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Cover Page Footnote

William E. Lori is Bishop of Bridgeport, Connecticut. This talk was delivered at Sacred Heart University on September 27, 2001, as part of a lecture series sponsored by the Institute for Religious Education and Pastoral Studies.

WILLIAM E. LORI

The Role of the Laity in the Church

I am delighted with this opportunity to share some reflections on the role of the laity in the life of the Church. My reflections this evening will be a mix of the theological and the practical, reflecting, I suppose, my experience as a priest and bishop for some twenty-four years.

How to tackle such a big topic in so short a time? The first thing to admit is that I won't cover the topic comprehensively. Rather, I can offer only a few key considerations that will hopefully prompt your ongoing thinking about this important topic. Among the key considerations I hope to cover are the following: the Call to Holiness; the Call to Communion; reflections on various forms of ecclesial lay ministry and their relationship to ordained ministry; the "secularity" of the lay vocation and its crucial role in new evangelization. And since this talk is not a *creatio ex nihilo*, I should tell you that my remarks will have as their principal sources and inspiration the Vatican Council II's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* and its *Decree on the Laity*, Pope John Paul II's *Christifideles Laici*, and his exhortation for the new millennium, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*.

Before covering those four points, let me briefly state two preliminary considerations:

First, the laity make up most of the church and you are "on the front lines of church," charged with bringing the Gospel message to every sphere of human activity.

Second, the role of the laity requires more than a "negative" definition or description, that is to say, it is not defined or described by what it is not. Rather it deserves and has a positive description, it has its own dignity, worth and *raison d'etre*. It is a _____

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vocation in the life of the Church. And it is this vision that I hope to touch on in the four parts of the talk that follow.

The Call to Holiness

Let's begin with the call to holiness. One of the central themes of Vatican Council II is the universal call to holiness. It is foundational to every role and ministry. Holiness is no less important for the laity than it is for bishops, priests, and deacons and those in various forms of consecrated life.

So it is appropriate to ask: What is holiness? How are we called to holiness? How do we answer the call to holiness? Why is it so important for the role of the laity in the life of the world and the Church? Holiness, simply stated, is graced participation in the life of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a gift by which we are invited to share in the communion of life and love that is the Holy Trinity. We somehow share in divine wisdom and love. We are caught up in the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father in the power of the Spirit. Holiness occurs when, as the liturgy puts it, "the Father can see and love in us what He sees and loves in Christ." It is our immersion in God's mystery, an immersion which does not engulf us, but rather makes us created reflections of God's truth, love and glory, each possessing intellect, will, and freedom, each with one's own individual identity.

That is the stupendous truth about holiness. Next comes the question of how the call to holiness reaches us. In a general sense, everyone is called to holiness. Possessing intellect, will, and freedom, each person is called by God to share in his life.

There is an "in-built" desire for God's life and love as part of the "standard equipment" of each and every person, a yearning described so well in the opening pages of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This yearning for God and capacity for his friendship is the ultimate root of human dignity.

In a more particular sense, the call to holiness is addressed to the baptized. This is the root of the equality and dignity of each member of the Church. We are baptized in the name of the Trinity because through Baptism we begin to share in the life of the Trinity. The "newness of life" described in the Scriptures and by the masters of the interior life is precisely God's Triune life, revealed by Christ and communicated to us in the power of the Holy Spirit.

How then do we answer that call? The "pre-answer" to the

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answer is that by ourselves we are incapable of responding to God's call: both the call and the response are God's gift to us. Now for the answer. We answer the call to holiness because what Christ has done to save us is communicated to us in the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is Christ, who, through the Spirit, leads us to the Father. Holiness consists in our sharing in what Christ has done to save us, especially in the sacramental life of the Church. And as we do so, we are enabled to apply his teaching to our lives and to imitate what he taught, most especially by living the law of love and by internalizing the beatitudes — in short, solid faith, a vibrant life of prayer, continual conversion, a virtuous style of life, a spirit of willing service.

