and questions arising after and as a result of the Council, it proceeds to a delicate and necessary discernment as regards experiences, trends and forms of lay participation that characterized the first post-conciliar period. Thirdly, it gives new indications intended "to stir and promote a deeper awareness among all the faithful of the gift and responsibility they share ... in the communion and mission of the Church (ChL 2)."¹⁴

We should underline the fact that *Christifideles Laici* constant references to the allegory of the vine, the vineyard and its workers (cf. Mt 20, 1-2, Jn 15, 1-11) is a par-

¹⁰ Caprile, *Il Sinodo*, 180: Card. Ratzinger presents four aspects to take into consideration: (a.) the *theological* point of view (b.) the *sociological* and *functional* aspects, (c.) the *way of living the Gospel in the world* and (d.) the notion of laity from a *historical perspective*.

¹¹ Cf. Caprile, *Il Sinodo*, 528-531.

¹² Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Der theologische Ort* 718: „Denn die wirkliche theologische Aufarbeitung der Probleme des Laientums war trotz einiger guter Ansätze bislang noch immer eine offene Aufgabe.“

¹³ E. Pironio, *Presentazione della ChL*, in: O. R., 30-31 gen. 1989, inserto tabloid, 3: "ChL ... (constitutes) for the lay faithful a rich and complete summary (a miniature somma) of the conciliar teachings on their identity, vocation and mission, within an ecclesiology of communion. It is a compendium of doctrine that merits greater reflection in order to relaunch the active participation of the lay faithful in the life and mission of the Church".

¹⁴ Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis, *The Pontifical Council for the Laity*, Vatican City 1997, 17; Cf. Glaubitz, *Laie*. 255 (n. 122).

ticularly useful image for presenting the identity and dignity of the laity's vocation and mission. The image of the vineyard - with its positive aspects of vitality, wholeness and fecundity - conveys the beauty, depth, attractiveness and persuasiveness of the life and being of a Christian.¹⁵

Without a doubt the Second Vatican Council represents the most important event in recent theology and the subsequent practice of the laity¹⁶, so much so that some authors call it "the Council of the laity".¹⁷ Let us not forget that at this Council, for the first time in the history of the Church, laypersons participated as observers and, also for the first time, the laity were made the "object" of reflection and the specific topic of a conciliar document.

This is why it is useful to bear in mind the conciliar texts, which have guided theological developments, and still remain the reference point for theology and its practical applications in the life of the Catholic laity today.¹⁸ After the great leap forward of the Second Vatican Council, the Synod of Bishops of 1987 takes another important step, by evaluating the personal and communal experience of the whole Church in the twenty-two years gone by, so as to promote and consolidate the corresponding Church practice.¹⁹ This is the ultimate goal of *Christifideles Laici*: to encourage all of the lay faithful to take up anew the missionary endeavor to obey the command of Christ, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15).²⁰

II. The ecclesiology of communion

Number 8 of *Christifideles Laici* reveals the "common thread" for our reflections. "Only from inside the Church's mystery of communion is the "identity" of the lay faithful made known, and their fundamental dignity revealed. Only within the context

¹⁵ Cf. R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, vol. III, cap.13-21, in: HThKNT, 108-123

¹⁶ Cf. H. Filser, Das Dekret über das Laienapostolat *Apostolicam actuositatem*, in: F.X. Bischof / St. Leimgruber (Hrsg.), *Vierzig Jahre II. Vatikanum*. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte der Konzilstexte, Verlag Echter, Würzburg 2005, 253-279; G. Bausenhart, *Theologischer Kommentar zum Dekret über das Apostolat der Laien Apostolicam actuositatem*, in: P. Hünemann / B.J. Hilberath, ed., *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, vol. 4, Verlag Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau, 2005, 1-123; E. Klinger/R. Zerfuß, *Die Kirche der Laien. Eine Weichenstellung des Konzils*, Verlag Echter, Würzburg 1987; Ch. Bender/M. Thull, Hrsg., *Berufung und Sendung der Laien in Kirche und Welt*, Bernward Verlag, Hildesheim 1987.

¹⁷ Cf. Glaubitz, *Laie*, 60.

¹⁸ Cf. F. Hengsbach, *Über das Apostolat der Laien*, Lateinischer und deutscher Text mit Kommentar, Konfessionskundliche und kontroverstheologische Studien, vol. XXIII, hrsg. vom Johann-Adam-Möhler-Institut, Paderborn 1967; A. Schrott, E. Trummer, M. Liebmann, E. Hofer, *Das Laiendekret im Lichte des Konzils*, Wien 1966; R. Pellitero (ed.), *Los laicos en la eclesiología del Concilio Vaticano II*. Santificar el mundo desde dentro, Madrid 2006; H. Schambeck (ed.), *Apostolat und Familie*, Miscellanea in onore del Cardinale Opilio Rossi, Berlin 1980.

¹⁹ Cf. ChL 2: "In reality, the challenge embraced by the Synod Fathers has been that of indicating the concrete ways through which this rich "theory" on the lay state expressed by the Council can be translated into authentic Church "practice".

²⁰ Cf. ChL 64.

of this dignity can their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world be defined.”²¹

At the press conference presenting *Christifideles Laici*, the then President of the Council for the Laity, Cardinal Eduardo Pironio concluded his speech by inquiring about the “novelty” of the Post-Synodal Exhortation: “Those who look for new things in the document or concrete solutions will perhaps come away disappointed... But the real and deeper novelty is this: the document frames the issue of the laity within an authentic ecclesiology of communion. The faithful are not considered ‘on their own’, as isolated or separate, but in the overall context of a Church which is essentially ‘communion in Christ’ (LG 1) and at the same time ‘universal sacrament of salvation’ (LG 48).”²² The exhortation *Christifideles Laici* makes its own the words of the final report of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985, stating that the Second Vatican Council’s ecclesiology of communion is the *central and fundamental idea of all the conciliar documents*.²³

Christifideles Laici describes the communion of the faithful with Christ by means of the image of the vine: “‘I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser... Abide in me and I in you’ (Jn 15: 1, 4). These simple words reveal the mystery of communion that serves as the unifying bond between the Lord and his disciples, between Christ and the baptized: a living and life-giving communion ... From the communion that Christians experience in Christ there immediately flows the communion which they experience with one another.”²⁴ This “*koinonia-communion*” is the union with God brought about by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. The opportunity for such communion is made present in the Word of God and in the Sacraments. Baptism is the door and the foundation of communion in the Church. The Eucharist is the source and summit of the whole Christian life (*cf. Lumen Gentium*, n.11).²⁵

