

"THE MISSION OF THE LAITY IN THE CHURCH" -

#4 and conclusion of a Series

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"THE CHARACTER OF A CHRISTIAN"

by

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This problem of what is the mission of a layman in the Church will certainly have to depend on a layman's status in the Church. I think too often we hear it said that a layman should do this and a layman should do that. Everyone has some suggestion about what a layman should do in the Church, and too often we are talking about peripheral jobs, jobs that may seem like jobs for an errand boy or a third assistant. At times, we cloud the issue by not getting down to just exactly what makes a layman what he is in the Church.

Having studied this problem for sometime, I think we can reduce it to something permanent that all of you have as Catholic layman. That something permanent is something that you received when you were baptized and when you were confirmed. You have heard about it in catechism. They call it a Character. Every man in this room who has been baptized and confirmed has two Characters - the Character of Baptism and the Character of Confirmation. Anything that you are in the Catholic Church in a permanent way will stem from those two Characters and what they mean, and the next obvious question is - What do they mean?

One of the greatest theologians of all times, St. Thomas Aquinas, has written quite a bit about this Character, Baptism and Confirmation, as well as the Character of Priesthood, or Holy Orders. He says there are two things that make up the real meaning of a Character. The first is that the Character gives you a configuration or likeness to Christ the Priest and a commitment to do His work, and secondly, the Character gives you the power as laymen to do some work of Christ the Priest.

This may seem confusing because you may say by definition, we are laymen and not priests - how then can our position in the Church be explained by this Character which gives us a likeness to Christ the Priest - a commitment to His task with the power to do something in collaboration with Him as the Head of the Mystical Body of the Church. I believe the answer would go back a long way. It would be something that was said in the first talk of this Series. Father McDonagh reminded you that our Holy Father Pope Pius the XII in one of his elocutions to the laity remarked, "You do not belong to the Church, you are the Church."

In other words the Church is the Body of Christ and you are just as much a member of that Church as I am. You are just as much a member as the Pope, or your Bishop or as anyone else in the Church, because if you are a member of this Body you have to live the life that runs throughout the whole Body. You have to be

committed to the same good as every other person in that Body. You have to have the same means and the same tasks at hand and somehow you have to collaborate as a member of that Body with everything that is going on in it.

This leads us very quickly to the second question - What is the Life of the Body which you as laymen have a direct part? Let me digress for a moment into some psychology. One of the greatest things studied in Psychology is Life. There are two kinds of activity that characterize life. (I may sound a little pedantic in this, but once we lay the ground work I think the conclusion will be obvious). The first kind of activity is an imminent self perfecting activity, the kind of activity that physically you call metabolism, intellectually, you call getting an education, or spiritually, you would call growing up in Christ.

There is within every living body an internal, self perfecting action, which is a sure sign of a body that is alive and not stagnant or dead or decomposing. Besides this imminent, self perfecting activity, that goes with every body, there is an external, transient activity whereby the perfection of the life of the body is transferred to other people. A good example of this would be a man teaching from the store of wisdom he has - transmitting this perfection to other people after building it up in himself through his own education. Another idea would be parenthood where husbands and wives pass on their physical life to their children and then further educate their children from their own intellectual and spiritual lives.

Now then if the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, it has to have two kinds of activity - the one kind of activity must be a self perfecting, growing up activity, and the other must be the activity that carries the body in all its effects, goods and blessings out to the world around it. In a word these two activities which characterize the life of the Mystical Body are the prayer and the work of the Body, what are called in Latin the Ora and the Labora. If these are the real works that characterize the body you, as layman, must somehow have an active part in both of these works if you are to be a real living member if you are the Body of Christ.

Now then, how are you prepared for those works? Can you actually take part in both of those works, that self perfecting work that goes on in the Body of Christ, that growing up with Christ, that union with Christ, that being united with Christ. Can you have a real active part in that? Secondly can you have a work in, or a participation in the transient work of the body, the carrying of the spirit and the influence of Christ out to the world around you.

If anything has been emphasized by the Popes of the past twenty or thirty years, especially Pius the X, Pius the XI and our present reigning Pius the XII, it has been this - the laymen of today cannot merely be a dead member of a living body. If the Church is to grow today it has to grow the way every other body grows by its internal perfection of all the members and by the carrying of that perfection to others in blessings. You can't do that work which is a spiritual supernatural social work just because someone tells you to do it. My standing here and saying that it is part of your mission in the Church to do this work doesn't give you the inner preparation to do it. We are talking here about a supernatural work, about spiritual work, about work that you have to be prepared to do, the same as I have to be prepared to teach. You can't do it just because a priest or a bishop or even the Pope tells you to do it. Somehow internally in your soul you have to be prepared to take part in these two great works of the Church, and I would like to tell you today that you are prepared by the fact that you have these two characters of Baptism and Confirmation engraved upon your soul.

