

---

## PERSON AND UNITY OF LIFE

---

Mgr Alvaro del Portillo, Prelate of Opus Dei

---

*The following is an extract from a radio interview given by Mgr del Portillo. The Vatican Radio program dealt with the recent Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*.*

*In your opinion what are the central features of the new Apostolic Exhortation?*

As I see it, in the first place, the breadth of vision given to the very notion of the lay faithful. In the years immediately after the Council, the concept of the laity was becoming more and more *elitist*, in practice if not in theory. One spoke frequently of the *committed* lay person, identifying the lay person as one who was actively engaged in some ecclesiastical activity. One could easily be led to think for example, that the Christian mother who worked full time at home was completely marginalised in the Church. The same could be said for the immense majority of the faithful who are employed in different sectors of civil society: agriculture, industry, teaching, business, etc.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* has finally put paid to such an idea. This was already done in the Council and now the Holy Father has addressed himself to all the Catholic laity, wherever they find themselves, telling them that there is where God wants them, where they are called to evangelise and give a christian dimension to the world, for the glory of God.

A second element, which I consider very fundamental, is the vocational aspect of the lay state. In the Church we are familiar with the idea of vocation to the priesthood or to the religious life, and for these states all Christians should have special respect. The same does not happen with the vocation of the laity. It seems as if there were no *call* for the ordinary Christian, lay man or woman, who lives in the world to work for the spread of the kingdom of God. The very title of the Apostolic Exhortation 'the vocation and mission of the laity' puts to rest that notion. The parable of the labourers called to work in the vineyard, which is the biblical foundation of the document, continually brings to mind the *call* which God, 'the owner of the vineyard' addresses personally to each of the lay faithful and from which derives their Christian identity.

*Position Paper 184*

*In this regard the importance which the document gives to the person is striking. Without doubt such emphasis highlights the personalist approach of the conciliar Decree on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes). And yet, one notices new emphases. What is your opinion about this? Could you point out for us some of these insights?*

What you say is true. We cannot be surprised that a concept which is so central to the Christian faith be the object of continual reflexion and be taught so consistently. But it seems right to me to emphasise a new element brought out by the document. I am referring to the relationship established between person and unity of life. This idea of unity of life is something I learned about, many years ago, in those very words, from the striking and penetrating preaching and example of the Founder of Opus Dei, Mgr Escrivá.

If we fix our gaze on the personal character of the call, we note that the Holy father —following almost word by word the teaching of the Council— underscores the all-embracing nature of the call of God. The entire life of the ordinary lay person is suffused with the idea of a call, with the divine. In a person who is *called* we do not have someone who is to live simply as a human being in the world and as a Christian in the church, because what is human is a component of the Kingdom of God. The model for such unity must be sought in the person of the Word Incarnate, true God and true man. There is, therefore, a certain analogy between the mystery of the Incarnation and the lay person's unity of life.

At the same time we must pay attention to the two communities to which the lay person belongs: to the ecclesial community and to civil society. It must be stated that unity exists in the person and not in the community. Any attempt to establish a unity of life outside the person is destined to inevitable failure. Unity of life is closely tied to the outlook of the Christian who values positively the things of this world, insofar as they are a meeting place with God and an opportunity to serve our fellow men. To finish, let me cite a few words from the constant teaching of the Founder of Opus Dei: 'everything can and ought lead us to God and nourish our constant dialogue with him, from morning to night. Every honest job can be prayer, and work that is prayer is apostolate. Thus, the soul achieves a real, true unity of life'.