Following the teaching of the first number of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, the exhortation *Christifideles Laici* states: “The reality of the Church as Communion is, then, the integrating aspect, indeed the central content of the “mystery”, or rather, the divine plan for the salvation of humanity.”²⁶ Quoting the words of Pope Paul VI, *Christifideles Laici* develops the concept of *Church-Communion* especially as a *communion of saints*: “The meaning of the Church is a communion of saints. ‘Communion’ speaks of a double, life-giving participation: the incorporation of Chris-

²¹ ChL 8; *Cf. J. Ratzinger, La Comunione nella Chiesa*, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2004; D. Tettamanzi, *La Chiesa Mysterium, Communio, Missio come struttura portante della «Christifideles laici»*, in: Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis, ed., *Christifideles Laici: Spunti per uno studio*, in: *Laici oggi* 32-33, Città del Vaticano 1989-90; A. Scola, *La teologia del laicato alla luce dell’ecclesiologia di comunione: l’identità del fedele laico*, in: Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis, ed., *Christifideles laici. Bilancio e prospettive*, Collana: *Laici oggi* n. 16, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2010, 23-46.

²² E. Pironio, *Presentazione* 3; *Cf. Glaubitz, Laie* 256 (n. 124).

²³ *Cf. ChL* 19 (n. 53); S. Matusiak, *Kirche* 51-54.

²⁴ ChL 18.

²⁵ ChL 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

tians into the life of Christ, and the communication of that life of charity to the entire body of the Faithful, in this world and in the next, union with Christ and in Christ, and union among Christians, in the Church.”²⁷

Church-Communion is an "organic" communion, characterized by a diversity and a complementarity of vocations and states in life, of ministries, of charisms and responsibilities.²⁸ “Because of this diversity and complementarity every member of the lay faithful is seen in relation to the whole body and offers a totally unique contribution on behalf of the whole body.”²⁹ *Christifideles Laici* points out that the Holy Spirit is always the unity in the Church.³⁰

Eliminato: dynamic force of

Immediately after the Council, in a reflection on the structure of Vatican II, the theologian Ratzinger places the point of departure for a renewed theology of the laity within the broader context of a renewal of theology and the reality of the liturgy. “There will continue to remain even afterwards distinctions between a lay person and a priest, between a religious and a non religious: there exist different functions and different paths within the Church, and one thing is not the other. To place everything on the same level would not only be false, but also foolish. Nevertheless, the Council has brought about an opening in this sector, that represents a part of a new opening of the Church herself, as willed by her... The Christian liturgy signifies ... the communal adoration of God on behalf of all the baptized as they sit at table with the Risen Lord.. It has, in this case, the characteristic of embracing all: everyone, even if they have different functions, are all subjects, because all form part of the body of the Lord... I think that the renewal of theology of the laity must start here, from the renewal of theology itself and of the reality of the liturgy, which is not a privilege of only the clergy; nor something to be enclosed within a glass case of its valuable past, but it is by its essence a liturgy, a universal worship.”³¹

The apostolic exhortation answers one of Cardinal Ratzinger’s greatest concerns: that of reducing the laity’s activity to only fulfilling tasks within the Church’s structure. While quoting from the Code of Canon Law, it observes: “However, the exercise of such tasks does not make Pastors of the lay faithful: in fact, a person is not a minister simply in performing a task, but through sacramental ordination. ...The task exercised in virtue of supply takes its legitimacy formally and immediately from the official deputation given by the Pastors, as well as from its concrete exercise under the

²⁷ ChL 19 quotes the speech of Paul VI at the Wednesday General Audience of June 8, 1966, in: *Insegnamenti*, IV (1966), 794.

²⁸ Cf. ChL 20 and 21.

²⁹ ChL 20.

³⁰ Cf. ChL 20: “One and the same Spirit is always the dynamic principle of diversity and unity in the Church. ...Thus, Church communion is a gift, a great gift of the Holy Spirit, to be gratefully accepted by the lay faithful, and at the same time to be lived with a deep sense of responsibility. This is concretely realized through their participation in the life and mission of the Church, to whose service the lay faithful put their varied and complementary ministries and charisms.”

³¹ J. Ratzinger, *L’apertura della chiesa al mondo nel concilio Vaticano II*, in: *Idem, Il nuovo popolo di Dio*. *Questioni ecclesiologicalhe*, Editrice Queriniana, 4^a ed., Brescia 1992, 310-325, 313 ss.

guidance of ecclesiastical authority (cf. AA 24).”³² The indications of the post-synodal document are very clear: “The various ministries, offices and roles that the lay faithful can legitimately fulfill in the liturgy, in the transmission of the faith, and in the pastoral structure of the Church, ought to be exercised in conformity to their specific lay vocation, which is different from that of the sacred ministry.”³³

Christifideles Laici expresses at the same time a deep appreciation for the contribution of the lay faithful, both women and men, in the work of the apostolate, in evangelization, sanctification and the Christian animation of temporal affairs, as well as their generous willingness to supply in situations of emergency as was the case, and continues to be, in some parts of Asia. Here, we can also note by way of example, the efforts of numerous lay catechists.³⁴

After the experience of the second conciliar period, theologian Ratzinger’s advised the Synod to guide the Church more in line with the twelfth chapter of the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, and this desire is fulfilled admirably in number 20 of *Christifideles Laici*.³⁵ Furthermore, the theological clarifications and explanations of terminology in number 23 regarding the danger of a “clericalization” of the laity surely gained his full consent.³⁶

III. The vocation of the lay faithful

1. The identity and dignity of the laity

Cardinal Ratzinger stated a fundamental premise in his second address at the 1987 synod: “In order for this discussion to be fruitful, we need to clearly define the full weight of the concept ‘laity’”.³⁷ Already as a young theologian he had delved into the matter of a more precise terminology, and hoped to find a *rich* and *positive* description of being a “lay faithful” that surpassed the negative description of a lay person as merely someone who is *not* a priest or *not* a religious.³⁸

³² ChL 23.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Das Konzil auf dem Weg, Rückblick auf die zweite Sitzungsperiode*, Verlag J. P. Bachem, Köln 1964, 40-43.

³⁶ Cf. Kardinal J. Ratzinger, «*Ohne ein Amt frei für die Welt*», («*Senza un ufficio libero per il mondo*»), an interview with M. Lohmann, in: *Rheinischer Merkur/Christ und Welt*, Nr. 46, 13. November 1987, 24 = J. Ratzinger, Balance del Sínodo sobre los laicos, in: J. Ratzinger, *Ser cristiano en la era neopagana*. Edición e Introducciones de J. L. Restán, Ediciones Encuentro, Madrid 1995, 163-170.

