

Secularity of the Lay Faithful: Living Expression of Christian Hope

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I. SECULARISM AS A FALSIFICATION OF HOPE

The interventions of the pontifical magisterium at the beginning of the third millennium are marked by an insistent and ever more explicit appeal to Christian hope. The Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* focuses on the present and future of Europe precisely from the perspective of this theological virtue.

One of the passages in the post-synodal document dedicated to a diagnosis of the cultural and sociological situation of the old continent (also quite relevant for other geographic and human areas), describes in strong terms some clear symptoms of a “dimming of hope”: “a kind of practical agnosticism and religious indifference whereby many Europeans give the impression of living without spiritual roots—somewhat like heirs who have squandered a patrimony entrusted to them by history. . . . Many people are no longer able to integrate the Gospel message into their daily experience; living one’s faith in Jesus becomes increasingly difficult in a social and cultural setting in which that faith is constantly challenged and threatened. In many social settings it is easier to identify oneself as an agnostic than as a believer. The impression is given that unbelief is self-explanatory, whereas belief needs some kind of social legitimization which is neither obvious nor taken for granted.”¹

It is not hard to see reflected here the description that Pope John Paul II drew back in 1988 of secularism,² a vision of the world and of all human realities that dramatically restricts, both on the theoretical plane and in practice, the horizon of

1. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* [EiE], June 28, 2003, no. 7.

2. “How can one not notice the ever-growing existence of religious indifference and atheism in its more varied forms, particularly in its perhaps most widespread form of secularism? Adversely affected by the impressive triumphs of continuing scientific and technological development and above all, fascinated by a very old and yet new temptation, namely, that of wishing to become like God (cf. *Gen 3:5*) through the use of a liberty without bounds, individuals cut the religious roots that are in their hearts; they forget God or simply retain him without meaning in their lives, or outrightly reject him and begin to adore various ‘idols’ of the contemporary world. The present-day phenomenon of secularism is truly serious not simply as regards the individual, but in some ways as regards whole communities, as the Council has already indicated: ‘Growing numbers of people are abandoning religion in practice.’ At other times I myself have recalled the phenomenon of de-Christianization which strikes long-standing Christian people and which continually calls for a re-evangelization.” (John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, [CL], December 30, 1988, no. 4).

human existence, enclosing everything within a purely immanent perspective. “It is therefore no wonder,” *Ecclesia in Europe* recapitulates, “that in this context a vast field has opened for the unrestrained development of nihilism³ in philosophy, of relativism in values and morality, and of pragmatism—and even a cynical hedonism—in daily life. European culture gives the impression of ‘silent apostasy’ on the part of people who have all that they need and who live as if God does not exist.”⁴

Setting aside one’s faith leads directly to a weakening of hope. And, “as the Synod Fathers made clear, ‘*man cannot live without hope*: life would become meaningless and unbearable.’ Often those in need of hope think that they can find peace in fleeting and insubstantial things.”⁵ After listing some of the more widespread versions of an alternative “hope” that some have sought as a replacement for the true one, John Paul II concludes: “All these, however, show themselves profoundly illusory and incapable of satisfying that yearning for happiness which the human heart continues to harbor. The disturbing signs of growing hopelessness thus continue and intensify.”⁶

Thus a parched man, lost in the desert,⁷ sees in the distance a mirage that leads him to spend his waning energies in running, with a false hope, towards a goal that proves deceptive. And once more scanning the horizon, he thinks he sees another oasis and forces himself to run towards it, exhausting his ever depleting strength. When true hope is lacking, the more intensely a person immerses himself in temporal realities, and the greater the hope that he places in them, the more he separates himself from their true meaning and the meaning of his own life. And in the end this frenetic activity leads only to a spiral of despair.

The Founder of Opus Dei, in a homily given in 1968 and later published under the title *The Christian’s Hope*, reflected on the indispensable role of this virtue in our earthly life: “I am always moved to respect and even to admiration by the tenacity of those who work wholeheartedly for noble ideals. Nevertheless, I consider I have a duty to remind you that everything we undertake in this life, if we see it exclusively as our own work, bears from the outset the stamp of perishability. . . . This precariousness does not stifle hope. On the contrary, once we recognize the insignif-

3. The despair fostered by nihilism is highlighted in the following text from the pontifical magisterium: “As a result of the crisis of rationalism, what has appeared finally is nihilism. . . . In the nihilist interpretation, life is no more than an occasion for sensations and experiences in which the ephemeral has pride of place. Nihilism is at the root of the widespread mentality which claims that a definitive commitment should no longer be made, because everything is fleeting and provisional” (John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, September 14, 1998, no. 46).

4. *EiE*, no. 9.

5. *EiE*, no. 10.

6. *Ibid.*

7. In the homily during the Mass inaugurating his pontificate (April 24, 2005), Benedict XVI made use of the same comparison: “The pastor must be inspired by Christ’s holy zeal: for him it is not a matter of indifference that so many people are living in the desert. And there are so many kinds of desert. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God’s darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.” This image reflects the divine lament in Jeremiah (2:13): “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

icant and contingent nature of our earthly endeavors, the way is then open for true hope, a hope which elevates all human work and turns it into a meeting point with God. An inexhaustible light then bathes everything we do and chases away the dark shadows of disappointment. But if we transform our temporal projects into ends in themselves and blot out from our horizon our eternal dwelling place and the end for which we have been created, which is to love and praise God and then to possess him forever in heaven, then our most brilliant endeavors turn traitor, and can even become a means of degrading our fellow creatures.”⁸

The vision spread by secularism not only ignores the wisdom of the faith regarding human realities, but, by enclosing the human person in a perspective “restricted to this world and closed to transcendence,”⁹ distorts hope and denatures true charity, starting with a rightly ordered love for this world.¹⁰ Hence as St. Josemaría concludes in the passage cited above: “Perhaps there is no greater tragedy for man than the sense of disillusionment he suffers when he has corrupted or falsified his hope, by placing it in something other than the one Love which satisfies without ever satiating.”¹¹

II. CHRISTIAN SECULARITY: AT THE HEART OF THE “GOSPEL OF HOPE”

In confronting the urgent need to announce the “Gospel of hope,”¹² to which the whole Church is called, it is important to realize that secularism is diametrically opposed to Christian “secularity.” The latter is an attitude towards the world that stems from faith and authentic hope. Therefore it is capable of embracing the world and all human realities¹³ in a love which does not turn traitor, and which leads a person to fulfil his fundamental vocation to love.¹⁴ And this is true despite the “ambiguity”¹⁵ with which earthly realities—

8. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, no. 208. In the following pages, besides the teachings of the Church’s magisterium, I will give special emphasis to the teachings of St. Josemaría. The interior lights that he received from God and that he faithfully spread through his pastoral activity since 1928, cast an especially strong light on the universal call to sanctity, the vocation of ordinary Christians, the value of secular realities, ordinary life as a path and place for meeting God, and the apostolic mission of the lay faithful. And he did so in a pastoral and theological context in which these ideas were not commonly taught. A pontifical decree pointed to the importance of the teachings and the pastoral practice of the Founder of Opus Dei, “not only in the fruitful example of his own life, but also—prophetically anticipating the Second Vatican Council—in the extraordinary vigor with which he sought from the very start of his ministry to address to all Christians the Gospel’s call” (Pontifical Decree on the Heroic Virtues of the Servant of God J. Escrivá de Balaguer, April 9, 1990). Cf. Alvaro del Portillo, “Concluding the Symposium,” in M. Belda et al. (eds.), *Santidad y Mundo* (Rome, October 12-14, 1993), Eunsa, Pamplona 1996, pp. 277-294.

9. *EiE*, no. 10.

10. St. Thomas explains that “when our mind is occupied with temporal things as though trying to find its end there, it is lowered to their level; in contrast, when these things are ordered to blessedness, one is not brought down by them, but, rather, one raises them to a higher level” (*S. Th.*, II-II, q. 83, a. 6 ad 3).

