

The Laity’s Role in Today’s Church—Pope John Paul II’s *Christifideles Laici*

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Introduction

In this 1989 discussion of Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, Cardinal Bevilacqua emphasizes the essential point of the influence we can have on others. Any honorable human occupation can be a path toward God and an effective means for helping others find Christ who is passing by. The enemies of Christ pointed to his life of manual work and the simplicity of his background as a supposed contradiction of his claim to teach in God’s name. We can fall into the same trap if we fail to take advantage of opportunities to speak with others about the Person without whose friendship life on earth is puzzling and even tedious.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, Pope John Paul II points out that the call to holiness that is the vocation of the lay faithful is “an essential and inseparable element of the new life of Baptism” (n. 47).^{*} In other words, the lay person cannot fulfill his mission in the Church and in the world unless he seeks sanctity. And for the lay person, this sanctity or holiness must be sought in everyday professional and social life.

The pope underlines repeatedly the need for unity of life. One of the more serious errors of our time, even among faithful Christians, is the “split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives” (n. 59). Cardinal Bevilacqua treats this under the heading, “Integration of faith and life.”

The Holy Spirit is forming in each of us the image of Jesus Christ. This applies not only to our life of prayer; the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray as Christ prayed to the Father, but he also teaches us to work and to rest the way Jesus did. Look at Christ’s life. He spent thirty of his thirty-three years on Earth in very normal and unspectacular circumstances. This should lead us to appreciate the divine value of the work, friendships, conversations, meals, and celebrations Jesus enjoyed with his relatives and neighbors in Nazareth during those thirty years.

In order for there to be a Christian unity in our lives, there must be a supernatural motive of everything we do. The Second Vatican Council reminded us of this when, speaking of the lay faithful, it said: “their work, prayers, and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily labor, their mental and physical relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all of these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. . . . During the celebration of the Eucharist these sacrifices are most lovingly offered to the Father along with the Lord’s Body” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 34).

In the following pages, Cardinal Bevilacqua provides the background for Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation on the vocation and mission of the lay faithful, and he discusses how the Church calls each one of us to be an effective witness, apostle, and evangelizer in today’s world.

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ON DECEMBER 30, 1988, the Feast of the Holy Family, Pope John Paul II issued his Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Christifideles Laici*, or “The Lay Christian Faithful.” Never before in the history of the Church has a

^{*}Note: Quotations from *Christifideles Laici* will simply be indicated by section number.

pope issued such a complete guidebook on the vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world.

This 200-page document was a response to a request for such instruction that was made by the members of the Synod on the Laity. This synod was held in Rome in October 1987, twenty-two years after the Second Vatican Council concluded. It assembled from around the world more than 200 bishops to discuss the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church. Also present and participating in various ways were fifty-four lay persons: twenty-four women and thirty men.

For several years leading up to the synod, consultations were carried on in every part of the Church—by bishops, bishops’ conferences, and lay associations. Their input, the thousands of pages of presentations at the synod, the group discussions at that meeting, and the final fifty-four recommendations of the synod fathers were the raw materials the Holy Father used in preparing his Apostolic Exhortation.

A noble ancestry

Participation of the laity in the mission of the Church has a noble ancestry. Recall the gospels and note that the call of Christ to preach the Good News was addressed to everyone, not just the apostles. A particularly dramatic call of Christ to a lay person to proclaim the gospel is the one made to the Gerasene demoniac. As described by St. Mark, the man had been possessed by a legion of demons, which Christ drove out of him and into a herd of swine. St. Mark then describes the vocation and mission of this lay person in these words: “As he [Christ] was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed begged to be allowed to stay with him. Jesus would not let him but said to him, ‘Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you.’ So the man went off and proceeded to spread throughout the Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him” (Mark 5:18–20).

The Acts of the Apostles and the history of the early Church offer countless examples of lay persons evangelizing and witnessing to the gospel, often most effectively by their martyrdom. Down through the centuries, there were always holy men and women who cared for the sick, fed the poor, and preached the gospel. Even the Crusades, whatever evaluation we give them, were an episode in which the laity were engaged in what they regarded as their Christian mission. The voyages of Columbus, by his own account, were primarily motivated by a desire to spread the gospel. St. Vincent de Paul is one of many saints who formed lay groups to assist in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. And over the course of decades, missionaries teaching the faith in foreign lands have been supported by thousands of lay catechists. Throughout history, the laity have been deeply involved in the life of the Church.