³⁷ Immediately there follow four aspects to take into consideration: (a.) the theological point of view (b.) the sociological and functional aspects, (c.) the way of living the Gospel in the world and (d.) the notion of laity from a historical perspective.

³⁸ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Konzil* 40.

So who are the lay faithful, what is their identity and dignity, their vocation and mission, according to the Post-Synodal Exhortation?³⁹ *Christifideles Laici* (n. 9) responds to this question by citing n. 31 of *Lumen Gentium*: “The term 'lay faithful' is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state sanctioned by the Church. Through Baptism the lay faithful are made one body with Christ and are established among the People of God. They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ. They carry out their own part in the mission of the whole Christian people with respect to the Church and the world.”

This is a typological description that contains several elements.⁴⁰ The lay Christian is distinguished - in a positive way - as (1.) an active member in the People of God, (2.) participating in the mission of the whole church and as (3.) jointly responsible for the Church. The lay Christian - in a negative sense - is (4.) not ordained and a non-religious. Because of their specific nature, the lay person is (5.) engaged in world affairs, a trait that defines their particular vocation in the church and the world. Their main task is - through the testimony of their life - (6.) to make Christ visible in the world, (7.) to permeate the world with his Spirit and to order it according to his will.

For this reason the first step in better understanding the identity and dignity of the lay faithful is that of properly valuing the sacraments of Christian initiation, especially *Baptism*⁴¹ which describes the “figure” of the layperson by virtue of these three fundamental aspects: “Baptism regenerates us in the life to the Son of God; unites us to Christ and to his Body, the Church; and anoints us in the Holy Spirit, making us spiritual temples.”⁴²

Christifideles Laici speaks in clear terms about the *meaning* and *purpose* of the lay Christian’s existence: “It is no exaggeration to say that the entire existence of the lay faithful has as its purpose to lead a person to a knowledge of the radical newness of the Christian life that comes from Baptism, the sacrament of faith, so that this knowledge can help that person live the responsibilities which arise from that vocation received from God.”⁴³

Through their Baptism, the lay faithful participate in the threefold mission of Christ as *Priest, Prophet* and *King*.⁴⁴ They, together with ordained ministers and religious, and in light of their common dignity conferred by baptism, are jointly responsible for

³⁹ Cf. M. Vergottini, art. «Laico», in: *Teologia*, Collana: I Dizionari San Paolo, Edizioni San Paolo, Ciniselle Balsamo 2002, 776-787.

⁴⁰ S. Matusiak, *Kirche und Politik*, Die politische Dimension des Laienapostolats im Licht der Ekklesiologie des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils, Reihe: *Ethik in Forschung und Praxis* 3, Hamburg 2005, 57-61.

⁴¹ Cf. ChL 9, 17, 58; Cf. G. Campanini, *Il laico nella Chiesa e nel mondo*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna 2004; E. Masseroni, *Laici cristiani*. Tra identità e nuove sfide, Collana: Saggistica Paoline, Edizioni Figlie di San Paolo, Milano 2004; E. Malnati, *Teologia del laicato*, Edizioni Piemme, Casale Monferrato 2000.

⁴² ChL 10 s.

⁴³ ChL 10.

⁴⁴ Cf. ChL 14.

the mission of the Church. The laity have a particular and distinguishing mark, that is their *secular character*⁴⁵, that the Second Vatican Council had indicated as proper to the lay person: “What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature”.⁴⁶ We should not consider the lay faithful’s identity and action merely from an *anthropological* or *sociological* point of view, but under the light of *theology* and *ecclesiology*.

The *world* is the particular *environment* and *means* for the fulfillment of the lay vocation. The Synod Fathers stated that this “secular” aspect is to be understood in light of God’s creative and redemptive act, who has entrusted the world to men and women, so that they might cooperate with his creative command.⁴⁷ Number 15 of *Christifideles Laici* sums it up in this way: “The lay faithful’s position in the Church, then, comes to be fundamentally defined by their newness in Christian life and distinguished by their secular character.”

Therefore, any renewal of the lay faithful’s self-awareness and commitment must start from the source of Christian existence. Many of the baptized have forgotten or never realized this fundamental “newness” and this “specific difference” in their lives. We call to mind the admonition of Pope Leo the Great, also mentioned in *Christifideles Laici*: “Acknowledge, O Christian, your dignity!”⁴⁸

To understand well what it means to be a Christian, we must grasp more and more that to be baptized is not the same as joining a “club” or an international organization, nor is it comparable to the “membership” in other religions. We know that these forms of membership are based on “some common interest” or on the fact of being born in a given territory or to parents who belong to a given religion. The teaching or

⁴⁵ Cf. ChL 15.

⁴⁶ Cf. LG 31: “What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature. ... by reason of their particular vocation especially and professedly ordained to the sacred ministry. Similarly, by their state in life, religious give splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes. But the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer; Cf. AA 7: The laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation. Led by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church and motivated by Christian charity, they must act directly and in a definite way in the temporal sphere. As citizens they must cooperate with other citizens with their own particular skill and on their own responsibility. Everywhere and in all things they must seek the justice of God’s kingdom. The temporal order must be renewed in such a way that, without detriment to its own proper laws, it may be brought into conformity with the higher principles of the Christian life and adapted to the shifting circumstances of time, place, and peoples. Preeminent among the works of this type of apostolate is that of Christian social action which the sacred synod desires to see extended to the whole temporal sphere, including culture”; ChL 15; Cf. E. Braunbeck, *Der Weltcharakter des Laien*. Eine theologisch-rechtliche Untersuchung im Licht des II. Vatikanischen Konzils, Eichstätter Studien, Neue Folge XXXIV, Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg 1993.

⁴⁷ Cf. ChL 15 (Proposal 4).