11. *Friends of God*, no. 208.

12. Cf. *EiE*, no. 33 and *passim*.

13. “‘It is a time of hope, and I live off this treasure. It is not just a phrase, Father,’ you tell me, ‘it is a reality.’—Well then ... bring the whole world, all the human values which attract you so very strongly—friendship, the arts, science, philosophy, theology, sport, nature, culture, souls—bring all of this within that hope: the hope of Christ.” St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow*, no. 293.

14. Cf. Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* [GS], no. 19.

15. St. Josemaría points to an aspect of this ambiguity in *Furrow*, no. 294, referring to “that pleasant but insubstantial enchantment of the world . . . there all the time.” Cf. the enlightening balance with which the Council discusses this theme in GS, 36 ff.

precisely because of the truth and value that they contain¹⁶—present themselves to our eyes.

The proper response to this intrinsic ambivalence of the world is, undoubtedly, one of the keys to an authentic Christian secularity, since it requires giving an account for one's hope¹⁷ and showing the consistency of one's faith in daily life. Only authentic hope permits one to adequately resolve, in a way that respects the truth of creation, the tension between this world and the next: "this conviction spurs me on to grasp that only those things that bear the imprint of God can display the indelible sign of eternity and have lasting value. Therefore, far from separating me from the things of this earth, hope draws me closer to these realities in a new way, a Christian way, which seeks to discover in everything the relation between our fallen nature and God, our Creator and Redeemer."¹⁸

This new "drawing close" to earthly realities, an unmistakable fruit of hope,¹⁹ is what distinguishes Christian secularity: "The true Christian, who acts according to his faith, always has his sights set on God. His outlook is supernatural. He works in this world of ours, which he loves passionately; he is involved in all its challenges, but all the while his eyes are fixed on heaven."²⁰

Certainly, since the Church lives in the world and appears before it as the sign and universal sacrament of salvation,²¹ one can speak of a "secularity" of the Church itself. And one could also consider the "secular dimension" (that is to say, the relationship with secular realities) of the Christian life of each of the faithful, with its corresponding features and hues according to one's condition and vocation. All in the Church, sacred ministers, consecrated faithful and laity, participate, each in his or her own way, in the mission of the Church for the life of the world. Nevertheless, when the Second Vatican Council proclaimed that all the faithful are called to sanctity²² (a teaching that Pope Paul VI pointed to as "the most striking characteristic and final goal of the whole Conciliar magisterium"²³), it spoke of secularity as the "specific characteristic" of the lay faithful.²⁴ In the case of the laity, therefore, secularity—the secular nature of their Christian life—is the feature that defines their

16. Cf. *GS*, 36.

17. *1 Pet* 3:15.

18. *Friends of God*, no. 208.

19. "The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man; it takes up the hopes that inspire men's activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]*, 1818).

20. *Friends of God*, no. 206.

21. Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium* [LG], no. 48.

22. Cf. *LG*, 11; 39–41.

23. Pope Paul VI, *Motu proprio Sanctitas Clarior*, March 19, 1969, AAS 61 (1969), p. 159. John Paul II elaborated on this teaching: "The Second Vatican Council has significantly spoken on the universal call to holiness. It is possible to say that this call to holiness is precisely the basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the Gospel. This charge is not a simple moral exhortation but an undeniable requirement arising from the mystery of the Church" (*CL*, 16).

24. Cf. *LG*, 31.

proper and specific way of seeking sanctity and participating in the evangelizing mission of the Church.

From this point of view, the circumstances that mark the beginning of the third millennium—the philosophical and practical dimming of hope mentioned above—highlight in a special way the evangelizing importance of the Christian mission and vocation of the laity,²⁵ since “it is to the laity, though not exclusively to them, that secular duties and activity properly belong.”²⁶

As John Paul II emphasized in his post-synodal Exhortation for Europe: “The contribution of the lay faithful to the life of the Church is essential: they have an irreplaceable role in the proclamation and the service of the Gospel of hope, since ‘through them the Church of Christ is made present in the various sectors of the world, as a sign and source of hope and of love.’²⁷ As full sharers in the Church’s mission in the world, they are called to testify that the Christian faith constitutes the only complete response to the questions which life sets before every individual and every society, and they are able to imbue the world with the values of the Kingdom of God, the promise and guarantee of a hope which does not disappoint.”²⁸

We find here the special responsibility of the lay faithful, in the service of mankind and the world: to vivify all earthly realities, striving to order them in accord with the hope that does not defraud.²⁹ This mission, in turn, is greatly aided by a right understanding of the meaning of the secular character of the Christian vocation.³⁰

III. A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD

The great majority of Christians are immersed in the flux of temporal realities, which absorb most of their time and energy. One of the features of this complex human and Christian reality is, of course, the negative influence of “the world,”

25. This is the way that the 1987 Synod of Bishops, dedicated to the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world, understood it, as it took up the challenge “of specifying the concrete ways of seeing to it that the splendid ‘theory’ of the laity expressed by the Council might find an authentic ecclesial ‘praxis’” (CL, 2).

26. GS, 43.

27. CL, 7.

28. *EiE*, 41.

29. “. . . [beseeching] our Lord to grant us an ever increasing hope, we will possess the infectious joy of those who know they are children of God. . . . Let us be optimists. Moved by the power of hope, we will fight to wipe away the trail of filth and slime left by the sowers of hatred [cf. *The Way*, no. 1]. We will find a new joyful perspective to the world, seeing that it has sprung forth beautiful and fair from the hands of God. We will give it back to him with that same beauty.” (*Friends of God*, no. 219).

30. As indicated by the title, I am going to refer directly only to the lay faithful, without dealing with other types of secularity. The purpose of these reflections is to illustrate some of the principle dimensions of the “secular character” of the lay vocation, as the Council expressed it, leaving aside any comparison of the different vocations and conditions found in the Church.

due to the disorder introduced by sin: creatures attempting to rise up as rivals to the Creator, and also to one another; temporal goods and goals which, if taken as absolutes, blind and mislead the heart; earthly interests, mean or otherwise, which trap a person in a tangled web of demands and passions, and threaten to divert one's eyes from the only goal capable of fulfilling one's longing for happiness. In this sense, "the world," as the sphere of influence of "the prince of this world"³¹ in rebellion against God's plan, is the enemy of one's soul. Rather than fostering Christian life, it opposes it.

Nevertheless, Christian reflection on the world needs to take into account other features—particularly the original goodness of creation in God's plan and the consequences, not only of sin, but also of the redemption.³² A theological evaluation of the world that unilaterally accentuates, or simply emphasizes, its negative aspects, would necessarily lead to intensifying the opposition between the realities of this world and those of the next, and to the consideration of life in the world as an obstacle for attaining holiness. The world would therefore constitute, in practice, a falsification of hope, in a way opposed to that produced by secularism, but equally unwelcome.

Throughout history various manifestations of this outlook have appeared in the theory and practice of Christian life.³³ Without denying the sanctifying potential stemming from the condition of being baptized, a predominantly negative evaluation of the world leads one to view the world, understood as the "hostile surroundings" in which the life of many faithful unfolds, as conditioning and placing obstacles (in the best of cases) to the full development of Christian life. This outlook also leads to a "devaluing" of the ordinary faithful when it comes to actively taking up their indispensable role in the mission of evangelizing.

In contrast, a thorough understanding of the truth of the vocation of the laity to sanctity and apostolate, as the "natural," and therefore attainable, goal of their Christian life, requires a renewed theological evaluation of the world. Only thus can one avoid reducing the unequivocal call that resounds in Christ's preaching to an exhortation, although beautiful, that is unattainable in practice, because of an irreconcilable opposition between the world and holiness.

To help clarify these points, we will need to look at the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on the reality of the universal call to holiness and the condition of the lay faithful living in the world.

31. *Jn* 14:30.

32. Cf. CCC, 2853.

33. Cf. in this regard, Jose Luis Illanes, *Mundo y Santidad*, Madrid, 1984, pp. 65 ff, and the bibliography cited therein.