While the laity’s witness has always been a forceful element in spreading the faith, for various reasons and until recently the task of evangelization has largely been regarded as the domain of clergy and religious. In the nineteenth century, however, voices were raised to promote more important roles for the laity in the Church. For example, here in America Orestes A. Brownson, a prominent journalist and philosopher who came into the Church in 1844, emphasized the equality of all members of the Church, as well as the need for the clergy and the laity to know their proper roles. He wrote: “We apprehend that it will be found necessary to leave to laymen all that may be done by men not in orders” (“The Church Not a Despotism,” in *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, p. 236). Compare this to the words of the Apostolic Exhortation: “It is, therefore, natural that the tasks not proper to the ordained ministers be fulfilled by the lay faithful” (n. 23).

In England, Cardinal Newman lectured, preached, and wrote extensively on the need for the laity to fulfill their proper role in the Church. He appealed to them to become educated in the faith so that they could more adequately carry out their role.

In the early part of the twentieth century, especially from the 1930s through the 1960s, many lay movements in this country and throughout the world came into being and were classed under the umbrella of

“Catholic Action.” These were very active apostolates in which lay persons, especially younger men and women, became enthusiastic apostles for the faith. In these Catholic Action groups, however, the nature of the mission of the laity was often seen as a participation in the work of the hierarchy. The Second Vatican Council sought to refine or correct the notion that the laity were to function as delegates of the hierarchy, as it emphasized that the source of the vocation of the laity lies in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation.

The proper vocation and mission of the laity was first highlighted in the documents of Vatican II. The ecclesial status and role of the laity runs like a thread throughout the Council’s teachings, but it is particularly featured in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) and in the Decree on the Missions (*Ad Gentes*). The Vatican II Decree on the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) has become a Magna Carta for the laity. Devoted entirely to the place of the laity in the Church’s mission, the Decree insists that “[o]n all Christians, accordingly, rests the noble obligation of working to bring all men throughout the whole world to hear and accept the divine message of salvation” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 3). The Decree goes on to specify the distinctive role of the laity in the secular arena: “Laymen ought to take on themselves as their distinctive task this renewal of the temporal order. Guided by the light of the gospel and the mind of the Church, prompted by Christian love, they should act in this specific manner” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 7).

The period between Vatican II, which concluded in 1965, and the 1987 Synod on the Laity witnessed a crescendo of both lay involvement in the mission of the Church and statements on the vocation of the laity. Each of the recent pontiffs, especially John Paul II, repeatedly challenged lay persons of all ages to engage actively in the evangelization of the temporal world. Prior to 1987, most of the synods of bishops gave significant attention to the role of the laity. Their themes clearly show that discussion of the mission of the laity was integral to each: the 1971 synod was on “Justice in the World” and “Ministerial Priesthood”; the 1974 synod on “Catechetics”; the 1980 synod on “The Christian Family”; and the 1983 synod on “Reconciliation and Penance.”

A “sleeping giant”

The laity in the Church have been described as a “sleeping giant,” and it is this giant whom the Holy Father wishes fully to awaken through his Apostolic Exhortation.

The lengthy document opens with an introduction, which is followed by five chapters. Binding all the chapters is the theme of the vine-dresser and the vineyard. According to the metaphor, the vineyard is the whole world, and the workers sent into the vineyard represent the whole Church, including the laity. As this gospel image indicates, the document relies heavily on scripture as the basis for its arguments. At the same time, it draws on the riches of theology, spirituality, culture, and history.

The first chapter defines the laity and affirms their dignity in the Church. It notes that their distinctive role is specified by their secular character.

The second chapter deals with the Church as communion and the laity’s participation in the life of the Church as such. It describes the distinction between the laity and the clergy, and clarifies how the ministry of the laity is founded in the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and often Matrimony. Finally, the chapter urges the laity to participate in the life of the Church in their own dioceses and parishes, not omitting, however, their individual apostolates and activities in various lay associations.