First of all, take the character of Baptism. We are told that like all the characters, it engraves your soul to the image of Christ the Eternal Priest. Here

again we can avoid a great deal of confusion because very often Catholics hear that somehow they are priests, and people say "Well don't get it mixed up, you are not wearing a Roman collar, you are not a priest in that sense, you're getting it all mixed up, just be a layman and let it go at that." Well God didn't let it go at that, God gave you a configuration to the priesthood of Christ. How can we understand it? I think we can understand it only by understanding what the priesthood is and how the work of the priesthood, which is the work of Christ, goes on in the Church today.

Christ became a priest when His Divinity, His Divine Nature, was joined to His Human Nature in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On the Feast of the Annunciation when she agreed to become the Mother of God, when the Word became Flesh and dwelt amongst us, a tremendous thing was done. The Divine Nature, Divinity came down to earth and became one of us. We say - The Word became Flesh because it was the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity Christ Jesus, who became Man. And when He became Man, or His Humanity, this Man became the Eternal Priest. Why? Because a priest is essentially a mediator, he is one who stands between two extremes and joins them within himself and Christ does just this, because in His Person He joins the two greatest extremes, you might say time and eternity, God and Man, Divinity and Humanity.

He joined in His Very Person these two great realities of Divinity and Humanity, God and Man, because that was the characteristic note of what He came to do as the Eternal Priest - He came to extend His Arms and to bring all humanity in union with God and as St. Thomas tells us a priest is called sacerdos - "one who gives sacred things, one who brings the prayers of man to God, and one who brings the Blessings of God to man." A priest is one who stands between Heaven and earth, a man who must be close to God and must be close to men, a mediator who brings the Blessings of God to men and the prayers of men to God.

Now then, Christ is the only real Priest, the only Eternal Priest, the only real High Priest. Why is this? Because He alone in His Person unites the two things He came to unite in His work, He alone unites man and God in His Person. And if you look at the whole Work of Christ which followed the Incarnation, you will find that it is just that. It is to follow man throughout the world that Incarnation took place in His Person - it is to bring all the things of man, man's work, man's marriage, man's daily life of prayers and sacrifice - to bring all the things that are close to a man's heart into contact with God and with salvation and redemption. It is to make the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Faith incarnate in all the things of time. It is somehow to draw all the creatures of the earth into one vast liturgy and to offer them to God, and to seek God's Blessing upon them so that they might make man happy, and they might contribute to man's salvation and redemption.

Christ did this perfectly by His Work, but the fact that He redeemed all mankind doesn't mean that all men are going to be redeemed, or that all men are going to be saved, or that all people are going to Heaven. He meant that the Work that He did as Great High Priest was to be participated in by many other people, indeed, by all people of all time. To do this work and to carry on the work of incarnating God in the things of man, He established a Church which in a sense again is patterned after His own Incarnation, because the Church is the great body of Christ, of which He, the Divine Son of God, is the Head, and we, so many human elements are the members.

Now we aren't all in the same function within that Body, we aren't all hands and feet, as St. Paul says, or all eyes and ears. We, all of us, have something to do for the good of that Body, and because all of us have to take a part in this great work of the Priesthood, of bringing God and man together, of joining the things of man and the things of God, a work that is the very opposite of secularism which separates God and the things of man. Because we all must have a part in this, the very first thing that happens when a person is made a member of the Body of Christ

through Baptism, is that person is given a Character, an indelible mark on his soul which engraves upon your soul the eternal effigy of Christ, the High Priest, and you are given a part to partake in the Work of Christ's Priesthood.

What are those Works - they are only the Works we explained earlier, the Works that take place in the Church, the great internal work of the Church which is to grow up in Christ, to become more Christlike, to receive the blessing of Christ's redemption in our soul, and the souls of those around us. And secondly the diffusion of that Blessing, the diffusion of those Graces, the bringing out of the Spirit of Christ to our work-a-day lives, into our family, into our office, into our profession, into our recreational life, into our educational life. This is the work of the Church, and this is merely the continuation of the Work of Christ, the incarnating of the Spirit of the Things of God and the things of man, and this is the work which you are empowered to participate in by these two great Characters that go with every Catholic layman, the Character of Baptism and Confirmation.