IV. THE VOCATION AND MISSION OF THE LAITY IN THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

When the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* refers specifically to the laity, it begins by emphasizing what they have in common with all the faithful: "These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world."³⁴ The Council thus confirms that the laity, incorporated into Christ, are called like all the other faithful to be saints and to carry out the apostolic mission of the Church; but it insists that they do so in their own special manner: "in their own way."

The Council document goes on immediately to describe the special manner in which the laity carry out their Christian vocation: "What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature. . . . 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."³⁵

In the following pages I will present some considerations³⁶ that can help throw light on this text. But before doing so, it is important to emphasize that the universal call to holiness is for each of the faithful a true personal vocation.³⁷ In this perspective, the secular nature of the lay faithful appears in all of its depth as the key to a true and effective renewal of the meaning of one's life as a Christian vocation.

1. THE SECULAR CONDITION OF LAY PEOPLE AS A MODE OF THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION.

The Council's affirmation that "what specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature" is not meant to highlight merely the obvious fact that the lay faith-

34. *LG*, 31.

35. *LG*, 31.

36. These were originally spelled out in my book *Fieles en el mundo: La secularidad de los laicos cristianos*, Pamplona 2000, ch. 2.

37. In the decades following the Council, the expression "universal call to holiness" has become a part of the common vocabulary of Christians. But, perhaps for that very reason, it is important to stress certain aspects of its meaning, to prevent it from being vitiated. Among these, we can call attention precisely to the fact that it is a call, that is to say, a vocation. The universal or general call addressed to all men and women entails, for each Christian, a very personal vocation. Every call from God is always translated into a personal call, into a divine vocation to which each has to respond personally. And it is also worth pointing out that this is a matter of vocation in the strict sense: "Before the Second Vatican Council, the concept of 'vocation' was applied first of all to the priesthood and religious life, as if Christ had addressed to the young person his evangelical 'follow me' only for these cases. The Council has broadened this way of looking at things" (John Paul II, *Letter to Young People*, March 31, 1985, no. 9).

ful live in the world and dedicate themselves to secular tasks and realities. On the contrary, it is a doctrinal declaration of great importance, containing in essence the theological evaluation of secular realities that underlies the universality of the Christian vocation to holiness and apostolate.

With these words the Council is trying to point out that the secular condition of the lay life should not be understood as a simple fact, nor as “simply an external and environmental framework, but as a reality destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of its meaning,”³⁸ since it constitutes a mode of Christian life, a way of being a Christian. In the words of John Paul II, “among the lay faithful this one baptismal dignity takes on a manner of life which sets a person apart, without, however, bringing about a separation from the ministerial priesthood or from men and women religious. The Second Vatican Council has described this manner of life as the ‘secular character.’”³⁹

If one keeps in mind that the call to holiness is a true personal vocation, one more easily understand why secularity cannot be understood as “simply an external and environmental framework.” In each lay man or woman the vocation to holiness and the secular character of their life are inseparable. It is not a matter of having a Christian vocation on the one hand, and on the other, as a merely coincidental circumstance, in fact be living in the world. The condition of being a Christian and one’s secular character are intertwined in the unity and totality of one’s personal vocation.

This is expressed clearly by St. Josemaría Escrivá: “I dream—and the dream has come true—of multitudes of God’s children, sanctifying themselves as ordinary citizens, sharing the ambitions and endeavors of their colleagues and friends. I want to shout to them about this divine truth: if you are there in the middle of ordinary life, it doesn’t mean Christ has forgotten about you or hasn’t called you. He has invited you to stay among the activities and concerns of the world. He wants you to know that your human vocation, your profession, your talents, are not omitted from his divine plans. He has sanctified them and made them a most acceptable offering to his Father.”⁴⁰

Thus, in this context, the expression “secular character” or “secularity” means precisely the lay faithful’s specific way of being a Christian. Consequently, the fact of being in the world and dedicating oneself to the concerns of the world and the fact of being a Christian cannot be understood as two conflicting realities that limit each other in such a way that the increase of one is in detriment to the other. A similar error is found in the view that one cannot be fully secular if one is fully Christian, or fully Christian if one’s life is fully secular.

38. *CL*, 15.

39. *CL*, 15.

40. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 20.

If one of the lay faithful were to have a poor understanding of secularity or of the Christian vocation, or of both, there could easily enter into his life a tension, a separation between these aspects in his Christian life. And this tension would sooner or later result in either abandoning one of the alternatives or, what is no less harmful, in reaching the false solution of establishing a precarious compromise between one's Christian life and one's everyday life. This could take the form of a superficial "compatibility," or a no less superficial separation, between one's public and private life, one's spiritual and "real life," one's obligations and devotions; one's belief and knowledge. Naturally, in either case, one's Christian vocation would be sadly neutralized.

The truth however is that no opposition exists between secularity and the Christian vocation. For the lay faithful, secularity is the specific "mode" both of one's sanctity and one's evangelizing mission. The words of John Paul II, cited earlier, that the secular character constitutes a "mode of one's baptismal dignity" (that is, of one's Christian vocation), is the equivalent of saying that the vocation to holiness and apostolate (which by its proper nature affects all of one's life and not just a part of it)⁴¹ is expressed in the lay faithful specifically as secularity. Therefore the "secular character" of the lay faithful is not a mere external factor, either sociological or environmental, but rather a reality with a deep vocational meaning.

2. THE WORLD AS THE "PLACE" OF ONE'S VOCATION

Clearly, this affirmation of the secularity of the laity as a vocational category implies a profoundly positive evaluation of the world and of temporal realities.

As the magisterium insists, we should view the relationship of the lay faithful with the world as "not simply an external and environmental framework, but as a reality destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of its meaning."⁴² It is precisely this meaning in Jesus Christ that provides the ultimate meaning of the secularity of the laity as a vocational reality.

The book of Genesis tells us that God, after creating the world and mankind, saw that all that he had created was *good*, that it was *very good*.⁴³ From the beginning, all material creation forms part of God's loving plan for mankind, and is intrinsically ordered to man's good. According to divine design, the world and all the realities of the world show forth, each in its own way, the glory of the Creator. Each creature expresses a harmony, a goodness, that leads us to God.⁴⁴

Genesis also speaks of the original fall, by which sin and disorder entered into the heart of man and, in consequence, also into the world. Earthly realities thus lost

41. See below, note 74.

42. *CL*, 15.

43. Cf. *Gen* 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 31.

44. Cf. *Wis* 13:1-9.

their original transparency and became opaque, capable of blinding man and hiding God from him. With the proliferation of sin the disintegration of the original harmony widened and deepened.

But God did not abandon man to his fate or allow him to be definitively lost. He sent his own Son, “through whom everything has been made,” so that, as true God and true man, he would redeem man and restore the whole of creation. Therefore understanding the meaning of secularity requires considering the meaning of the world, of created realities, in light of the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God and the re-creation of all things in Christ.⁴⁵

Christ is “the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth. . . . He is the beginning, the first born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”⁴⁶ And God, who “was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself,”⁴⁷ has entrusted to the Church the “ministry of reconciliation.”⁴⁸ He wants each Christian, incorporated into Christ by baptism, to be united to the Son’s redemptive mission, which encompasses also the restoration of the primordial meaning of all creation, so that the world and all created realities may once more show forth, with the newness of the risen Christ,⁴⁹ the glory of God and draw all mankind towards him.

This mystery of our vocation in Christ underlies the hymn of benediction with which the letter to the Ephesians begins: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. . . . For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”⁵⁰

The positive evaluation of the world that is the foundation of Christian secularity is neither a cheery ingenuousness, nor a resigned acceptance of the reality of evil present in the world, which is used to justify a less demanding Christian life. On the contrary, this optimistic evaluation stems from the Church’s firm faith in the

45. “Creation,” says the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “is the foundation of ‘all God’s saving plans,’ the ‘beginning of the history of salvation’ . . . that culminates in Christ. Conversely, the mystery of Christ casts conclusive light on the mystery of creation and reveals the end for which ‘in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’ (*Gen* 1:1): from the beginning, God envisaged the glory of the new creation in Christ (cf. *Rom* 8:18-23)” (CCC, 280).