⁴⁸ Cf. ChL 17.

rediscovery of the sacraments of Christian initiation is then a *most pressing need*, for both the “old” and the “new” particular churches.⁴⁹ I firmly believe that *Christifideles Laici*, with its rich and profound description of lay identity and dignity, has fully satisfied the expectations of the theologian and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

2. The call to holiness

The first and most fundamental aspect of the lay faithful’s call to holiness is the vocation to “the perfection of charity”. And this divine call, “made by the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit” reveals their true dignity.⁵⁰ All the members of the Church receive from God and share the *same vocation* to holiness, inseparable from their dignity as baptized: namely, the call to fullness in Christian life and to perfection of charity in their particular state of life.⁵¹

Christifideles Laici points out the “concrete” consequences of this call, by referring to the letter to the Colossians (cf. Col 3: 17) as presented in number 4 of the Vatican II decree on the apostolate of lay people, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*: “Neither family concerns nor other secular affairs should be excluded from their religious programme of life.” The Synod fathers add: “The unity of life of the lay faithful is of the greatest importance: indeed they must be sanctified in everyday professional and social life. Therefore, to respond to their vocation, the lay faithful must see their daily activities as an occasion to join themselves to God, fulfill his will, serve other people and lead them to communion with God in Christ.”⁵²

The exhortation *Christifideles Laici* sees the laity’s duty to witness as ultimately linked to the prophetic office of Christ: “Their responsibility, in particular, is to testify how the Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response - consciously perceived and stated by all in varying degrees - to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society.”⁵³ Again and again the Magisterium of the Church urges the faithful to make a *vital synthesis* between *faith* and *life’s daily duties*, and feel the pressing need to give a coherent testimony with their lives.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Cf. ChL 64: “It is of particular importance that all Christians be aware that through Baptism they have received an extraordinary dignity: through grace we are called to be children loved by the Father, members incorporated in Christ and his Church, living and holy temples of the Spirit... While this ‘Christian newness of life’ given to the members of the Church, constitutes for all the basis of their participation in the priestly, prophetic and kingly mission of Christ and of their vocation to holiness in love, it receives expression and is fulfilled in the lay faithful through the ‘secular character’ which is ‘uniquely and properly’ theirs.”

⁵⁰ ChL 16; Cf. ChL 17: “Such a vocation, then, ought to be called an essential and inseparable element of the new life of Baptism, and therefore an element which determines their dignity. At the same time the vocation to holiness is intimately connected to mission and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful in the Church and in the world.”

⁵¹ Cf. ChL 17: “The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their involvement in temporal affairs and in their participation in earthly activities.”

⁵² ChL 17 (proposition 5).

⁵³ ChL 34; Cf. AA 13: “The laity fulfill this mission of the Church in the world especially by conforming their lives to their faith so that they become the light of the world as well as by practicing honesty in all their dealings so that they attract all to the love of the true and the good and finally to the Church and to Christ. They fulfill their mission also by fraternal charity which presses them to share in the living conditions, labors, sorrows, and aspirations of their brethren with the result that the hearts of all about them are quietly prepared for the workings of saving grace.”

⁵⁴ Cf. GS 43; Cf. ChL 17, 34, 35, 59; ; EA 23, 42.

This is an appropriate moment for recalling the “definition” of the lay faithful that Cardinal Ratzinger gave shortly after the end of the 1987 synod: “A lay person is a baptized Christian who actively takes to heart his being a Christian, effectively living and achieving his specific profession in the world where he is placed as a Christian”.⁵⁵

Christifideles Laici sees this living holiness of the laity, which emanates from their participation in the Church’s holiness, as their primary and fundamental contribution to the building up of the Church, the “*communio sanctorum*”. Holiness is the fundamental and indispensable condition for carrying out the Church’s mission of salvation.⁵⁶

We can all attest that in our societies immersed in consumerism and dominated by mass media - whether in the East or the West - with an over-saturation of words and images, personal integrity has become decisive in transmitting the faith. The need for coherence of life could lead, in extreme cases, to the greatest and supreme witness of martyrdom, as the martyrs of nineteenth-century Korea show us.⁵⁷

IV. The mission of the lay faithful

1. proclaiming and living the Gospel

Taking up again the image of the vine and the branches, the exhortation highlights the need for Christians to *bear fruit*⁵⁸ and considers communion with Jesus, which generates communion with others, as the essential prerequisite.⁵⁹

The Church as communion is by its very nature a *missionary community*, led by the Holy Spirit: “At this point *communio begets communion*: essentially it is likened to a *mission on behalf of communion*. ... Communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually require each other to the

⁵⁵ Cf. Ratzinger, *Ohne Amt* 24: “Ein Laie ist ein getaufter Christenmensch, der aktiv sein Christentum in die Hand nimmt, es lebt und in seinem spezifischen Beruf in der Welt, in der er steht als Christ, wirksam vollzieht.”

⁵⁶ Cf. ChL 17.

⁵⁷ Cf. ChL 34: “The lay faithful have their part to fulfill in the formation of these ecclesial communities, not only through an active and responsible participation in the life of the community, in other words, through a testimony that only they can give, but also through a missionary zeal and activity towards the many people who still do not believe and who no longer live the faith received at Baptism.”; Cf. ChL 39: “The proclamation of the Gospel and the Christian testimony given in a life of suffering and martyrdom make up the summit of the apostolic life among Christ’s disciples, just as the love for the Lord Jesus even to the giving of one’s life constitutes a source of extraordinary fruitfulness for the building up of the Church.”

⁵⁸ Cf. ChL 32: “Bearing fruit is an essential demand of life in Christ and life in the Church.”

⁵⁹ Cf. ChL 32: “And communion with others is the most magnificent fruit that the branches can give: in fact, it is the gift of Christ and His Spirit.”

point that *communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion.*⁶⁰

The Holy Spirit sends Christ's disciples to evangelize to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1: 8). The Church is aware that "the communion received by her as a gift is destined for all people. Thus the Church feels she owes to each individual and to humanity as a whole the gift received from the Holy Spirit that pours the charity of Jesus Christ into the hearts of believers, as a mystical force for internal cohesion and external growth."⁶¹

The character of the Church as mission means that the lay faithful's primary and fundamental task is to proclaim the Gospel. In his commentary back in 1967 on the famous quote from the conciliar decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* number 2 ("The Christian vocation ... is by its very nature a vocation to the apostolate"), the theologian Ratzinger said with great insight: "[This vocation] thus involves the basic understanding of Christian existence as dynamism. The mission can no longer be seen as external activity, superficially imposed on a static Christianity; being a Christian means in and of itself to go beyond oneself. This being a Christian is therefore characterized by a missionary imprint and as a result must express itself - in every time and in every true believer - as an external activity, put into motion so as to fulfill his deepest nature."⁶²

Quoting from number 10 of *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the exhortation *Christifideles Laici* entrusts to the laity in a special way those who are "far" from the faith and the Church,⁶³ and indicates a systematic catechesis as the way to achieve this goal.⁶⁴ By announcing the Gospel the lay faithful participate in the primary task of the Church, and thus they come to build and shape *the community of faith* "that confesses the faith in full adherence to the Word of God which is celebrated in the Sacraments, and lived in charity, the principle of Christian moral existence."⁶⁵

Along the same lines Cardinal Ratzinger said, with his characteristic insightfulness, in the interview cited above: "This is precisely the specific task of the laity in the professional circles of a society: to act as Christians by developing in those circles an ethos inspired by faith."⁶⁶ The Christian bears a *message* in the world around him, and a *way of life* that the world on its own cannot grasp. Both aspects have the poten-

⁶⁰ ChL 32.