These qualities of life on the part of the baptized are summed up in *Christifideles Laici* and elsewhere under the triple rubric of "prophet, priest, and king." Christ is Father's Word incarnate; we are *prophets* insofar as his Word finds a home in our hearts and we are witnesses to his Word. Christ is the priest who offered his life for us. We are *priests* when our lives become "a living sacrifice of praise," precisely in our daily activities, which have as their aim to consecrate ourselves, our work, our world to the Lord. Christ is the King who conquered sin and death and ushered in the Kingdom of the Beatitudes. We share his *kingship* insofar as we share in his victory over the "kingdom of sin" by achieving, in God's grace, self-mastery. We also share in his Lordship by helping to "restore all things in Christ," directing all our relationships and the created reality at our disposal to God's creative and redemptive purposes.

All this is easy to say but hard to do. That points to the importance of an authentic spirituality of the laity, of holiness to be achieved "in the world." The center of one's life in Christ is the Sunday Eucharist, yet increasingly so many absent themselves from this life-giving mystery. Indispensable is daily prayer. I'd like to be able to tell busy people that holiness can be attained with just a few minutes of prayer per day, but I can't; it requires a greater investment, perhaps as much as an hour per day, tucked somehow in a very full life. That hour may include reading the Scriptures, devotions to the Blessed Mother, good spiritual reading, structured meditation, or simply listening to the Lord and talking to him in your own words. It also calls for regular reception of Penance, for special focus on family relationships, and for a spirit of loving service, both to church and community.

And finally, why is this important? Couldn't we leave praying to the monks and nuns, especially the contemplatives, so that we could be engaged fully in our varied activities? In reality, that division of labor doesn't work. The Lord told all of us (not just monks and nuns), "apart from me you can do nothing." The simple truth is that, for the most part, we cannot do the Lord's work well unless we first share in his life. As Pope John Paul II has written: "Holiness . . . must be called a fundamental presupposition for everyone in fulfilling the mission of salvation within the Church. The Church's holiness is the hidden source and the infallible measure of the works of the apostolate and of the missionary effort" (*Christifideles Laici* 17).

A Call to Communion

In *Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II analyzes the parable of the vine and the branches. That parable describes our individual lives, our prayer, our relationship with the Lord (without him we can do nothing), and our relationship with the Church (we are called to be branches of a single vine).

In order to describe the vocation of the laity, we have to "locate" it on two maps, one secular and one ecclesial. The vocation of the laity, as already alluded to, finds its broadest arena in the world itself: the home, the workplace, the broader community of which each individual part and to which each is related. But that lay vocation takes its shape and receives its strength within the communion of the Church.

Students of the Second Vatican Council will recall that the notion of "communion" (*koinonía*) is deeply rooted in Revelation (Scriptures and tradition) and is central to conciliar teaching. Indeed, all images and models of the Church coalesce into this concept, the source of which is the Blessed Trinity. Simply put, in the words of Cyprian of Carthage, "The Church shines forth as a people made one in the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." It is a unity referred to in the Creed when we profess our belief in "the communion of the saints" and "sacramentalized" in the Holy Eucharist. In short, each person is called *with equal dignity* to a deep and personal union with Christ and to a communion with all other followers of Christ, both living and dead. We are called, to the extent

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possible, to relate to one another in the Church after the manner in which the persons of the Holy Trinity relate to one another.

Let's now look at how they do relate to one another. From all eternity the Father "gives away" all that he is and all that he has to the Son, and the Son gives glory to the Father by receiving all the Father gives, without grasping, without a trace of egotism, but instead perfectly reflecting all that he has received from the Father. And the bond of the love that arises between the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth and love. Thus St. Paul urges us to seek that unity "which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force." From this I hope you can see that the Church's *communio* is a gift, that it is precious, and that every vocation in the Church should aim to build up that communion of truth and life, justice, love, and peace.

St. Paul stresses that there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." All of us, whatever our state in life, whatever gifts or ministries we have received, are called to a deep union with the Holy Father and the bishops in union with him. So too we are called to unity in the faith of the Church, as authenticated and taught by the *Magisterium* of the Church.

