

## FOUNDATION IN CHURCH DOCUMENTS and SCRIPTURE

### A. CHURCH AS THE 'PEOPLE OF GOD'

The Second Vatican Council (1961-1965) defined 'Church as the People of God' specifically in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. This updated definition of church led to the development of new vehicles for a shared responsibility. It changed the methods of operation within the local churches from the traditional hierarchical method to a shared responsibility method. In his commentary on *Lumen Gentium*, Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J. stated:

. . . the Constitution devotes an entire chapter to the description of the Church as the 'new People of God'. This title, solidly founded in Scripture, met a profound desire of the Council to put greater emphasis on the human and communal side of the Church, rather than on the institutional and hierarchical aspects which have sometimes been over-stressed in the past. . . . While everything said about the People of God as a whole is applicable to the laity, it should not be forgotten that the term 'People of God' refers to the total community of the Church, including the pastors as well as the other faithful.<sup>1</sup>

### B. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE MISSION OF JESUS AND THE CHURCH

1. The role of the laity in the mission of the Church is identified as the lay apostolate, and the value of shared responsibility in the Church is clearly stated in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity:<sup>2</sup>
  - a. . . . the laity, too, share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own role to play in the mission of the whole People of God in the Church and in the world. n 2
  - b. Incorporated into the Christ's Mystical Body through baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself. n 3
  - c. To fulfill the mission of the Church in the world, the laity have certain basic needs. They need a life in harmony with their faith, so they can become the light of the world. n 13
2. This call to active participation by the laity in the mission of the Church also has foundation in Scripture:
  - a. Each one of you has received a special grace, so like good stewards responsible for all these different graces of God, put yourselves at the service of others. *1 Peter 4:10*
  - b. The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me.

---

<sup>1</sup> Avery Dulles, S.J. in Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, Documents of Vatican II. Walter M. Abbott S.J., Ed., pp. 24-25.

<sup>2</sup> Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, in Documents of Vatican II. Walter M. Abbott S.J., Ed., pp. 491-492, 505.

He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor. *Luke 4:18-19*

The mission of Jesus is clearly defined in this passage from the Gospel of Luke and in turn defines the mission of every local church. Those in parish leadership need to ask the questions:

- ▶ Who are the poor in our parish? How do we bring good news to them?
- ▶ Who are the captives in our parish? How do we bring them liberty?
- ▶ Who are the blind in our parish? How do we help them recover sight?
- ▶ Who are the downtrodden in our parish? How do we set them free?

Postscript to these questions: "Why, then, do you stand here all the day idle?"

*Matt. 20:6*

3. Reflecting the theological vision of the kind of Church which Christ intended to establish, the following introductory canon speaks of Church as the 'People of God'. The Code of Canon Law clearly states:

Christ's faithful are those who, since they are incorporated into Christ through baptism, are constituted the people of God. For this reason they participate in their own way in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ. They are called, each according to his or her particular condition, to exercise the mission which God entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world.<sup>3</sup> **Can. 204 §1**

4. In September 1995 on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity and the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Called and Gifted<sup>4</sup>, the United States Catholic Bishops, reflecting on these documents, prepared in hope for the third millennium. As a result, the Committee on the Laity issued the exhortation titled: Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium. In the chapter, "The Call to Mission and Ministry", a paraphrase from the exhortation, *Christifideles Laici n 20*, is cited to bring focus on the vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world. It states:

Through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, every Christian is called to participate actively and co-responsibly in the Church's mission of salvation in the world. Moreover, in those same sacraments, the Holy Spirit pours out gifts which make it possible for every Christian man and woman to assume different ministries and forms of service that complement one another and are for the good of all.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The Canon Law: Letter & Spirit, p.115.

<sup>4</sup> Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity

<sup>5</sup> Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium, p.15

### C. CALL FOR THE CREATION OF PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS

1. A preliminary reference to council formation is found in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity  
In dioceses, as far as possible, there should be councils which assist the apostolic work of the Church either in the field of making the gospel known and men [sic] holy, or in the charitable, social, or other spheres. To this end, clergy and religious should appropriately cooperate with the laity.<sup>6</sup> n 26
  
2. To further develop the concept of parish pastoral councils, the United States Bishops' Committee on the Parish issued a statement in 1980 titled: The Parish: A People, A Mission, A Structure<sup>7</sup> which reads in part:  
Parish leadership challenges everyone to recognize and accept responsibility to both the Gospel and the total experience of the Church, which is tradition. This pastoral leadership encourages the fullest possible collaboration of clergy, religious and laity, men and women, in their common mission. To accomplish all this, the leadership develops appropriate structures which will allow for participation in the decision-making process, as well as in the various ministries of the parish. n 30  
  
. . .the parish council remains the most promising way to make sure such participation occurs. . . . It must be grounded in faith and worship; it must be formed and trained for its responsibility; . . . The council has very clear functions: to develop the correct understanding of the parish's mission and to formulate policies. . . . n 31
  
3. The Code of Canon Law gives a definition of a parish and later introduces the concept of a pastoral council for each parish. Vatican II shifted the overall juridical emphasis from the previous purely territorial basis of a parish to the people who constitute the parish community, especially centered around the Eucharist.  
A parish is a certain community of Christ's faithful stably established within a particular church, whose pastoral care, under the authority of the diocesan bishop, is entrusted to a parish priest as its proper pastor.<sup>8</sup> **Can. 515 §1**  
  
If, after consulting the council of priests, the diocesan bishop considers it opportune, a pastoral council is to be established in

---

<sup>6</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, p.515. Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, p. 515.

<sup>7</sup> "The Parish: A People, A Mission, A Structure," in ORIGINS 10:41 (26 Mar 1981) p. 645.

<sup>8</sup> Code of Canon Law, p. 285.

each parish. In this council, which is presided over by the parish priest, Christ's faithful, together with those who by virtue of their office are engaged in pastoral care in the parish, give their help in fostering pastoral action. **Can. 536 §1**

The pastoral council has only a consultative vote, and it is regulated by the norms laid down by the diocesan Bishop.<sup>9</sup> **Can. 536 §2**

4. Called and Gifted in the Third Millennium paraphrases content from *Christifideles Laici*<sup>10</sup> and writes:  
The ministries which exist and are at work at this time in the Church are all, even in their variety of forms, a participation in Jesus Christ's own ministry as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, the humble servant who gives himself without reserve for the salvation of all. n 21
  
5. Challenge for the Future: Collaboration is at the heart of the ideal pastoral council. Therefore:  
The new evangelization will only become a reality when ordained and lay members of Christ's faith understand their role and ministries as complementary and their purposes joined to the one mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. His prayer at the Last Supper must be our prayer, 'That all may be one.' Collaboration in ministry is a way to realize that unity.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Code of Canon Law, p. 298.

<sup>10</sup> *Christifidelis Laici*, n. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium, p.18.