The third chapter takes up the theme of the coresponsibility and collaboration of the laity in the Church in its missionary role. It calls the laity to reevangelize the developed countries of the first world, and not to forget the responsibility all have to support foreign missions. This chapter dwells extensively on the task of the laity to recognize and define the inviolable dignity of every person, and it considers this dignity under

a variety of specific topics, including: the right to life and basic freedoms; the family; charity toward neighbor; participation in political life; peace; social and economic life; ecology; culture and the instruments of culture, including schools, universities, scientific research, arts, and social communications.

The fourth chapter, entitled “Good Stewards of God’s Graces,” considers the various categories of the laity and their specific gifts to the mission of the Church. Featured are the roles of the youth, the elderly, women, the sick, and the suffering.

The fifth and final chapter discusses the necessary formation of the laity. It stresses the need to integrate the spiritual and the secular dimensions of life. It also calls for formation in spirituality, doctrine, and the social teachings of the Church. This chapter considers where and by whom the lay faithful are formed, and it highlights that Mother Church is the principal agent of formation and that all in the Church—clerical, religious, and lay—must be collaborators in this task. Particular centers of formation mentioned are the diocese, small Church communities, parents and family, schools and Catholic universities, as well as various other groups, associations, and movements. The chapter concludes with an appeal to the laity to recognize their extraordinary dignity received in Baptism.

At the threshold of the Third Millennium, all in the Church are called to reflect and realize with depth and sincerity their responsibility to preach the gospel everywhere. The Holy Father concludes the Apostolic Exhortation by transforming his appeal into a prayer to Mary.

A gold mine

This document is a rich gold mine of teaching on the vocation and mission of the laity. If I were to pick out the largest nuggets of gold that shine forth in this exhortation, I would set apart the following:

1. The vocation and mission of the laity founded in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation;
2. The secular character of the role of the laity as its distinctive quality;
3. The participation of the laity in the life of the Church as communion;
4. The formation of the laity;
5. The integration of faith and life;
6. Diversity, unity and collaboration in carrying out the mission of the Church; and
7. The status and role of women.

My discussion of the Apostolic Exhortation will emphasize these seven areas.

At the beginning of Chapter I, the Holy Father asks the basic question: “Who are the lay faithful?” Quoting Vatican II’s Constitution on the Church, he answers: “The term ‘lay faithful’ . . . means all the faithful except those in Holy Orders [and the religious]. Through Baptism the lay faithful are made one body with Christ. . . . 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” (n. 9; *Lumen Gentium*, n. 31).

In the nineteenth century, Archbishop Ullathorne of Birmingham, England, took a difficult attitude toward the laity. In a confrontation with Cardinal Newman on the place of the laity, Ullathorne asked somewhat contemptuously: “Who are the laity?” In classic understatement, Newman commented that the Church would, after all, look rather silly without them. Consider that today in 1987, there are 852,000,000 faithful in the Catholic Church, and the laity represent 99.953% of them. It is obvious that their significance in the life of the Church is no small matter.

The basis of the lay vocation

Joined to the Church—the Body of Christ—by Baptism, strengthened by the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, and transformed into Christ by the nourishment of the Eucharist, all lay persons have, through these sacraments, received from Christ the commission to be apostles of the gospel, to be evangelizers of the Good News, to be ambassadors of Christ and his Church to the world in which they live, work, play, suffer, and die. It is basically through their baptized and confirmed character that all the laity are deputized to carry out, in collaboration with the hierarchy and the religious, the Church’s mission of salvation of the world, of bearing witness to Christ and the Church in spreading and defending the faith. Note that while Baptism and Confirmation confer on the laity the right to participate in the Church’s mission of evangelization of the world, the moment the right is acquired it becomes a life-long duty. Something similar happens in the sacrament of Matrimony. Everyone has a right to marry, and as soon as the right is exercised legitimately, it changes into a life-long responsibility.