St. Thomas says, that the Character of Baptism gives you a power that is more passive than active because you are baptized as a child, and when you are baptized you are given the power of receiving all the good things of Christ, all the other Sacraments are opened to you. You cant really participate in the Mass and in the great liturgical acts of the Church until you are baptized. Once you are baptized all these Blessings become yours. You are mentioned and remembered in every Mass. You can participate actively with the priest in carrying out the liturgy. You join and are made a part of that great internal work of the Church which is to grow up in Christ and become close to Christ, the Head of the Mystical Body. You will become a member of this great social organism spread through the world, and every blessing that is diffused throughout the Church is your blessing, comes into your life and your soul. Every time the priest says his Office, praying the official prayer of the Church, you are remembered and you are a part of that prayer. In every Mass that is offered up, you are a member and you are part, because it is a Sacrifice of all living and dead Christians.

I said the Character of Baptism is mainly passive, because it is the power to receive the Things of Christ, and yet it is active to this extent, that by it we are meant to work with the great Liturgical Action of the Church. We are not meant to sit back when Mass is going on, but to offer it up with the priest. We are to bring our lives and all they are, our work, our family life, our ideals, our troubles, day by day, the sacrifices we must make because we are Christians, the daily tensions, the burden and the heat of living in a secularistic world where so many things are against us, and so often the odds are weighted against us. We are to bring ll these to Mass as a great living sacrifice, so that our little gift is consecrated and sanctified with the great gift of Christ on Calvary, that it might be offered up to God as a great hymn of praise. We offer our whole lives and all they mean. And this you can do because you are baptized, because you have the Image of Christ the High Priest in your soul, because you have the power to participate in this great work of priesthood which is a work of prayer, offering all the good things of men to God in prayer and praise. This is how you are associated with all the ordained priest of the Church. They offer this in your name and you offer it with them.

There is another Character, the Character of Confirmation. By this Character we are told in Theology, by St. Thomas who did it so beautifully, there is deepened within your soul, when you are Confirmed, the Image that you bear to Christ the Priest. Because Confirmation is a Sacrament of adulthood in the Church you are no longer given merely the power to receive the good things of Christ, but to carry those good things to other people. In Baptism you were geared to the great inner work of the Church so that you might grow up in Christ.

We dont any of us grow up in Christ merely for our own good, but that we might bring Christ to other people, that we might bring the great Incarnating Spirit of Christ into our work, into our daily lives, and our family and our professions. For that reason you have the Power of the Sacrament of Confirmation. This is not merely a passive power to receive but an active power. St. Thomas says the power that comes to you through the Sacrament of Confirmation is something that stands between the Power of Baptism and the Power of Holy Orders. He says that by Baptism you are geared to receive the good things of Christ, by Holy Orders or Ordination a man is geared to give unselfishly of himself to other people. And in Confirmation he says the layman is set up in the Church to bring the good things of Christ to other people, to defend the Faith, to spread the Faith, to be a witness to the Faith.

So you can see by Confirmation, as the Holy Father keeps reminding us, you are consecrated, set aside, empowered to carry on this great external work of the life of the Church, this work of carrying Christ to other people, this great work of Apostolate. So you can see when the Pope says, "You do not merely belong to the Church you are the Church", he is only saying that you as Catholic laymen have an active living part in the active life of the Church, that just as the Church is a social body, with social and religious activity, so that is your activity as well as mine.

The Holy Father does not say, "Do this because I tell you to do it, but He says do this which you have the power to do by what you have in your souls." He says, "If you carry about in your souls engraved upon them the Image of Christ the Priest, take part in this great priestly work of Mediation, by your active participation in the Liturgical Acts of the Church, take part in receiving all the Blessings that come from Christ in His Redemption." Take part in that active work of the Church, in any way you can. Take part in this great Mediation of Christ, for you stand between Christ and the world you live in. Bring Christ to that world.

Take the Power of Christ which you have by your Sacrament and your Character of Confirmation, to be a vital, militant Catholic. Don't say that it is merely the ordained priest in the Church who have an Apostolate. You have an Apostolate, you are consecrated and committed to an Apostolate. You have a power to do Apostolic work. The Church must grow in you and through you. Baptism gives it a chance to grow in you, Confirmation a chance to grow through you.