46. *Col* 1:15ff.

47. *2 Cor* 5:19.

48. *2 Cor* 5:18.

49. Cf. *Rev* 21:5.

50. *Eph* 1:3ff.

radical restorative power of the redemption. And it leads to a clear vision of secularity, and the secular character of the laity, as a vocation to co-redeem the world with Christ. "We must love the world and work and all human things. For the world is good. Adam's sin destroyed the divine balance of creation; but God the Father sent his only Son to re-establish peace, so that we, his children by adoption, might free creation from disorder and reconcile all things to God."⁵¹

Thus we can understand the close tie between secularity and the Christian vocation of the laity in no. 31 of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, cited above: "They are called there by God" (that is, "in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations" and "in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life"). The world, thus understood, is the "place" of one's Christian vocation. But not only a physical place, a stage, as it were, for playing a role—one's Christian life—which has no necessary relationship with it (a neutral vision of the world). But rather, as the Council affirms,⁵² the existence of the lay faithful, taken up in each of its facets by one's divine vocation, is as though "interwoven" with secular reality. Therefore, the divine vocation of the laity is not a call to flee from those realities or distance oneself from them (a negative vision of the world). "They are not called to abandon the position that they have in the world. Baptism does not take them from the world at all . . . on the contrary, He entrusts a vocation to them that properly concerns their situation in the world."⁵³

3. CHRISTIANS ARE IN THE WORLD AS LEAVEN

As we have seen, *Lumen Gentium*, when considering the vocation and mission of the laity, speaks of "ordering" temporal realities "according to God": "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."

Human realities are not neutral; they possess an intrinsic meaning: an ordering and opening to transcendence that constitutes the key to their truth and goodness. When this order was broken by sin, all of these realities, which were linked by the Creator's plan for mankind, experienced a deterioration also "from within": their intrinsic truth was falsified, and with it their goodness itself was affected. This deterioration, in turn, often prevents human realities from being directed to God.⁵⁴ If one considers the meaning of secularity in the light of the Incarnation, one imme-

51. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 112.

52. *LG*, 31.

53. *CL*, 15. St. Josemaría said: "What illuminates our conscience is faith in Christ, who has died and risen and is present in every moment of life. Faith moves us to play our full part in the changing situations and in the problems of human history. In this history, which began with the creation of the world and will reach its fulfillment at the end of time, the Christian is no expatriate. He is a citizen of the city of men, and his soul longs for God. While still on earth he has glimpses of God's love and comes to recognize it as the goal to which all men on earth are called" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 99).

54. Very timely, in this sense, is the description of the pagan world in the first chapter of Letter to the Romans.

diately sees that the Christian is not an alien. He has not come to the world “from without,” to take possession of something that does not belong to him, in the name of his faith. On the contrary, Christians “already are in” the world. The world belongs to them as much as it does to others—more, in a certain sense, because it belongs to Christ, to whom they are joined.⁵⁵ And “they are called there by God,” not to supplant the truth of the world by some other “logic” that is alien to it, but to restore, recuperate and bring to its fullness the original truth and meaning intrinsic to human realities, with the regenerating power of the redemption. “By the very fact of being a man, a Christian has a full right to live in the world. If he lets Christ live and reign in his heart, he will feel—quite noticeably—the saving effectiveness of our Lord in everything he does.”⁵⁶

The Gospel image of fermenting by leaven⁵⁷ is especially useful for explaining how the laity carry out their mission in the world, contributing to “the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.” Leaven does not change the nature of the dough, but brings the best out in it. It is not present in it as a foreign body, but thoroughly mixed in, forming a homogeneous part of the dough itself. Uniting its beneficent influence to the good natural qualities of the other ingredients, a single loaf of bread comes about. The leaven alone is not bread, but the quality of the bread depends, to a great extent, on its action.

V. NEUTRALIZING TEMPTATIONS IN THE LAY VOCATION

The image of leaven also illustrates two necessary characteristics of the vocation and mission of the laity. For leaven to fulfill its function, the first requirement is that it not remain outside the mass of dough, but that it be perfectly mixed in; and, in addition, that it be in good condition, that it has not deteriorated and lost its capacity to ferment.⁵⁸

The aptness of the example is seen in these words of John Paul II: “The post-conciliar path of the lay faithful has not been without its difficulties and dangers. In particular, two temptations can be cited which they have not always known how to

55. The world ... ‘That is our field!’ you said, after directing your eyes and thoughts to heaven, with all the assurance of the farmer who walks through his own ripe corn. *Regnare Christum volumus!* — we want Him to reign over this earth of his!’ (Furrow, no. 292).

56. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 183.

57. Cf. *Lk* 13:20.

58. “We must therefore see ourselves as a tiny measure of yeast, prepared and ready to do good to the whole of mankind, remembering the words of the Apostle: ‘a little leaven is enough to leaven all the dough,’ transforming it completely. We have to learn to become that yeast, that leaven, and so modify and transform the multitude.

“Is yeast, by its nature, better than dough? No. But it is what makes the dough rise and become good and nourishing food. . . . This result would never have been possible had it not been for the small amount of leaven, which dissolved and disappeared among the other ingredients, working effectively and passing unnoticed. . . . If leaven is not used for fermenting, it rots. There are two ways leaven can disappear, either by giving life to dough, or by being wasted, a perfect tribute to selfishness and barrenness” (*Friends of God*, nos. 257–258).

avoid: 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."⁵⁹

The seriousness of these temptations stems from their capacity to neutralize the divine efficacy of the laity's vocation. As we have seen, the lay condition is a specific modality of Christian life whose proper mission is to sanctify the world "from within," as a leaven. Thus its efficacy requires being faithful to the way of being proper to lay people, to their secularity. The lay faithful need to live fully immersed in the temporal realities with which their life is interwoven, and this life needs to be a fully Christian life. The first requirement is opposed by the view, or the temptation, that the full assumption of the Christian vocation on the part of the laity consists in an increase in their work within the structures of the Church. The second, by the temptation of secularism, of a worldly spirit.

An adequate response to these two temptations⁶⁰ requires that we consider, at least in their essential features, the ecclesial meaning of the mission of the laity in the world and unity of life.

1. ECCLESIAL MEANING OF THE SECULAR MISSION OF THE LAITY

The Synod of Bishops on the laity used the term *clericalization*⁶¹ to refer to the error of viewing the vocation and mission of the laity principally in terms of access to functions and offices previously reserved exclusively to the clergy, or in greater collaboration in those functions. This first temptation pointed out by John Paul II stems from a restricted vision of Christian life as an "intra-ecclesial" life. Participation in the Church's mission would be reduced, in practice, to liturgical activity, or to assisting in organized activities. But in this case the leaven would never really be mixed in with the dough, and the proper vocation of the laity would not produce the fruit God wants: the renewal of Christian life.

We need to state once again that there is no dilemma here, no clear-cut alternative: either a mission in the Church or a mission in the world. Rather both di-

59. *CL*, 2.

60. Note that not only the second of these temptation but also the first that could entail a curtailment of Christian hope, to the extent that it implies a flight from or a devaluation of human realities (cf. *GS*, 1; 34). Indeed "the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one" (*GS*, 39).

"The Church well knows that no temporal achievement is to be identified with the Kingdom of God, but that all such achievements simply reflect and in a sense anticipate the glory of the Kingdom, the Kingdom which we await at the end of history, when the Lord will come again. But that expectation can never be an excuse for lack of concern for people in their concrete personal situations and in their social, national and international life, since the former is conditioned by the latter, especially today.

"However imperfect and temporary are all the things that can and ought to be done through the combined efforts of everyone and through divine grace, at a given moment of history, in order to make people's lives 'more human,' nothing will be lost or will have been in vain" (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, December 30, 1987, no. 48).

