

Responsibilities and Rights of the Laity

“According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which [the laity] possess, they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of persons.” (Canon 212 §3)

The responsibilities and rights of the laity to participate in the work and mission of the Church are based on Scriptures and tradition, formulated in Church teachings—especially those from the Second Vatican Council—and codified in Canon Law.

Inherent in this right, and explicit in various Canons, is the right of the laity to freely form associations. Although such associations may not use the term Catholic unless sanctioned by Church authorities, Christian faithful either as lay persons alone or in an association with clerics, may organize in a “common endeavor to foster a more perfect life, to promote public worship or Christian doctrine, or to exercise other works of the apostolate ...” (Canon 298 §1)

That the faithful may feel compelled, in the face of the sex-abuse crisis, its coverup by bishops, and the financial and pastoral repercussions of those failings, to form associations for the reform and renewal of the Church itself, is a sad comment on the needs of our Church today. But such associations are a necessary step for participating in “the common priesthood of the faithful” and thus “in the one priesthood of Christ.” (*The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #10)

An Emerging Church

In its earliest days, the Church had no clergy, no laity, simply a community of believers. “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. ... All who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2: 42, 44).

Very soon during that first century, however, it became necessary for the people to elect representatives to distribute food, keep accounts, and perform administrative functions that would leave the missionaries (apostles) free to spread the word of God. From such modest beginnings, we read further in the Acts of the Apostles, arose needs to affirm the true leaders within a community, to settle disputes among members and between cities, and to counteract false teachings. Century after century, as the Church grew in size and breadth, this need to establish structure increased.

But these structures remained open to the people: in 215 A.D, St. Hippolytus referred to bishops being chosen by all the people; around 250 A.D., St. Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage, declared that he never took action without the “counsel and consent of the people”; the election of St. Ambrose as bishop of Milan in 373 was at the demand of the people gathered there; and Pope Celestine I (422-432) insisted that the desire and consent of the clergy and the people was required for selection of a bishop.

Gradually, however, our increasingly structured Church focused in official documents, century after century, on the development and rights of hierarchical offices. The laity, when they were described at all, mostly were described as recipients of whatever actions their pastors and bishops took. This imbalance continued until the Second Vatican Council renewed the focus on the entire People of God.

The People of God

Among the documents from the Second Vatican Council, there are two that most directly address the rights and responsibilities of the laity: *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (also known as *Lumen Gentium* from the first words in its text), and *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* (also called *Apostolicam Actuositatem*).

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church describes the entire Church, from Christ as the light of all nations, to the hierarchical structure of the episcopate, to the activities of laity and religious. All are interrelated, and each participates in its own special way in the one priesthood of Christ (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #10). Indeed, pastors are exhorted, as a “noble duty,” to acknowledge the ministries and charisms of the laity and to accept their works (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #30):

Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church. Let them [the shepherds] willingly employ their [the laity] prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to them [the laity] in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. Further, let them encourage lay people so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative. Attentively in Christ, let them consider with fatherly love the projects, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity.”
(*The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #37)

The *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* repeats this call for the laity to use their special gifts within the apostolate of the Church—because “without it the apostolate of the pastors is often unable to achieve its full effectiveness”—and declares specifically the rights of the laity to form associations for such purposes.

For this reason the faithful should participate in the apostolate by way of united effort. They should be apostles both in their family communities and in their parishes and dioceses, which themselves express the community

nature of the apostolate, as well as in the informal groups which they decide to form among themselves. (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* #18)

Of course, the Church would prefer that the opinions of the laity channel through the “organs erected by the Church for this purpose” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #37). But where a local or diocesan authority fails to establish or to allow such organs (through open and independent lay councils, for example), or where the authority itself has failed to promote the good of the People of God—as in decades-long sex-abuse crimes and coverups—the laity are obliged to speak through their own freely formed associations. It is a right derived from union with Christ and baptism into the Church:

The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into 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. ... For the exercise of this apostolate, the Holy Spirit Who sanctifies the people of God through ministry and the sacraments gives the faithful special gifts also ... to build up the whole body in charity. From the acceptance of these charisms, including those which are more elementary, there arise for each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of men and the building up of the Church, in the freedom of the Holy Spirit ... (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* #3)

Descriptions of the laity’s rights and responsibilities in the documents of Vatican II also find expressions in the canon law.

Codification in Canon Laws

The Code of Canon Law, as revised and then issued in 1983, included a new section, “Book II: The People of God,” which derived its canons from the documents of Vatican II. In it, the Church specifies that all who are “incorporated in Christ through baptism” (Canon 204 §1) are the people of God who, through that baptism, share in Christ’s “priestly, prophetic, and royal function.”

The canons also, of course, admonish the laity to be faithful, to be obedient, to treat with reverence their pastors and bishops. But equally critical is the recognition (Canon 212 §2 and §3) of the right of the faithful to provide input to the community, to share opinions and information with each other and with their pastors and bishops, and to freely organize their own associations:

Canon 215: The Christian faithful are at liberty freely to found and direct associations for purposes of charity or piety or for the promotion of the Christian vocation in the world and to hold meetings for the common pursuit of these purposes.

Although other canons seek to balance this right with a call to seek approval, nowhere is such approval required unless the lay association wishes to call itself Catholic in title or to link to a religious community:

Canon 299 §1: By means of a private agreement made among themselves, the Christian faithful are free to establish associations to pursue the purposes mentioned in Canon 298, §1, [see below] without prejudice to the prescript of Canon 301 §1 [which restricts to ecclesiastical authority the right to create associations that “propose to hand on Christian doctrine in the name of the Church”].

Canon 298 §1: In the Church there are associations distinct from institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life; in these associations the Christian faithful, whether clerics, lay persons, or clerics and lay persons together, strive in a common endeavor to foster a more perfect life, to promote public worship or Christian doctrine, or to exercise other works of the apostolate such as initiatives of evangelization, works of piety or charity, and those which animate the temporal order with a Christian spirit.

Additional Information

The right of the laity to form associations such as the Voice of the Faithful is so clear and stems so obviously from the teachings and practices of the Church that dozens of noted theologians signed a petition in 2002 asserting precisely that right. A copy of that petition is included in this paper.

For additional references, see the Vatican Web site for the texts of Canon Law and the documents of Vatican II.

Code of Canon Law:

<http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/INDEX.HTM>

Dogmatic Constitution on the Church:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html