You might ask yourselves today - "Do I want to know what kind of a Catholic layman I am?" You might ask yourselves - how effective have the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation been in my life? Has the Church really grown, blossomed in my soul?" Secondly - "Has there been a normal sign of that growth, that after blossoming in my soul it has spread itself out through my carrying the influence of Christ to a world which will die without Him, to a world that is in sad need of redemption and which cannot be redeemed without Christ."

You see the world after original sin was completely separated from God. Original sin was a barrier to be broken down. Somehow manhood and Divinity had to reunited - that reunion took place in the Incarnation, when Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, became Man, and then by His work culminating on Calvary, that union was solidified for all mankind. As I have said earlier - the work was done but still the work goes on, and it is because the work must go on that we have a Church. Because the work goes on in and through the Church, that is why everyone in the Church must help it grow.

Everyone in his own part, in his own way, must carry on the Work of Christ, which is a great Work of Mediation to stand between God and man. To lift your prayers to the whole Mystical Body of Christ, to join your sacrifices to all the members of Christ and to let them rise in praise of God, and then to derive from God all the

blessings you do derive from all your prayers and sacrifices and to carry them outwardly to men, and to your lives and to your work.

This, I think, is the greatest dignity that a Catholic layman has - to know that what he is doing as a Catholic layman is not being done just merely because some priest says - "It would be nice if you did this" - or if the Bishop said, "It would be nice if you did this", or if the Pope says, "The world will be in a bad way if you don't do this". You do what you do because of what you are. Your place in the Church does not come from the Pope, or from the Bishop or from the priest, it comes from what God has given you in these Sacraments, and God Himself affects the work of the Sacraments.

It is true, of course, that we do have external authority in the Body of Christ and that is why, since we are all working together, and the Pope has put the bishops over the Church to carry out his work in the various dioceses in the world, that in your external official Catholic action you have to work hand in hand with the bishops and the priests. But, it is a work of collaboration, and just as the priest does his work because of the Character of Holy Orders which he has, you are doing your work because of the Character of Baptism and Confirmation which you have.

You can be just as proud of your preparation as he can of his, because while you participate in the priesthood of Christ in the lowest degree, and the priest himself also participates to a higher degree, and the bishop to a still higher degree, all of us Popes, bishops, priests and laymen, are participating in the Work of the one High Priest, the Work of the one Redeemer, the Work of the one Head of the Mystical Body. It is His Priesthood, and there is never a priest, and there never will be a priest in this whole wide world, who is not a priest because he participates in the Work of Christ the one High Priest. Christ is the Father of all priesthood. He is the beginning and the end of all priestly work, and all of us priests and laymen are participating in that work, even though in a different degree.

So I say to you today that I think this group has a double honor for not only are you doing a work which can be very close to the heart of Christ by promoting the education and welfare of the ordained priest-to-be, but at the same time you can remember that in promoting the education and welfare of young men who will be ordained priests some day you are indeed bringing the blessing of Christ's priesthood to these men. You indeed are being mediators in your own right, and you indeed are doing a priestly work in a double sense, in that you are making priests, and you are making it possible that young men may become priests, and also you are extending the Kingdom of God by extending the workers and officers in His ranks.

I would like to close this talk this afternoon by asking you to meditate once in awhile on the two great Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. In the Church we often think of Confession, Mass and Holy Communion and possibly Marriage as being the Sacraments which come closest to us, but always remember that the two Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation have given each of you something that you will never lose. For Eternity, and it will be an even greater pride when you are able to see it and realize it as you will in Eternity, one of your greatest prides will be that you carry about within you the Effigy of Christ, the Priest, and you realize deep in your heart that you have been committed by this Effigy to carry on the work of His Priesthood, that there is no where that you go that you cannot bring with you the Spirit of Christ, that there are many places you go that will never know the Spirit of Christ, unless it comes to this place through you, that the Spirit of Christ begins in your family with you, that the Spirit of Christ may never be in your business except through you, that the Spirit of Christ that must come to the world today, if secularism is not to overwhelm us, must come not from the few priests

we have in the world, but from the tremendous number of good Catholic laymen, like yourselves, who realize what it is to grow up in Christ, who are trying to let their Baptism blossom out into the fulness of Christ in their souls and who do not hoard that fullness to themselves, but spread it out in a priestly, mediatorial way to the world which will die without it.

God bless you.