61. Cf. *CL*, 23.

mensions converge in a true unity of life, which is a manifestation of the unity and totality of one's personal vocation. Thus the intensity of one's participation in the Church is not a function of one's greater or lesser dedication—or availability to dedicate oneself—to intra-ecclesial tasks. One's Christian commitment and dedication to the mission of the Church is always full, in each of the faithful, in accord with one's personal vocation. This fullness of dedication that the secular character of the laity's Christian vocation entails is the key to understanding the laity's mission in the Church.⁶²

When a lay person lives the demands of his vocation faithfully, his dedication to the mission of the Church is full. Therefore, one cannot say that one participates more fully in the Church's mission if one takes up more intra-ecclesial commitments or tasks, or that the laity's participation in this mission is "limited" by their dedication to secular tasks, because their full dedication as Christians to secular tasks is dedication to the mission of the Church, in the area that is their proper concern by divine vocation: "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."⁶³

The lay faithful, living members of the Body of Christ, by reason of their being part of the communion that is the Church—communion with God and with all of their fellow men—are themselves the Church.⁶⁴ Thus through their life and activity, which constitutes one of the modalities of that diversity united in communion,⁶⁵ they also carry out the mission of the Church in the world.⁶⁶ Therefore the entire life of

62. This is not to say that there are not also intra-ecclesial responsibilities that are ordinarily proper to the lay faithful, and other tasks that they could exercise, at times also to make up for the scarcity of sacred ministers (cf. Interdicasterial Instruction *Ecclesiae de Mysterio*, August 15, 1997, Theological Principles, 4). The Church has its own internal life and activities, in which all the faithful collaborate in accordance with their preparation and possibilities. With respect to these specific ecclesial functions and services, one can of course say that there is a diversity of kinds of dedication and availability, in accord with the situation and vocation of each person. It could even happen that the Church might need some lay people to make these tasks their principal activity, even seeing it as their professional work. The carrying out of functions and responsibilities in internal activities of the Church (liturgy, catechesis, charity, administration, counseling, apostolic groups, prayer groups, etc.), especially in parishes (cf. *CL*, 26), is not only not something strange for the laity, but constitutes a normal and joyful facet of their full condition as members of the Church.

63. *CL*, 17.

64. "Only from inside the Church's mystery of communion," explains Pope John Paul II, "is the 'identity' of the lay faithful made known and their fundamental dignity revealed. Only within the context of this dignity can their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world be defined" (*CL*, 8).

65. "Ecclesial communion is more precisely likened to an 'organic' communion, analogous to that of a living and functioning body. In fact, at one and the same time it is characterized by a diversity and a complementarity of vocations and states in life, of ministries, of charisms and responsibilities. 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" (*CL*, 20).

66. This supernatural reality does not imply, of course, that their activity in public life implies any sort of official or semi-official representation of the Church as an institution: "It is very important, especially where a pluralistic society prevails, that there be a correct notion of the relationship between the political community and the Church, and a clear distinction between the tasks which Christians undertake, individually or as a group, on their own responsibility as citizens guided by the dictates of a Christian conscience, and the activities which, in union with their pastors, they carry out in the name of the Church" (*GS*, 76). I will refer below to the activity of the laity in public life.

the laity, even in its most earthly and ordinary manifestations, possesses an ecclesial dimension,⁶⁷ and awareness of this reality is a joyful invitation to hope and fidelity. Realizing that his life is strongly rooted in the communion of the Church, he will feel the responsibility of knowing that by being faithful to his human and Christian vocation he is also—through his communion with God and all his brothers and sisters—the Church who is acting, making Jesus Christ present among mankind.

2. UNITY OF LIFE

That ecclesial dimension of the Christian's entire existence is one of the numerous consequences of the unity of life that radically characterizes it.⁶⁸ And unity of life is also affected by the second temptation described by John Paul II: that of "legitimizing the undue separation between faith and life, between acceptance of the Gospel and concrete action in the most diverse temporal and earthly realities." This rupture has such grave consequences for one's Christian life and co-redeeming mission that it is called by the Second Vatican Council "one of the gravest errors of our time."⁶⁹

Unity of life means not separating or compartmentalizing the realities that make up a Christian's life, according to whether they are viewed as proper to one's baptismal condition as a child of God, or to one's condition as a man or woman and a member of civil society. Undoubtedly the life of each person is complex, and presents a multiplicity of facets, but this is not simply the amalgam of unconnected circumstances. They are distinct, but really interrelated, above all because they make up a single life, with a single protagonist, a person, who is not divisible; and, in addition, because they are related, each according to its nature, with the same ultimate end to which the life of that person is ordered.

No opposition should be set up between one's human existence and one's divine vocation; between living in the Church and living in the world; between striving to lead a Christian life and looking after "other concerns"; between spiritual tasks and daily realities; between faith and life. The Founder of Opus Dei spoke with great force about unity of life in a homily preached in 1967, which summarized his constant

67. "The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, who untiringly work in the Lord's vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God's grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history" (CL, 17).

68. Unity of life is "a central theological concept" in the Founder of Opus Dei's spiritual teaching. It constitutes "one of the basic dimensions of the image of the Christian found in his preaching" (cf. Pedro Rodríguez, Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *Camino. Edición crítico-histórica*, Madrid 1999; introduction to chapter 15: commentary on point 411). The apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (nos. 17 and 59) stresses the importance of the lay faithful's unity of life: cf. R. Lanzetti, L'unità di vita e la missione dei fedeli laici nell'Esortazione Apostolica "Christifideles laici," in *Romana* 9 (1989/2), pp. 300-312. Cf. also, among other studies, E. Reinhardt, "La legítima autonomía de las realidades temporales" (3: "Santificación del mundo y unidad de vida en el Beato Josemaría"), in *Romana* 15 (1992/2), pp. 331 ff.; Ignacio de Celaya, "Unidad de vida y plenitud cristiana," in Fernando Ocariz-Ignacio de Celaya, *Vivir como hijos de Dios. Estudios sobre el Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Pamplona 1993, pp. 93 ff.; Antonio Aranda, *La lógica de la unidad de vida. Identidad cristiana en una sociedad pluralista*, Pamplona 2000, pp. 121 ff.

69. GS, 43.

preaching since 1928: “No, my children. We cannot lead a double life. We cannot have a split personality, if we want to be Christians. There is only one life, made of flesh and spirit. And it is that life which has to become, in both body and soul, holy and filled with God. We discover the invisible God in the most visible and material things.”⁷⁰

This unity of what is distinct needs to be understood according to the special “compenetration”—which is not absorption or confusion—between grace and nature, the supernatural and the natural. Grace does not destroy or annul nature, but rather assumes it, heals it, and elevates it, leading it to transcend the purely human dimension.

a) UNITY OF LIFE AND THE MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION

As in every authentic dimension of secularity, unity of life is closely tied to the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word. Two truths grounded in this mystery are especially important for understanding unity of life. The Word of God, upon becoming man, has taken up all that is human. And secondly, the Christian vocation, a vocation in Christ, encompasses the whole person. Let us look briefly at the implications of these two statements.

That the Son of God, upon becoming true man, took up all that is human, means that no human reality lies outside the scope of the redemption. Everything has been made by Christ into a path and occasion for the fulfillment of the Father’s will. The new Adam, Head of all creation, is the only one who can say with full truth those words from the Roman poet Terence: “I am a man, and I consider nothing human foreign to me.”⁷¹

Therefore every noble human reality is related to one’s Christian life: “Nothing can be foreign to Christ’s care. If we enter into the theology of it instead of limiting ourselves to functional categories, we cannot say that there are things—good, noble or indifferent—which are exclusively worldly. This cannot be after the Word of God has lived among the children of men, felt hunger and thirst, worked with his hands, experienced friendship and obedience and suffering and death.”⁷² Thus the truth of the Incarnation illumines the most important human realities as well as the most humble and ordinary ones, without distinction: “Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it.”⁷³

70. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Conversations*, no. 114.