It is also obvious that there is unity and diversity in the Trinity just as there is unity and diversity in the Church. More precisely, I might say there is a diversity and a complementarity among the various gifts given to the baptized. Just as the Spirit is the source of the Church's unity, so too the same Spirit is the source of diverse gifts, ministries, and charisms given to build up the Body of Christ. Later in this presentation, I shall focus more specifically on the relationship of various "states of life," most especially the relationship and difference between ordained ministry and the various forms the ministry of the laity takes in the life of the Church. For now let me make three brief observations.

First, none of these diverse gifts, whether a ministry or a charism, is a personal honor. Rather, these undeserved gifts are bestowed by the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead for the sake of the Church's mission. They do not of themselves make us holy but rather provide both a challenge and also a capacity to greater service to the Church's mission of spreading the Gospel and extending the saving mission of Christ in time and space. When any form of ecclesial ministry, whether ordained or lay, is used to promote a personal agenda or

ideology, then the gifts of Spirit are abused.

A second point flowing from the first is that we must guard against a destructive diversity. This can occur when various forms of ecclesial activity are no longer rooted in the teaching and worship of the Church or when groups in the Church prize their experience or views over against the Church's teaching.

Third, we should focus on the word "complimentarity" which I used earlier. That word, not usually found in dictionaries, refers to the obvious truth that not all ministries and charisms are the same but they must all work together — compliment and supplement one another — for the sake of the Church's mission, which increasingly is described as "the new evangelization."

*Relationship of the Vocation of
the Lay Faithful and Ordained Ministry*

Following the preceding discussion of the complimentarity and diversity of various ministries and gifts in the life of the Church, it is appropriate for us now to focus on the relationship between the ministries derived from Holy Orders and the ministries, offices, and roles that are entrusted to the lay faithful.

The tradition of the Church, including the documents of the Second Vatican Council, teaches that the distinction between ordained ministry and the vocation and various forms of service of the lay faithful is not merely one of degree but rather of essence. In speaking of both, we are using the word "ministry" in two very different ways, ways that are sometimes blurred in contemporary theological discourse. They are two complimentary but essentially different forms of participation in the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Ordained ministry is derived from the sacrament of Holy Orders, which produces a change in the depth of the being of the ordained whereby he resembles in a new and distinct way Christ as Head and Shepherd of the Church. That gift is given not as an honor but rather for the service of the entire Church. Specifically it is given so that the ordained will gather the Church through the preaching of the Gospel and through the celebration of the Sacraments by which the saving actions of Christ, principally his saving death and resurrection, are made present and available to God's people, in every age and epoch of

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the Church's life. Pope John Paul II reminds us that ordained ministries are given for the sake of the entire Church and are a grace for every member of the Church. These ordained ministries are essential so that all God's people, ordained and lay, can participate in the Church's mission.

As one who has been a priest for twenty-four years and a bishop for six of those years, I can attest that diaconate, priesthood, and episcopacy are exercised well only if the focus is on building up the spirituality of the lay faithful and, in the strength that comes from Christ, helping them to discover and exercise their distinctive roles in the life of the Church. At the same time, I have come to recognize that the expansion of lay participation in the life and mission of the Church does not and must not depend on a diminishment of ordained ministry. We should reject views that celebrate the vocations crisis as an opening to lay participation in the life of the Church. The more the laity participate the more necessary is the service offered by the ordained. Moreover, we should not think in terms of a finite "pie" of ecclesial life to be cut up and shared. Rather, in a mission that includes bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth, there is more than enough work and responsibility to go around.

The vocation and ministries of the lay faithful are rooted in Baptism and Confirmation; and for many of the lay faithful, their participation in the Church's mission is also rooted in the Sacrament of Matrimony. By means of these sacraments, the lay faithful participate in the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king (described earlier in this talk).

Recent years have seen an explosion of what is called "lay ecclesial ministry." It takes a variety of forms too numerous to mention in the course of this talk. Various offices in the Church, for example, the role of Chancellor, formerly reserved to clerics, are now open to the lay faithful who are qualified. In many parishes lay people carry forward important ministries, such as catechesis, R.C.I.A., advocacy to social justice, as well as ministries associated with the Church's sacramental life, such as lectors and extraordinary ministers of the Holy Eucharist. In some cases, especially in areas of the country where there is an extreme shortage of priests, lay persons are entrusted with the administration of parishes and other similar ministries. A few observations about this should be made.