⁶¹ ChL 32; 35.

⁶² J. Ratzinger, *Dichiarazioni del concilio sulla missione fuori del decreto sull'attività missionaria della Chiesa*, in: J. Ratzinger, *Il nuovo popolo di Dio*. Questioni ecclesiologicalhe, Editrice Queriniana, 4^a ed., Brescia 1992, 405-434, 418.

⁶³ Cf. ChL 27; Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation «*Ecclesia in Asia*» on Jesus Christ the Saviour and his mission of love and service in Asia: "... So that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (*Jn* 10,10), November 9, 1999, Tipografia Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1999, (= Enchiridion Vaticanum, Documenti ufficiali della Santa Sede, vol. 18, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna 2002, 1226-1309, (= EA), n. 45.

⁶⁴ ChL 33 "The lay faithful, precisely because they are members of the Church, have the vocation and mission of proclaiming the Gospel: they are prepared for this work by the sacraments of Christian initiation and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

⁶⁵ ChL 33

⁶⁶ Ratzinger, *Ohne Amt* 24

tial and strength to transform the principles and standards of a life that is entirely “this-worldly”.

Christifideles Laici emphasizes that this Christian message awakens humanity to the true nature and meaning of its existence. Because of their “secular nature” the lay faithful play an irreplaceable role in this service to the human family. An authentically Christian life constitutes a service to *all humanity* and *all aspects of society*.⁶⁷

Christifideles Laici lists the following as fields of action: promoting the dignity of the person; protecting the inviolable right to life; acknowledging religious freedom and the family as the basic environment for social engagement; charity as inspiration and support for solidarity; the duty of all to engage in politics; the human person’s centrality in social and economic spheres; and evangelizing culture on both the general level as well as every individual culture.⁶⁸

In this sense, Professor Ratzinger - as early as 1970 - saw in the foundation of an association for young girls (“Union for the Protection of Young Women”) a model for lay responsibility and freedom.⁶⁹ He said that this lay initiative “...recognizes a need that is intrinsic to faith and fulfills it dutifully in freedom ... The layperson shows his own freedom and faith’s requirements by doing that which the Church *should* do, that which is in fact necessary, but which can only happen if it is done freely, by free initiative.”⁷⁰

In his 1987 interview the Cardinal highlights the motivations that lay people should take from the Synod: “...simply a new encouragement to live as Christians in today’s world. Also a call to rejoice in their faith. These synods are not about impressing the world with long documents; they are about forming Christian awareness, first through the exchange among bishops, which then should continue dynamically in dioceses. Every Christian is a living and active subject of the faith, and bears witness to this faith in the world. We have to comprehend both the unifying nature of the faith that binds us together into one large family, as well as the personal and individual task that every Christian has. This task can not be imposed on the individual by any synod; the synod simply encourages him to recognize it.”⁷¹

2. A mission in the world

⁶⁷ Cf. ChL 36: In both accepting and proclaiming the Gospel in the power of the Spirit the Church becomes at one and the same time an ‘evangelizing and evangelized’ community, and for this very reason she is made the servant of all. In her the lay faithful participate in the mission of service to the person and society.”

⁶⁸ Cf. ChL 37- 44.

⁶⁹ J. Ratzinger, *Le basi antropologiche della fraternità*, in: J. Ratzinger, *Dogma e predicazione*, Collana: Biblioteca di teologia contemporanea 19, Editrice Queriniana, Brescia 1973, 200-212. (= J. Ratzinger, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Kirche - Zeichen unter den Völkern, vol. 8/1, Verlag Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 2010, 105-118).

⁷⁰ Ratzinger, *Le basi antropologiche* 207.

⁷¹ Ratzinger, *Ohne Amt* 24.

The exhortation *Christifideles Laici* focuses on a misunderstanding that arose in the post-conciliar period, and which the theologian and Cardinal Ratzinger went to great means to rectify.⁷² This misunderstanding is the trend towards the “clericalization” of the laity, understood as a “preoccupation” with the functions and tasks internal to the Church, to the detriment of their “secular” commitment.⁷³

Taking the German-speaking Church as an example, the theological discussion and resulting practices manifest a tendency to frequently succumb to this temptation. A look at the numerous publications of the period is enough to show how this participation in the life and mission of the Church is most often understood as participation in the “internal” services, such as parish councils and commissions, the right to partake in hierarchical decisions, and administering the Church’s goods. The repeated requests for a share in decision-making and the claim to authorize the decisions of Church authority show this mentality clearly.⁷⁴

The theologian Ratzinger already stated back in 1970: “To speak of [a certain type of] a theology of the laity is an utter contradiction in terms. The layperson is either a layperson or not. A theology of the layperson – understood as a struggle for having a part in the Church’s government – is a farce and remains so even if this misunderstanding is cloaked with the idea of running the Church in a conciliar way.”⁷⁵

The exhortation *Christifideles Laici* insists on distinguishing within the one mission of the Church, the ministry of pastors from the “lay nature” of the different ecclesiastical offices and functions entrusted to the laity, keeping in mind baptism as the root of these duties.⁷⁶ Even a full-time job at the service of the Church does not change the lay person’s state of life, and this should remain clear in the terminology used.⁷⁷

Cardinal Ratzinger directs the discussion in another direction. “We must more fully recover, or go much deeper in helping all Christians become vividly aware of the conviction that the value of a Christian is not measured by the number of jobs he holds in the Church. What the Church most needs are Christians who live in the

⁷² Cf. Ratzinger, *Le basi antropologiche* 206; Ratzinger, *Ohne Amt* 24.

⁷³ Cf. ChL 2: “...the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel’s acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world; Cf. *Direttorio AS*, 120.

⁷⁴ Cf. S. Demel, *Zur Verantwortung berufen*, Nagelproben des Laienapostolats, Collana: Quaestiones disputatae n. 230, Casa Editrice Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 2009; Cf. also the article “*Laie*” nel LThK III, vol. 6, 592-594; *Arbeiten in der Kirche*. Ämter und Dienste in der Diskussion, in: Herder-Korrespondenz Spezial, 1(2009).