The secular character of the laity’s role

Having defined who the lay faithful are, the Apostolic Exhortation proceeds to discuss the element that distinguishes their vocation from that of the clergy and the religious. The document finds the distinctive quality in what it calls the “secular character” of the laity’s role, repeating the concise statement of *Lumen Gentium*: “The secular character is properly and particularly that of the lay faithful” (n. 32).

The Holy Father incorporates in his discussion one of the propositions of the Synod on the Laity which emphasizes the world as the vineyard for the laity: “The term ‘secular’ must be understood in light of the act of God the Creator and Redeemer, who has handed over the world to women and men, so that they may participate in the work of creation, free creation from the influence of sin and sanctify themselves in marriage or the celibate life, in a family, in a profession, and in the various activities of society” (n. 15).

The secular world is one of the areas where clergy and religious generally do not and should not enter. It is specifically the arena where the lay person finds his or her primary and proper mission. Vatican II’s Decree on the Laity highlights this primary role: “[Living] in the midst of the world and of secular affairs, lay persons are called by God to make of their apostolate, through the vigor of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 2).

There is a very legitimate and necessary need for the laity to work more directly in the internal ministry of the Church, and many lay persons have been great gifts to the clergy and the Church in their apostolate within the Church’s life. It would be difficult to imagine what the Church would have done without countless lay persons serving as teachers in its schools, directors of religious education, lectors, catechists, members of parish councils, choir members, ushers, and other volunteers in parishes and Church institutions. The Church will always be grateful for the activities of these dedicated laity. However, the Vatican Council documents and the Apostolic Exhortation emphasize that the primary and more needed role of the laity is in bringing the gospel of Christ and the Church into the secular world, into the everyday activities of individuals and families, into politics, schools, universities, the public media, entertainment, science, the arts, labor, business—in short, into every aspect of society.

During the period of consultation for the Synod on the Laity, Gregory Pierce, President of the National Center for the Laity, put this challenge very succinctly: “We’ve done a lot of thinking about and training people for lay ministries in the Church in the last 20 years, but we haven’t done much about what Catholics can do outside the Church other than to say, ‘Lay people—go do it.’ Yet it’s much more important to have good businessmen than good Eucharistic ministers” (*National Catholic Register*, September 28, 1986).

The lay role in the Church as communion

Having founded the mission of the laity on the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, having seen its nourishment in the Eucharist, and having explained the distinctive secular character of the mission, the Apostolic Exhortation discusses the Church as communion. The mission of the laity to the world can never be regarded as a purely personal one. It may be individual, but it can never be apart from Christ, the Church, and everyone in the Church. Our fundamental communion is with Christ, and from this communion with him flows the communion we all have with each other in the Church. Once we are part of the Body of Christ, the Church, every activity we perform is an activity of the Body.

The Apostolic Exhortation summarizes this mystery as an organic communion: “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” (n. 20).

The document then discusses concrete ways in which the lay persons can fulfill their apostolate. It urges that the laity participate in the life of the Church first and foremost in the dioceses where they live and the parishes where they worship. More specifically, the Holy Father commends participation in diocesan pastoral councils, parish councils, parish renewal programs, lay associations and movements, and Catholic Action groups. He also recognizes that, in accord with Canon Law, in certain circumstances lay persons can carry out some pastoral roles and activities, such as those of Extraordinary Eucharistic ministers and lectors, the conferral of baptism, and others.

Formation of the laity

The Apostolic Exhortation stresses that the laity are called and enabled by Baptism and Confirmation to participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church, and as such need to be formed spiritually and doctrinally in order to be effective apostles.

There is an old axiom of philosophy that “you cannot give what you do not have.” In other words, before you take on the task of a lay apostle of the Church, you must ask yourself if you possess the training and credentials to be a legitimate, effective apostle. If your mission as a lay person is to share your faith with others, you must first have the faith. If your role as a lay person is to transform the world through the truths of the gospel, then you must first know and live those truths. If you are anxious to bring Catholic ethical and moral values to the world, then you must first be educated in those values and practice them. In short, if you are going to bring Christ and the Church to the world, then you must first be Christ and be Church. As has often been said, it is not enough to be called a Catholic, one must *be* one. It is when you truly live and think as Christ, when you truly live and think as a Catholic, that you become a dynamic, effective apostle.