71. “*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*” (*Heautontimorumenos*, I, 1).

72. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 112.

73. *Conversations*, no. 114. “The Pontifical Decree on the Heroic Virtues of the Servant of God J. Escrivá de Balaguer” declares that thanks to “his vivid perception of the mystery of the Incarnation,” the Founder of Opus Dei understood “how supernatural life penetrates all human realities in the heart of a person reborn in Christ. These realities thus become the setting for holiness and the means to that goal.”

As we saw when considering the vocational meaning of the secular condition of the laity, the affirmation that one's vocation involves the whole person means that vocation is not a partial aspect of life, but rather encompasses every facet of one personality and activity, since it affects one's very *being* and identity⁷⁴. The Christian, incorporated into Christ, made *another Christ* by baptismal grace, has to take up as He did all reality with a redemptive concern, because nothing human is foreign to one's life in Christ, which embraces all the dimensions of one's personal existence.

Therefore unity of life is not an artificial and forced "unification," one based on sheer will power. Rather it rests on a true human foundation, which is perfected supernaturally. It stems from the harmonious development of the economy of the Incarnation, which is both natural and supernatural at the same time. So much is this so that one could even apply to it, by analogy, the formula with which the Council of Chalcedon defined the unity of the two natures, divine and human, in the person of Christ: "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence."⁷⁵

b) UNITY OF LIFE AND CHRISTIAN CONSISTENCY

Unity of life is, therefore, an attainable aspiration. No obstacles exist on the part of the realities of the world, because, without losing their own natural worth, their autonomy,⁷⁶ all of them possess a deep and specific Christian meaning. And neither is there an obstacle on the part of the Christian, who without ceasing to be a person like any other, is called to live and act among these realities not like those "who have no hope,"⁷⁷ but in such a way that they are seen to be fully human and, at the same time, fully divine: the occasion and the place of a meeting with God, the matter of one's

74. Vocation, strictly speaking, is not simply a circumstance that accrues to one's personal existence. On the contrary, it constitutes the deepest ground of a person's life and identity and, in consequence, it affects the whole person, his very being, his definition. As Pope John Paul II explained on one occasion: "The vocation of each person is fused, to a certain degree, with his own being: one can say that the vocation and the person become a single thing" (Meeting with seminarians in Porto Alegre, June 5, 1980). This implies that the vocation of every Christian to sanctity, the Christian vocation, does not constitute a partial aspect of his or her existence, but rather encompasses all the moments of one's life and all the facets of one's personality and activity. Since the deepest foundation of a person's life is the love emanating from God who called that person into existence (cf. *Eph* 1:4) and to the fullness of love, responding to that vocation is not just one among the tasks that one must accomplish. Nor is it simply the most important task, in competition with all the others. Rather it is one's *raison d'être* and only goal in life, to such an extent that all the aspects of one's existence are, or should be, parts of that unique task. One can understand, then, why a total response is the only adequate response to one's vocation: "Christian faith and calling affect our whole existence, not just a part of it. Our relations with God necessarily demand giving ourselves, giving ourselves completely. The man of faith sees life, in all its dimensions, from a new perspective: that which is given us by God" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 46).

75. Council of Chalcedon, *Symbol*, *DS*, 301-302.

76. Cf. Second Vatican Council, *GS*, 36ff; Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* [AA], no. 7.

77. *1 Thess* 4:13.

sanctification.⁷⁸ This should lead the lay faithful to value the vocational dimension of their responsibility in respect to the faithful fulfillment of their duties of state.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, it is also quite true that the daily life of each person appears to be fragmented and divided in many respects (faith and reason; mind and heart; duty and likes; immediate present and the future; hopes and reality). Therefore, unity of life is not something that is accomplished automatically; it has to be achieved, in light of the personal discovery that everything can and ought to tend to the same ultimate end, God, even though the immediate end might be quite different. And this in turn is the defining characteristic of hope. “With the intensely human impetus of Christian hope,”⁸⁰ every circumstance can be converted into the path of fidelity to one’s Christian vocation, as St. Paul urged: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”⁸¹

The attainment of unity of life consists, then, in taking up more and more fully the vocational meaning of one’s life. One could even say that the effort to discern in each circumstance what is demanded by consistency with one’s own vocation is the true path of Christian maturity. A Christian is mature to the extent that he spontaneously and freely make decisions with a deep sense of his vocation and mission.

To act with naturalness for a Christian means precisely to live with that consistency. It would be a serious mistake to understand naturalness as acting in a way that

78. The Second Vatican Council teaches: “All those things which make up the temporal order, namely, the good things of life and the prosperity of the family, culture, economic matters, the arts and professions, the laws of the political community . . . not only aid in the attainment of man’s ultimate goal but also possess their own intrinsic value. This value has been established in them by God, whether they are considered in themselves or as parts of the whole temporal order” (AA, 7). Commenting on this text, C. Soler writes: “the ordering of earthly realities to their ultimate end cannot be done independently of their proper meaning. That is to say, it is not right to view them as simply an opportunity to direct oneself to one’s final goal; it is not right to order them to this end from outside of themselves, extrinsically, as though their own content were a matter of indifference. Thus, for example, it is wrong to view them as merely an occasion to exercise virtue, or to offer them with a right intention, or to give testimony to Christ, independently of the proper reality or temporal activity involved. It is its proper content, its material significance, its proper dynamic, in short its proper value which has to be ordained intrinsically to the final end. That is to say, it is a matter of finding in each reality its proper meaning and discovering the immanent ordination of that meaning to the final end” (*Iglesia y Estado. La incidencia del Concilio Vaticano II sobre el derecho público externo*, Pamplona 1993, p. 151). As the Founder of Opus Dei said regarding work: “It is no good offering to God something that is less perfect than our poor human limitations permit. The work that we offer must be without blemish and it must be done as carefully as possible, even in its smallest details, for God will not accept shoddy workmanship” (*Friends of God*, no. 55).

79. Of special importance here is the personal discovery of the value of one’s daily work as a reality that is sanctifiable and sanctifying: “Your ordinary professional work will provide the true, solid, noble material out of which you will build a truly Christian life. You will use your work to make fruitful the grace which comes to us from Christ.

Faith, hope and charity will come into play in your professional work done for God. The incidents, the problems, the friendships which your work brings with it, will give you food for prayer. The effort to improve your own daily occupation will give you the chance to experience the cross which is essential for a Christian. When you feel your weakness, the failures which arise even in human undertakings, you will gain in objectivity, in humility and in understanding for others. Successes and joys will prompt you to thanksgiving and to realize that you do not live for yourself, but for the service of others and of God” (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 49).

80. P. O’Callaghan, “La virtud de la esperanza y la ascética cristiana en algunos escritos del Beato Josemaría, Fundador del Opus Dei,” in *Romana* 23 (1996/2), pp. 262-279.