⁷⁵ Ratzinger, *Le basi antropologiche* 206

⁷⁶ Cf. ChL 23.

⁷⁷ Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, Pontifical Council for the Laity, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Congregation for Bishops, Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, *Instruction on certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priest*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1997, 17-18.

⁷⁷ Cf. ChL 23; Cf. among others article one of the *Instruction on certain questions* on the “Need for an Appropriate Terminology”; Cf. also the directory AS n. 112.

world, not as employees, but as free individuals. It is a matter of each one perceiving his responsibility as a Christian not according to regulations, but according to the dynamism of being a Christian. The Christian should not use as a measuring stick his degree of involvement in the institutional set-up; the real measure should be the very strength of faith he holds within himself.”⁷⁸

3. Forms of lay commitment

These reflections lead us to the question of the *ways* that laity participate in Church life. It is important to note that every Christian has the freedom to choose the *way* of *his* personal involvement in the Church. However, his first and indispensable duty consists in giving witness in his *family, social and professional life*.⁷⁹

Among the possible areas of participation the first place goes to the *parish*, since it is the most immediately visible expression of ecclesial communion in a given place. The parish is not principally a structure, a territory, or a building, but rather, the ‘family of God’, a ‘fellowship afire with a unifying spirit’, a ‘familial and welcoming home’, the ‘community of the faithful’⁸⁰. Plainly and simply put, “the parish is founded on a theological reality, because it is a Eucharistic community.”⁸¹ For this reason, the first and fundamental commitment for the laity is to participate actively in the *Eucharistic community*!⁸²

Christifideles Laici strongly recommends *personal* participation in parish life, for example in the liturgical services, in catechism, or in social works of charity.⁸³ It should be hoped that the lay faithful also help in the representative structures, such as the councils and pastoral synods of the diocese or the individual parishes.⁸⁴ *Christifideles Laici* recalls that the vocation of every individual is “unique and irrepeatable”, for the good of all, that is, of the entire ecclesial community. In the apostolate exercised by the individual, the spreading of the Gospel takes on the characteristic of being personal, continual, and incisive.⁸⁵

Let us now look at the *associative* forms of lay participation, which are in a certain way a “qualified” type of collaboration.⁸⁶ Due to the growth and development of the

⁷⁸ Ratzinger, *Ohne Amt* 24.

⁷⁹ Cf. AA 16: “The individual apostolate, flowing generously from its source in a truly Christian life (Cf. John 4:14), is the origin and condition of the whole lay apostolate, even of the organized type, and it admits of no substitute.”

⁸⁰ Cf. ChL 26.

⁸¹ Proposal 10.

⁸² Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Eucaristia e missione*, in: *ibid.*, *La comunione nella Chiesa*, 93-128, 126 ss.

⁸³ Cf. ChL 27.

⁸⁴ Cf. ChL 25 s.

⁸⁵ Cf. ChL 28.

⁸⁶ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *I movimenti ecclesiali e la loro collocazione teologica*, in: J. Ratzinger, *Nuove irruzioni dello Spirito. I movimenti nella Chiesa*, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2006, 11-50; J. Ratzinger, *I movimenti, la Chiesa, il mondo*, in: Ratzinger, *Nuove irruzioni* 51-96.

movements and new ecclesial communities (“the new season of associations”), the Council’s teaching on the associative form of lay involvement merits special attention. Number 18 of *Apostolicam Actuositatem* runs thus: “The faithful are called to engage in the apostolate as individuals in the varying circumstances of their life. They should remember, nevertheless, that man is naturally social and that it has pleased God to unite those who believe in Christ into the people of God ...and into one body The *group apostolate* of Christian believers then happily corresponds to a human and Christian need and at the same time signifies the communion and unity of the Church in Christ, who said, ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Matt. 18:20).”

The following number 19 of *Apostolicam actuositatem* denotes the Council’s *turning point* when it declares the right of the lay faithful to found and direct lay associations.⁸⁷ *Christifideles Laici* notes that this springtime of new ecclesial realities brings many different forms, both in *methods of education, fields of action* and *outward configuration*, but at the same time the document sees how “they all come together in an all-inclusive and *profound convergence* when viewed from the perspective of their common purpose, that is, the responsible participation of all of them in the Church’s mission of carrying forth the Gospel of Christ, the source of hope for humanity and the renewal of society.”⁸⁸

The Apostolic Exhortation also shows how these associations correspond to man’s social nature, such that the Christian commitment acquires a “social entity” that allows a more extensive and effective impact on culture. In addition, faced with an ever more secularized society, a community is thus better able to provide aid in favor of a truly Christian life and missionary commitment.

This becomes all the more true in situations of Christian minority, where international groupings manifest the universality of the Catholic faith and provide a link with the See of Peter.⁸⁹ But prior to these considerations there is a fundamental ecclesiological reason that justifies lay associations. As number 18 of *Apostolicam actuositatem* states, the lay association “signifies the communion and unity of the Church in Christ”. It is important for new foundations to heed the fundamental criteria of ecclesiality, as formulated in number 30 of *Christifideles Laici*.

V. Two urgent task of the lay faithful in Asia

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

⁸⁷ Cf. CIC can. 215; ChL 29; P. Boekholt, *Der Laie in der Kirche*. Seine Rechte und Pflichten im Neuen Kirchenrecht, Verlag Butzon & Bercker, Kevelaer 1984; L. Martinez Sistach, *Las asociaciones de fieles*, Col. Lectània Sant Pacià 37, Barcelona 2004. Cf. Ch. Hegge, *Il Vaticano II e i movimenti ecclesiali*. Una recezione carismatica, Collana: Contributi di teologia 33, Edizioni Città Nuova, Roma 2001; Ch. Hegge (ed.), *Kirche bricht auf*. Die Dynamik der Neuen Geistlichen Gemeinschaften, Aschendorff Verlag, Münster 2005.

⁸⁸ ChL 29.

⁸⁹ Cf. EA 9.