Lay theologian Igino Giordani remarks: “Lay persons, as Church, do not have difficulty going toward the world, since they are humanity, they are the world. They must rather remain Christian in the world not as a dead weight from the religious point of view, not as a passive object from the evangelical angle, not as a nearly stagnant pool in the social realm, but as an active ferment, as a priesthood ready to fulfill its mission, which is to mediate the divine in the human, the spiritual in the temporal, to give a soul to the world, or better, to make oneself the soul of the world” (*Living City*, February 1988, pp. 16–17).

How is one formed into an effective witness, apostle, evangelizer? The Apostolic Exhortation speaks of two major qualities in the religious sphere:

1. *Spiritual formation.* First and most important is to be formed spiritually. By Baptism, we are all called to holiness. There is no exception. Sanctity is not the monopoly of the clergy, consecrated religious, or any elitist group in the Church. Christ's call to holiness is a universal one. It is issued to every person in the Church: "Everyone in the Church, precisely because they are members, receive and thereby share in the common vocation to holiness. In the fullness of this title and on equal par with all other members of the Church, the lay faithful are called to holiness" (n. 16).

Mother Teresa of Calcutta was once asked: "How do you feel when people say of you that you are a living saint?" Instead of denying her sanctity, she simply replied: "Isn't everyone supposed to be a saint?"

The Holy Father aptly points out that the laity must take their daily secular activities as opportunities for growth in the spiritual life. He incorporates in the Apostolic Exhortation the synod's statement on the holiness of the laity in proposition #5: "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" (n. 17).

2. *Doctrinal formation.* The document forcefully states "that the formation of the lay faithful must be placed among the priorities of a diocese" (n. 57; proposition #40). After highlighting the privileged role that spiritual formation must play in a person's life, the Holy Father points out the "increasing urgency for a doctrinal formation of the lay faithful" (n. 60). Furthermore, he adds, "it is indispensable that they have a more exact knowledge . . . of the Church's social doctrine" (n. 60).

Integration of faith and life

The formation of the laity cannot be solely an academic or cerebral exercise; it must be a totally integrated formation for living an integrated life. The Apostolic Exhortation reiterates what the synod fathers and the pope have frequently stressed: "There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand, the so-called 'spiritual life' with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called 'secular life,' that is, life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture" (n. 59).

One of the most repeated warnings of the bishops at the synod of 1987 concerned the evil of this dualism of faith and life. Cardinal O'Fiaich of Ireland began his discussion of this theme of a false separation of faith and life by quoting a well-known ditty:

Paddy Murphy went to Mass;
Never missed a Sunday.
But Paddy Murphy went to hell
For what he did on Monday.

Achieving consistency between faith and life often entails serious difficulties and, at times, heavy sacrifices, but it is conducive to the greater richness of tranquility of mind, soul, and conscience. The Vatican Council Decree on the Laity challenges the laity to integrate their faith and life: "The laity, carrying out this mission of the Church, exercise their apostolate therefore in the world as well as in the Church, in the temporal order as well as in the spiritual. . . . The layman at one time and the same time a believer and a citizen of the world, has only a single conscience, a Christian conscience; it is by this that he must be guided continually in both domains" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 5).

The oft-repeated response of some political leaders on the issue of abortion, “I am personally against abortion but . . . ,” is perhaps the most notorious violation of this single conscience and the most public illustration of the pernicious dualism of faith and life.

Diversity, unity, and collaboration

The Apostolic Exhortation recognizes that in the Church there is a diversity of members and functions, and it presents this as a richness from the Spirit. The basic diversity discussed in some detail is the distinction between the vocation of the laity and that of the ordained priesthood. However, as the document is prompt to explain, this diversity is not one of isolation or elitism but rather of complementarity and collaboration: “The Spirit of the Lord gives a vast variety of charisms, inviting people to assume different ministries and forms of service and reminding them, as he reminds all people in their relationship in the Church, that what distinguishes persons is not an increase in dignity, but a special and complementary capacity for service” (n. 20).