First, as noted earlier, the rapid expansion of lay ministry is a good thing for the life of the Church, and should not be seen to depend on a shortage of priests. In various parts of the nation and world, the extraordinary work of dedicated lay persons keeps the faith alive and communities gathered.

Second, ecclesial lay ministry, even in the absence of the ordained, must be done in a spirit of communion with the Church's pastors, even as there must be instilled in the Church's pastors a sense of communion and respect for the dignity, gifts, and vitality of the lay faithful. To take a practical example, I could not imagine administering the diocese without the solid advice that I receive from an extremely well-qualified and articulate finance council or other largely lay boards.

A third observation, however, is that the role of the laity in the life of the Church is not, in the first instance, ecclesial lay ministry. Indeed, the outline of this talk is deficient as it may give that impression. Of greater importance is the role of the laity in bringing the faith to the world where they live and work.

The "Secularity" of the Lay Faithful

The final portion of this talk will be devoted to the "secularity" of the lay faithful. This is not meant to be a pejorative term, such as when we speak of "secularism" or refer to someone as "worldly." Rather, it is a reference to the greatest need and challenge which the Church largely entrusts to her lay faithful, namely, to bring the Gospel into the world. In order to do this, the lay faithful must be, echoing words very familiar to us all, "in the world but not of the world." The lay faithful are called to bring the faith of the Church into their homes, their places of work, their circle of friends, the social and political life of their communities and the nations of which they are a part. They bring the Gospel to arenas which are ordinarily not the direct purview of priests and religious, for example, law offices, laboratories, public office, and the like. Using images drawn from the Scriptures, Pope John Paul II challenges the lay faithful to be "salt and light" and "leaven" in a largely secular world. For example, Catholic homes are called to be distinctive for their lively faith, their respect for human life in its origins, their spirit of prayer, their values, their stress on communicating the faith to children, their spirit of service. What could

be more important that the apostolate of families in our communities?

The lay faithful are called to bring the values and virtues that flow from faith and reason to bear on their various professions, not only by the integrity of their ethics but also by bringing to professional life a lively sense of the dignity of the human person, so easily sacrificed in a competitive environment or in the process of globalization. How important that lay persons work to promote what the Pope called "a culture of life," a culture that respects life by speaking with love and accuracy about the Church's teaching on life among one's colleagues, neighbors, and friends. Make no mistake: this can be a costly ministry.

One thinks of various forms of public service, forms that have been very much in evidence during recent days. I think of firefighters and rescue workers who have given such a magnificent witness to the value of human life and who manifest the triumph of Christ's love even amid calamity.

Immersed as lay persons are in the culture, they have a special role in evangelizing not only their family, neighbors and colleagues, but indeed in evangelizing the culture of which they are a part. To be sure the culture contributes much to the preaching of the Gospel and the life of the Church, yet the Gospel and the Church are never at home in any cultural milieu but will always be "a sign of contradiction." That role too is often costly.

Conclusion

Dear friends, in his instruction on the beginning of the third Christian millennium, Pope John Paul II has challenged all of us with the words of Jesus to Peter after the Resurrection: "duc in altum" — "put out into the deep." We are challenged, as never before, to "fish" in the deep waters of our culture, bringing to the surface many new followers of Christ and members of his Body and bringing back to the surface those who have been alienated or who, for various reasons, have ceased to profess, practice, and proclaim their faith. As you can see by now, this is something we need to do together, clergy, lay faithful, and those in consecrated life, in a communion of truth, life, and love. The Holy Father has reminded us that the first and most important element in the response we will make — each according to our distinct vocations — is holiness of life. My prayer is that all of us

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may open our hearts ever more widely to Christ so that in our unity and diversity we may constitute a living sign of Christ's love for all the world to see.

Thank you and may God bless you always.