81. 1 Cor 10:31.

seeks to prevent one's faith and hope from being noticed, so that a Christian's actions could not be distinguished from the actions of those who are moved by purely worldly interests and criteria.⁸² This false naturalness would mean giving in to the temptation to shun unity of life. And then the light would cease to illumine, the salt would lose its savor; instead of sanctifying the world, Christ's disciples would become worldly.⁸³

In summary, the effectiveness of the laity's vocation and mission requires understanding that the secular character of their life is their path for being faithful to Christ and that the true naturalness of their conduct consists in being faithful in the world.

c) UNITY OF LIFE AND THE LAITY'S APOSTOLIC MISSION

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, when referring to the apostolic mission of the laity, recalls the Council's teaching: "Since, like all the faithful, lay Christians are entrusted by God with the apostolate by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation, they have the right and duty, individually or grouped in associations, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth."⁸⁴ The Catechism goes on to present a summary of Vatican II's teaching on the participation of the laity in the threefold role of Christ: priestly, prophetic and royal. I will limit myself to pointing out now, in light of this teaching, that unity of life, shown by Christian consistency and naturalness, is also the reason why the apostolic mission of the lay faithful is carried out in a way that is inseparable from their secularity.⁸⁵

The first consequence of this reality is that—since the call to holiness and life in the world cannot be separated—the laity's apostolic mission is indissolubly united to ordinary life, and cannot be reduced to certain activities qualified as "apostolate," which also form part of the lay mission. The second is that, as a result, their apostolic mission is not an occasional or intermittent occupation; rather, since it is an essential element of the Christian vocation,⁸⁶ it should be present in every aspect of one's life, "just as there is no way to separate Christ, the God-man, from his role as redeemer."⁸⁷

82. Cf. *EiE*, no. 7 (cited supra, note 1).

83. "And in a pagan or in a worldly atmosphere, when my life clashes with its surroundings, won't my naturalness seem artificial?" you ask me. —And I reply: Undoubtedly your life will clash with theirs; and that contrast—faith confirmed by works!—is exactly the naturalness I ask of you" (St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, no. 380).

84. CCC, 900.

85. "Each one of us has to be *ipse Christus*: Christ himself. He is the one mediator between God and man (cf. 1 Tim 2:5). And we make ourselves one with him in order to offer all things, with him, to the Father. Our calling to be children of God, in the midst of the world, requires us not only to seek our own personal holiness, but also to go out onto all the ways of the earth, to convert them into roads that will carry souls over all obstacles and lead them to the Lord. As we take part in all temporal activities, as ordinary citizens, we are to become leaven (cf. Mt 13: 33) acting on the mass (cf. 1 Cor 5:6)" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 120).

86. "The Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate" (AA, no. 2).

87. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 122.

It is impossible, therefore, to give an exhaustive list of the manifestations of the lay apostolate, which are as diverse as the situations and variations of life in the world. The laity's mission "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,"⁸⁸ needs to be carried out, in first place, within the ambit of ordinary life: family, work, friendships, social life. Considered from this perspective, everything takes on an apostolic dimension: being optimistic in family problems, helping out in household tasks, punctuality and good example at work, temperance and moderation in one's lifestyle, conversations with neighbors, choice of clothing or the place for family vacations.

In addition to pointing out this apostolic dimension of daily life, the Council forcefully calls on the laity to accept their responsibility for the apostolic mission especially in those places, circumstances and activities in which the Church can be the salt of the earth only through them.⁸⁹ This is a proper and specific demand of the secular nature of their vocation: "The priority of the task of the new evangelization, which involves all the People of God, requires, today in particular. . . a full recovery of the awareness of the secular nature of the mission of the laity. This enterprise opens vast horizons, some of which have yet to be explored, for the lay faithful. The faithful can be active in this particular moment of history in areas of culture, in the arts and theatre, scientific research, labor, means of communication, politics, and the economy, etc. They are also called to a greater creativity in seeking out ever more effective means whereby these environments can find the fullness of their meaning in Christ."⁹⁰

We are dealing with areas that don't have an official Catholic "solution" or "position." In all these fields, the initiative and responsibility belong properly and exclusively to each of the lay faithful. Here it is not a question of cooperating in the apostolates of the hierarchy to which the lay faithful may be called from time to time,⁹¹ and which should be carried out in accord with the indications of the legitimate Church authorities. The freedom that each of the faithful enjoys in temporal matters,⁹² demands the "creativity" to seek in each case the most appropriate means to illuminate issues with a Christian light, and to cooperate in solving them in a way consistent with the faith. Therefore it is not a freedom that "liberates" one from being consistent with the faith, but a joyful *freedom to be faithful*.

This was expressed with great clarity by the Founder of Opus Dei in the 1967 homily cited above: "A man who knows that the world, and not just the Church, is the place where he finds Christ, loves that world. He endeavors to become properly

88. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31

89. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 33

90. Instruction *Ecclesiae de Mysterio*, cit. Premise; cf. also CL, 36 ff.

91. Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 33, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 20.

92. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43; *Code of Canon Law*, canons 227, 272.

trained, intellectually and professionally. He makes up his own mind with complete freedom about the problems of the environment in which he moves, and he takes his own decisions in consequence. As the decisions of a Christian, they derive from personal reflection, which endeavors in all humility to grasp the will of God in both the unimportant and the important events of his life. But it would never occur to such a Christian to think or say that he was stepping down from the temple into the world to represent the Church, or that his solutions are 'the catholic solutions' to the problems. That would be clericalism, 'official Catholicism,' or whatever you want to call it. In any case, it means doing violence to the very nature of things. . . . It is obvious that, in this field as in all others, you would not be able to carry out this program of sanctifying your everyday life if you did not enjoy all the freedom that proceeds from your dignity as men and women created in the image of God, and that the Church freely recognizes. Personal freedom is essential to the Christian life. But do not forget, my children, that I always speak of a responsible freedom. Interpret, then, my words as what they are: a call to exercise your rights every day, and not merely in times of emergency. A call to fulfill honorably your commitments as citizens in all fields—in politics and in financial affairs, in university life and in your job—accepting with courage all the consequences of your free decisions and the personal independence that is yours."⁹³

VI. FORMATION AND INTERIOR LIFE, PILLARS OF CHRISTIAN SECULARITY

To attain a solid unity of life and act with the consistency that is a sign of maturity in one's Christian vocation, we have two indispensable resources, "which are like living supports of Christian conduct: interior life and doctrinal formation, the deep knowledge of our faith."⁹⁴

We have already seen that when a Christian states that the world is good, he is not being naive or glossing over the manifestations of evil present in the world. This doesn't mean, of course, that all created realities—stained by the disorder that is the consequence of sin—are perfectly good just as we find them. But all possess a meaning, a truth that ordains them to the glory of God, and that we have to discover and restore.

Thus it would be a false "naturalness" to see secularity as simply living in the world and accepting the status of worldly realities as they exist in fact.⁹⁵ It would mean forgetting St. Paul's strong words: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation

93. *Conversations*, nos. 116-117.

94. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 8.

95. "Our Lord . . . has given us the world for our inheritance. It is up to us to keep our souls and our minds wide awake. We have to be realistic, without being defeatist. Only a person with a callous conscience, made insensitive by routine or dulled by a frivolous attitude, can allow himself to think that evil—offense to God and harm, at times irreparable harm, to souls—does not exist in the world he sees. We have to be optimistic, but our optimism should come from our faith in the power of God who does not lose battles, and not from any human sense of satisfaction, from a stupid and presumptuous complacency" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no 123).

itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now.”⁹⁶ The whole tone of this Pauline text teaches us that hope is the right antidote for this false naturalness.

Naturalness, as we have seen, has nothing to do with adopting a worldly outlook in one’s life. Rather it means living with Christian consistency, viewing worldly realities in the light of their relationship to God’s plan. Thus secularity is harmed when lay people slacken in their Christian mission in the world and allow their life to be tainted by a worldly spirit, by a “bourgeois” life-style. To avoid this danger, a sound Christian formation is needed to provide the faithful with the capacity to discern good and evil, to grasp first what pleases God,⁹⁷ without allowing oneself to be influenced by fashionable behavior, by what everybody is doing or by what in fact is happening.⁹⁸

“A Christian has to be ready, at all times, to sanctify society from within. He is fully present in the world, but without belonging to the world, when it denies God and opposes his lovable will of salvation, not because of its nature, but because of sin.”⁹⁹ To live in the world while being faithful to the mission to purify all human realities and direct them to God, one needs a thorough Christian formation. Therefore the Code of Canon Law states that this formation is a fundamental right of the faithful, and specifically of the laity.¹⁰⁰

The faithful, together with their human and professional formation, need to strive to acquire a solid doctrinal formation, a deep and exact knowledge of the truths of faith in accord with each person’s capacity; a correct Christian anthropology; a clear grasp of ethics, especially in what relate to their professional circumstances; and a firm knowledge of the Church’s social teachings. All these elements need to be oriented not simply to erudition, but to a true formation of the person’s conscience.¹⁰¹ This is a task that requires special effort and dedication, both from the lay persons themselves and from their pastors, since this Christian consistency must be shown precisely in a secular life characterized by a broad freedom of decision and

96. *Rom* 8:19-22

97. Cf. *Eph* 5:10; *Rom* 12:2

98. In the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, dated August 6, 1993, John Paul II made this reflection: “In a widely de-Christianized culture, the criteria employed by believers themselves in making judgments and decisions often appear extraneous or even contrary to those of the Gospel. It is urgent then that Christians should rediscover the newness of the faith and its power to judge a prevalent and all-intrusive culture. As the Apostle Paul admonishes us ‘Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of the light (for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead, expose them.. Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time because the days are evil’ (*Eph* 5:8-11, 15-16; cf. *1 Thess* 5:4-8)” (no. 88).

99. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 125.

100. Cf. CCC 217, 229. Cf. also J. Hervada, “Misión laical y formación,” in *La misión del laico en la Iglesia y en el mundo. VIII Simposio internacional de teología*, Pamplona 1987, pp. 481-495.

101. Cf., on the characteristics of this formation, R. Lanzetti, *L’unità di vita e la missione dei fedeli laici...*, op. cit. (Section B: “La formazione dei laici all’unità di vita,” pp. 304 and ff.)

action.¹⁰² Christians need to be able to *give a reason for their hope to anyone who asks them*,¹⁰³ but first of all to themselves, facing all the vicissitudes of their earthly life with the transcendent vision of a well-grounded and knowledgeable hope.

To this end, one needs to keep in mind that Christian formation can never be reduced to a more or less detailed supply of “information.” Christian life is not a philosophy or a series of opinions, but a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is not enough, then, to attain a theoretical knowledge of doctrine, as a set of propositions. Formation must become life, unity of life: “Every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.”¹⁰⁴

Knowledge of the faith would be of limited use, then, without a true personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Spiritual life is an indispensable condition for unity of life. One cannot persevere in an authentic faith without a personal and transforming relationship with God, which is what vocation entails.

The fount and summit¹⁰⁵ of spiritual life is the Eucharist, its “center and source.”¹⁰⁶ Christians, sharers in Christ’s priesthood through baptism (the “common priesthood of the faithful”¹⁰⁷) are called and empowered to unite their whole life to Christ’s Sacrifice, the great redeeming act in which the whole of creation, taken up by its Head, becomes a pleasing offering to the Father in the Holy Spirit: “For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.’ Together with the offering of the Lord’s body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.”¹⁰⁸

The Eucharist thus becomes a magnificent focus for unity of life, above all by making present sacramentally the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ: “In the paschal event and the Eucharist which makes it present throughout the centuries, there is a truly enormous ‘capacity,’ which embraces all of history as the recipient of the grace

102. For relevant aspects of the activity of the laity in temporal affairs, cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life, Nov. 24, 2002; and among other studies: A. Rodríguez Luño, “La formación de la conciencia en materia social y política según las enseñanzas del Beato Josemaría Escrivá,” in *Romana* (1997/1) pp. 162-181.

103. Cf. *1 Pet* 3:15

104. *Mt* 7: 26-27

105. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11.

106. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 87

107. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 10

108. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 34; cf. *LG* 10.

of the redemption;”¹⁰⁹ a “universal and, so to speak, cosmic character. Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation. The Son of God became man in order to restore all creation, in one supreme act of praise, to the One who made it from nothing. He, the Eternal High Priest who by the blood of his Cross entered the eternal sanctuary, thus gives back to the Creator and Father all creation redeemed. He does so through the priestly ministry of the Church, to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity. Truly this is the *mysterium fidei*, which is accomplished in the Eucharist: the world which came forth from the hands of God the Creator now returns to him redeemed by Christ.”¹¹⁰

Thus the Eucharist draws us more and more fully into the life of Jesus Christ: “It is because of this that we can consider the Mass as the center and the source of a Christian’s spiritual life. It is the aim of all the sacraments. The life of grace, into which we are brought by baptism, and which is increased and strengthened by confirmation, grows to its fullness in the Mass. ‘When we participate in the Eucharist,’ writes St. Cyril of Jerusalem, ‘we are made spiritual by the divinizing action of the Holy Spirit, who not only makes us share in Christ’s life, as in baptism, but makes us entirely Christ-like, incorporating us into the fullness of Christ Jesus.’ . . . We may have asked ourselves, at one time or another, how we can correspond to the greatness of God’s love. We may have wanted to see a program for Christian living clearly explained. The answer is easy, and it is within reach of all the faithful: to participate lovingly in the holy Mass, to learn to deepen our personal relationship with God in the sacrifice that summarizes all that Christ asks of us.”¹¹¹

This “personal relationship with God” is essential if one is to feel a hunger to offer one’s life with Christ for the salvation of the world. Together with the Eucharist and the other sacraments, especially frequent recourse to penance, a personal life of prayer is indispensable for all the faithful. The first chapter devoted to prayer in the Catechism of the Catholic Church bears the heading: “The universal call to prayer.” This implies that it is impossible to be faithful to the Christian vocation to holiness and apostolate without being faithful to the call, no less personal, to prayer.¹¹² Prayer has many different forms and manifestations, but it always leads each of the faithful to a personal friendship with God, a vital union with Christ. “This is how the early Christians lived, and this is how we too should live: meditating the doctrine of our faith until it becomes a part of us; receiving our Lord in the Eucharist;

109. John Paul II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, April 17, 2003, no. 5.

110. *Ibid.*, no. 8.

111. *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 87-88.

112. In the Apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, dated January 6, 2001, John Paul II wrote: “But it would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today’s world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but ‘Christians at risk.’ They would run the insidious risk of seeing their faith progressively undermined, and would perhaps end up succumbing to the allure of ‘substitutes.’” (no. 34).

meeting him in the personal dialogue of our prayer, without trying to hide behind impersonal conduct, but face to face with him. These means should become the very substance of our attitude. If they are lacking we will have, perhaps, the ability to think in an erudite manner, an activity that is more or less intense, some practices and devotions. But we will not have an authentically Christian way of life, because we will lack that personal relationship with Christ, which is a real and living participation in the divine work of salvation.”¹¹³

Christian formation attains its fullest realization when spiritual life and doctrinal instruction interpenetrate in a deep unity, because the goal of formation is identification with Christ, permitting the Holy Spirit to form Christ in each of the faithful, according to St. Paul's exclamation: “My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!”¹¹⁴ Spiritual life and formation attain their full reality under the action of the sanctifying Spirit, facilitated by the docility of a Christian who generously cultivates the life of grace: “The Holy Spirit forms the human spirit from within according to the divine model which is Christ. Thus, through the Spirit, that Christ whom we know through the pages of the Gospel becomes the ‘life of the soul,’ and man, when he thinks, when he loves, when he judges, when he acts, even when he feels, is conformed to Christ; he becomes ‘Christ-like.’”¹¹⁵

This life in the Spirit enables one to “rediscover” the realities of daily life, taken up into one's life of prayer, through the eyes of Christ. We thus come to see our own existence as an offering that can attain co-redemptive value, united to Christ's Sacrifice in the Eucharist, which is the true reason for our hope. As John Paul II wrote in his last Encyclical, with a reflection on the Church that is also applicable to every Christian: “The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates *the heart of the mystery of the Church*. In a variety of ways she joyfully experiences the constant fulfillment of the promise: ‘Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age’ (Mt 28:20), but in the Holy Eucharist, through the changing of bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord, she rejoices in this presence with unique intensity. Ever since Pentecost, when the Church, the People of the New Covenant, began her pilgrim journey towards her heavenly homeland, the Divine Sacrament has continued to mark the passing of her days, filling them with confident hope.”¹¹⁶

113. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 134.

114. *Gal 4:19*.

115. John Paul II, General Audience, July 26, 1989.

116. Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 1.