Collaboration is a constant refrain in both Chapter II, on the participation of the laity in the life of the Church as communion, and Chapter III, on the coresponsibility of the laity in the Church as mission.

The Holy Father, while teaching the lay faithful that their distinctive vocation and mission is in the secular arena, reminds them that the evangelization of the world is not solely their task. Collaborators with the lay faithful in the transformation of society are consecrated religious and clergy, but each category serves according to its specific charism and role.

The laity most effectively carry out their mission when, in cooperation with religious and clergy, they remain faithful to their specific function. Laity, religious, and clergy are all mandated by Baptism and Confirmation to preach the gospel. But by their consecration, religious take on a role in the mission of the Church which is not that of the laity or of the clergy. By ordination, the priest is entrusted with a very specific responsibility in the same mission of the Church, but which also differs from that of the laity and of the religious. Different does not mean better or superior. It means exactly what it says—different.

The diversity of functions of clergy, religious, and laity in the unity of the mission of the Church is often considered an insight of the Second Vatican Council. In fact, since St. Paul used the metaphor of the human body to describe unity and diversity in the Church, there have been numerous illustrations of this truth. One of the more vivid clarifications of the distinctive roles of clergy, religious, and laity helped to end the famous investiture controversy of the eleventh century. At that time, Pope Gregory VII delineated a division of labor in the Church whereby clergy were to preside over the sacraments and give guidance, monks were to be witnesses of the spiritual life and the life of eternal happiness, and lay persons had the task of the Christianization of society, since they were the ones with the directly engaged with the world (G. W. Olsen, *Communio*, Spring 1984).

Though less frequent and pronounced than in previous years, there are still today distortions of these roles. Some priests put aside their special mission as shepherds, for they feel they can be much more effective by living in the world as lay persons do and by carrying out roles that belong uniquely to the laity. Conversely, some lay persons desire to embrace a way of life and assume responsibilities more properly belonging to the clergy than to persons who must constantly maneuver in today’s world.

Repeated in the Apostolic Exhortation is the caution, frequently enunciated by the Holy Father, that we must not and cannot run the risk of “laicizing the clergy” and “clericalizing the laity.” Such a distortion would rob both the clerical and the lay states of their specific purposes, and it would upset their complementarity. Both are indispensable, the Holy Father has said, and “we must therefore recognize and respect in these states of life a diversity that builds up the Body of Christ in unity” (Address to Laity, San Francisco, September 18, 1987).

The status and role of women

Following the lead of the Synod on the Laity, the Holy Father gives special attention to the status and role of women. He affirms “the urgency to defend and to promote the personal dignity of woman and consequently, her equality with man” (n. 49). He sees the recognition of the personal dignity of women as the first step in promoting “the full participation of women in Church life as well as in social and public life” (n. 49). In the apostolate of evangelization, women are called to put to work the gifts that are properly theirs. “Above all,” the Holy Father adds, “the acknowledgement in theory of the active and responsible presence of woman in the Church must be realized in practice” (n. 51).

While appealing to women to be actively involved in the mission of the Church, the Exhortation singles out two great tasks entrusted to women: “First of all, the task of bringing full dignity to the conjugal life and to motherhood. . . . Secondly, women have the task of assuring the moral dimension of culture, the dimension, namely, of a culture worthy of the person, of an individual yet social life” (n. 51).

“ . . . into my vineyard”

In this brief analysis of the Apostolic Exhortation, I only highlight its main features. As I mentioned at the beginning, I have selected what my eyes have seen as the larger nuggets of gold. Even from among these I have chosen only a few. Most of the gold still remains in the mine to be discovered, extracted, and put to use.

Inspired by a knowledge of this Exhortation and by its motivation, the laity will be more prepared to respond to the final appeal of the Holy Father in the words of the gospel: “You go into my vineyard too.” To emphasize the collaboration and communion of everyone in the Church, the Pope John Paul II’s final words are a challenge to all: “The whole Church, . . . standing on the threshold of the Third Millennium, ought to feel more strongly the Church’s responsibility to obey the command of Christ, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole of creation’ and take up anew the missionary endeavor” (n. 64).