Twelve years after the synod on the laity, the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* makes concrete some of the principles of *Christifideles Laici* regarding the pastoral situation of the Asian continent.⁹⁰ In particular it highlights two points, namely *the need for formation* and *the re-awakening of the laity's missionary commitment*.⁹¹

1. The need for adequate formation

In order to fulfill completely his Christian nature, the lay faithful must know his faith well. This principle applies twice as much where the Church is a minority!⁹² Our living of the faith cannot stop at attending Mass and receiving the sacraments. *Christifideles Laici* has dedicated an entire chapter to the formation of the laity, referring again to the image of the vine and the branches: “the call to growth and a continual process of maturation, of always bearing much fruit.”⁹³

The basic objective of formation is to understand ever more clearly their vocation and to be more willing to live it.⁹⁴ As the basic means *Christifideles Laici* lists listening to the word of God and of the Church, prayer, spiritual guidance, the recognition of personal gifts and the signs of the times. It is important not to stay at the level of mere theoretical knowledge, but go beyond to acting concretely: “to grow always in the knowledge of the richness of Baptism and faith as well as to live it more fully.”⁹⁵ The Apostolic Exhortation proposes once again conciliar teaching,⁹⁶ recalls the bishops' duties in this area⁹⁷ and highlights the many aspects of integral formation.⁹⁸

The *Christifideles Laici* insists on an integral formation because only it can lead to *unity of life, coherence* between *faith* and *life*, between life as *believer* and *citizen*. Among the areas of integral, unified formation we should emphasize spiritual, doctrinal and social formation.⁹⁹ As regards places and resources, people and groups for this formation, the Synodal document emphasizes that God is the first educator, whose educational work is revealed and fulfilled in the person of Jesus and comes to

⁹⁰ Cf. EA 24 (nota 120)

⁹¹ Cf. EA 45.

⁹² Cf. EA 9.

⁹³ Cf. ChL 57-63, 57: “People are approached in liberty by God who calls everyone to grow, develop and bear fruit. A person cannot put off a response nor cast off personal responsibility in the matter ... In this dialogue between God who offers his gifts, and the person who is called to exercise responsibility, there comes the possibility, indeed the necessity, of a total and ongoing formation of the lay faithful ...”

⁹⁴ Cf. ChL 58: “God calls me and sends me forth as a labourer in his vineyard. He calls me and sends me forth to work for the coming of his Kingdom in history. This personal vocation and mission defines the dignity and the responsibility of each member of the lay faithful and makes up the focal point of the whole work of formation, whose purpose is the joyous and grateful recognition of this dignity and the faithful and generous living-out of this responsibility.”

⁹⁵ ChL 58.

⁹⁶ Cf. ChL 57.

⁹⁷ Cf. ChL 61.

⁹⁸ Cf. ChL 60: “Above all, it is indispensable that they have a more exact knowledge -and this demands a more widespread and precise presentation-of the Church's social doctrine ...”; Cf. Pont. Council for Justice and Peace (ed.), *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2004.

⁹⁹ ChL 60.

men through the Holy Spirit, made real in the Church and through and in view of the Church.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, the universal church and the Pope have an irreplaceable role in the education of the laity. But the particular churches with their bishops and parishes with their priests, must play their part. *Christifideles Laici* recalls the important role of small communities, groups, associations and movements in the process of forming the lay faithful. Finally, the family carries out an irreplaceable work of education, and Catholic schools and universities also play an important role in this educational process.

There is one aspect of the reflections of *Christifideles Laici* that has particular relevance to the Asian continent, namely the attention paid to local culture, as the Synod Fathers wanted: “The formation of Christians will take the greatest account of local human culture, which contributes to formation itself, and will help to discern the value, whether implanted in tradition or proposed in modern affairs.”¹⁰¹

Therefore, *Ecclesia in Asia* (No. 22) gives the laity a decisive role in the process of inculturation: “It is they above all who are called to transform society, in collaboration with the Bishops, clergy and religious, by infusing the “mind of Christ” into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the secular world in which they live. A wider inculturation of the Gospel at every level of society in Asia will depend greatly on the appropriate formation which the local Churches succeed in giving to the laity.”

Finally, let me mention three key tools for lay formation: the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*¹⁰², the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*¹⁰³ and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*¹⁰⁴. These resources are of great help in addressing urgent problems that require joint reflection and action.

2. The urgency for a missionary re-awakening

In addition to the need for formation, I can refer only briefly, for lack of time, to the need for a missionary revival of the lay faithful in Asia.¹⁰⁵

The post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* takes up the words that Pope John Paul II gave during the World Youth Day in Manila 1995: “If the Church in Asia is to fulfil its providential destiny, evangelization as the joyful, patient and progressive

¹⁰⁰ Cf. ChL 61.

¹⁰¹ ChL 63.

¹⁰² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1993.

¹⁰³ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (ed.), *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. EA 19.

preaching of the saving Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ must be your absolute priority.”¹⁰⁶

Let us not forget that among the effects of the globalization process an overall leveling of religious and ethical convictions is taking place. It seems that all religions and the different proposals for ethics have the same value and the same degree of truth. The only real differences regard emphasizing or preferring this or that aspect. If as Christians we are to combat this “general relativism”, we must first of all become aware of our own identity and dignity as lay faithful.

We should remember that on the part of Christians there is no reason for any sense of inferiority, even with the lack of a long Christian tradition or when faced with the situation of minority in most Asian countries. In the end the richness of the Christian message and the corresponding unity of life lead, in the midst of all “outward” circumstances, to a great “interior” joy and a deep gratitude for the great gift of faith in God.

Cardinal Ratzinger affirmed as much when he said after the '87 synod: “The Church lives above all by the fact that Christians feel the joy of being Christians and know that this is precisely why the Church needs them.”¹⁰⁷

When lived in the circumstances of a minority, this unity of life creates yet another effect, namely the personal integrity of Christians contributing to building bridges and relationships with the world around them, thus improving mutual relations and contributing to peaceful living together.¹⁰⁸ We remain in the firm certainty that “The believer is never alone!”¹⁰⁹ The believer always lives in a community of believers, both near and far. *Christifideles Laici* speaks of a “real, essential and constant bond” that joins the particular Churches with the universal Church.¹¹⁰ Often it just takes an awareness of breathing a more “Catholic” breath!¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ EA 2 = John Paul II, *Speech to the VIth General Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences* (F.A.B.C.) Manila, 15 gennaio 1995, n. 11, in: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XVIII, 1 (1959), 159; Cf. EA 4.

¹⁰⁷ Ratzinger, *Ohne Amt* 24: “Aber vor allen Dingen lebt die Kirche davon, dass Christen Freude daran haben, Christen zu sein, und wissen, dass gerade so die Kirche sie braucht.”

¹⁰⁸ Cf. ChL 35: “The lay faithful can favour the relations which ought to be established with followers of various religions through their example in the situations in which they live and in their activities ... Throughout the world today the Church lives among people of various religions... All the Faithful, especially the lay faithful who live among the people of other religions...ought to be for all a sign of the Lord and his Church ... What is first needed for the evangelization of the world are those who will evangelize; Cf. EA 23: This proclamation is a mission needing holy men and women who will make the Saviour known and loved through their lives ... Christians who speak of Christ must embody in their lives the message that they proclaim.”

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Homily* at the Islinger Feld in Regensburg, 12 September 2006, in: O. R., Weekly edition in English, n. 212, 14 sett. 2006, 5: “The Creed is not a collection of propositions; it is not a theory. It is anchored in the event of Baptism - a genuine encounter between God and man. In the mystery of Baptism, God stoops to meet us; he comes close to us and in turn brings us closer to one another. Baptism means that Jesus Christ adopts us as his brothers and sisters, welcoming us as sons and daughters into God's family. He thus makes us one great family in the universal communion of the Church. Truly, those who believe are never alone. God comes to meet us. Let us go out to meet God and thus meet one another! To the extent we can, let us make sure that none of God's children ever feels alone!”

¹¹⁰ Cf. ChL 25.

¹¹¹ Cf. ChL 26.

Another opportunity to capitalize upon, especially where the Church is a minority are the various forms of lay association.¹¹² Besides the ecclesial and other reasons for their existence - such as the social dimension of the person - these forms of association provide an efficacious means of action - which is especially valid in a pluralistic and fragmented society where the faithful are few in number - and these associations assist in offering the laity an integral and ongoing formation.

It seems that the open acceptance of the forms of lay association on the part of this theologian, Cardinal and Pope, can be explained not only by their positive valorization as the fruit of Vatican II, but also by a hope that stems from the new forms of Christian fraternity.¹¹³ In a short book published in 1958, the young professor of dogmatic and fundamental theology in Freising presents Christian fraternity as a principle within the ecclesial community that is life giving and correcting, and which has decisive consequences for parish life, as well as for all ecclesial groups.¹¹⁴ To encourage and to support these new movements as building blocks of Christian fraternity and as leaven within, as they are disposed and directed towards the work of evangelization, this is one of the “great projects” of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Pope Benedict XVI!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

I wish to end our long analysis with one last look at the Christians of the first centuries. Protestant professor *Christoph Marksches*, ordinary of Ancient Church History at Humboldt University in Berlin, wrote a book a few years ago titled: “*How did Christianity ever survive antiquity?*”. The author responds to the question with seven historical reasons, leaving out of the picture, however, any “divine” action or assistance.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Cf. EA 9: “The apostolic and charismatic movements too are a gift of the Spirit, bringing new life and vigour to the formation of lay men and women, families and the young.28 Associations and ecclesial movements devoted to the promotion of human dignity and justice make accessible and tangible the universality of the evangelical message of our adoption as children of God (Cf.. Rom 8:15-16).”

¹¹³ J. Ratzinger, *La fraternità cristiana*, Collana: Giornale di Teologia 311, Editrice Queriniana, Brescia 2005, 87-89. (= Ratzinger, *Schriften* 8/2, 37-104).

¹¹⁴ Ratzinger, *Fraternità* 88. The author quotes from the book of German exegete Heinz Schürmann, *Gemeinde als Bruderschaft im Lichte des Neuen Testaments*, in: Diaspora, Gabe und Aufgabe, ed. dal Generalvorstand des Bonifatiusvereins, Paderborn 1955, 21-31, 24 ss. In reference to parish renewal by means of various complementary initiatives is added this observation of Schürmann (that to): “that permanent nucleus remains the need to develop again, even today, in the actual communitarian forms of extra-ecclesial community life, that favor cultural encounters and make possible this direct fraternal contact ... so that in the parishes this fraternity will be, so to speak, subdivided into each and every association and organization, so that it will be necessary to continually promote encounters on a general level, so that their aims can be effectively manifested within the greater unity of the parish. The individual organization has a right to exist only in the degree in which it is conceived as a basic instrument at the service of fraternity of the entire community.”

¹¹⁵ C. Marksches, *Warum hat das Christentum in der Antike überlebt?* Ein Beitrag zum Gespräch zwischen Kirchengeschichte und Systematischer Theologie, Reihe: Forum. Theologische Literaturzeitung 13 (2004), Leipzig 2004.

I think the first reason that he gives is directly connected with our theme. Markschies point of departure is the great “impression” that the first Christians made on the non-Christians as this reveals the fact of the exceptional personal credibility of each singular Christian in a non-Christian world.¹¹⁶ The author specifically points out the “immediate personal effect” that the martyrs and missionaries provoked, as well as the monks and bishops.¹¹⁷ According to his thesis, the convincing force of the Christian faith consisted in a unique and *common dynamic*, expressed and recognized *in the shared witness* of each individual Christian, whether pastor or lay person, a faith that was lived in its complete fullness without any if’s, and’s or but’s. Regarding this point, Cardinal Ratzinger said: “The community of the life of the Church invited others to participate in this life, and it was there where the truth was revealed and it was from there which came forth this life”¹¹⁸

In 2005, shortly before being elected Pope, Cardinal Ratzinger ended a conference at Subiaco with a clear invitation to be *witnesses* and to form this *creative minority*: “Above all, that of which we are in need at this moment in history are men who, through an enlightened and lived faith, render God credible in this world. The negative testimony of Christians who speak about God and live against him, has darkened God's image and opened the door to disbelief. We need men who have their gaze directed to God, to understand true humanity. We need men whose intellects are enlightened by the light of God, and whose hearts God opens, so that their intellects can speak to the intellects of others, and so that their hearts are able to open up to the hearts of others.”¹¹⁹

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

The Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* will celebrate at the end of this year its twenty-second birthday: so we are dealing with a document that is still very “young”, well theologically grounded, and full of enthusiasm and rich points for the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world. I am sure that the expectations and hopes, whether those nurtured in the heart of the theologian Joseph Ratzinger or those of the Church’s Magisterium are fully satisfied by means of the pronouncements made in the post conciliar teachings and by means of this Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*. Now it is up to us to keep these points present in our common reflections and to implement them into the life of our local churches, in our families, in our work place, free time, in our parish, in our ecclesial movements and new communities.

Thank you for your attention.

¹¹⁶ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Guardare Cristo*. Esercizi di Fede, Speranze e Carità, Jaca Book, Milano 1989, 31.

¹¹⁷ Markschies, *Christentum* 44.

¹¹⁸ Ratzinger, *Guardare Cristo* 31.

¹¹⁹ J. Ratzinger, *L'Europa di Benedetto nella Crisi delle Culture*, Edizioni Cantagalli, Siena 2005, 63-64. English translation taken from Zenit News Service article: “Cardinal Ratzinger on Europe's Crisis of Culture (Part 4)” found at: <http://zenit.org/article-13705?l=english>