

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: EVER ANCIENT EVER NEW:  
REFLECTIONS UPON THE VATICAN II COUNCIL: PRESENTATION 9  
CONSECRATING THE WORLD AROUND US: THE DECREE ON APOSTOLATE OF THE LAITY

I. Apostolicam Auctuositatem, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, was the result of an increasing emphasis on the need for the laity to become more involved with the work of the Church in the world.

A. With the strong support of the popes from St. Pope Pius X (1903-1914) through Pope Pius XII (1939-58), lay apostolates had played an increasing role in the Church during the twentieth century.

1. In 1905, St. Pope Pius X published Il Fermo Proposito, supporting the idea of Catholic Action specifically in Italy, but also throughout the world. Catholic Action was a term that generally included any predominately lay group that was nevertheless directly in conjunction with the hierarchy to bring the Church's presence into the world.

- The specific group called Catholic Action began with the support of Pope Pius XI (1923-39) and was designed to train laity to take up apostolate in the world.

2. Such general groups such as the Knights of Columbus, the Legion of Mary and the National Council of Catholic Women in America and more specialized groups such as the Saint Vincent de Paul Society (for faith based charity), the Young Christian Workers, Serra International (for vocations) and the Holy Name Society are examples of the groups from the twentieth century that formed the expansion of the lay apostolate. By the opening of the Council, the Conference of International Catholic Organizations included 35 such groups operating across national boundaries.

3. In 1957, Pope Pius XII gave an address to the International Congress of the Lay Apostolate inviting them to propose issues for consideration by the Church, including how much the clergy and Catholic apostolates should interact and how there could be more cooperation. See [www.vaticaniiat50.wordpress.com](http://www.vaticaniiat50.wordpress.com) (October 30, 2012.)

B. The Preparatory Commission for the Laity and then the Conciliar Commission on the Laity drafted the initial document, which then was followed by a short and mostly positive discussion.

1. When Pope John XXIII called for the Vatican II Council, he placed the widely respected Vatican diplomat Cardinal Fernando Cento in charge of the Preparatory Commission that was to draft the document on the lay apostolate. That Preparatory Commission in turn formed three sub-commissions: (1) one for general principles of the lay apostolate; (2) one for social action concepts; and (3) one for the topic of organized charity. The final draft would have three overall topics, but they would be instead general principles, specific apostolates, and the coordination of the clergy and the laity.

2. There was some initial criticism that the Commission was entirely composed of clergy, but Cardinal Cento included lay experts in the consultation and drafting. See

John O'Malley, What Really Happened at Vatican II (2008) 229;  
www.vaticaniiat50.wordpress.com (October 30, 2012.)

3. The initial draft of the decree had 272 sections, which was subsequently reduced to 92. See Robert Oliver, "The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*" in Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition (2008) footnotes 8 and 45 at 283 and 286. However, even that draft would be condensed before being presented to the Council. By the end of the second session of the Council in 1963, Pope Paul VI and most of the bishops anticipated that the Council would conduct its final session in 1964. However, given that the Council had only approved two of the documents, on the liturgy and on mass media, there was a great deal of concern that there would not be enough time to finish the remainder of the work. And so Cardinal Julius Dopfner of Munich proposed reducing the size of most of the remaining texts to a few paragraphs so that the work could be completed. As a result of this proposal, which came to be known as the Dopfner plan, there were many calls that the decree on the laity to be reduced from 92 articles to a few paragraphs. However, Cardinal Centro argued successfully that, given the great interest both among the laity and among bishops in this topic, that this abbreviation was too extreme. And so the draft was increased to 21 articles. The final document would have 33 articles, with what is now chapter 5 added back in.

4. And so, on October 6, 1964, Cardinal Centro presented to the Council the decree, which at the time had the title De Apostolatu Laicorum (On the Apostolate of the Laity.)

5. That presentation was followed by a week of debate, which was for the most part positive.

a. Some bishops such as Cardinal Joseph Ritter of St. Louis argued that it was still focused too much on the clergy. See A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II 102-03. On the other hand Cardinal Michael Browne, the Master General of the Dominican order, wanted more of an emphasis on the need to coordinate lay apostolates together under the guidance of the hierarchy. See What Really Happened at Vatican II at 230.

b. Some bishops wanted to add more material on the universal call to holiness. The final document would not add much material along these lines because the issue had already been addressed in other documents such as Lumen Gentium. But the final document would cross reference these other sources with 9 footnotes out of 49 citing Lumen Gentium and 4 footnotes citing other Council documents. There were also numerous references to papal encyclicals including 8 footnotes citing Pope John XXIII's last encyclical Mater et Magister, which addressed the

issue of what constitutes true progress in cultures, i.e. a development of the human person and families, not mere technical progress or material wealth.

c. One bishop Stjepan Bauerlein of Syrmia, Croatia wanted an express reference to the centrality of large families and pointed out that that low birthrates were causing a shortage of priests and religious. See What Really Happened at Vatican II at 230. While his recommendation was not accepted, it was an accurate prediction for the future.

c. Patrick Keegan, the president of the World Federation of Christian Workers spoke of the document as a first step in forging a closer bond between the hierarchy and the laity and having a “family dialogue” among members of the Church. It was the first time a layman made an official speech at the Council. See What Really Happened at Vatican II at 230.

C. The Commission then presented a revised draft to the Council on November 6, 1965. The draft added what is now chapter 5 and included among its changes six slight revisions called for by Pope Paul VI. On November 18, the Council voted on the decree, now called Apostolicam Actuositatem, from the first two words in Latin “apostolic activity”; and it passed on a vote of 2305-2, the largest majority for any document of the Council.

II. The decree consists of an introduction and six chapters, which progress from general principles to specific proposals. The first two chapters discuss general principles behind the apostolate of the laity. The next two chapters describe different types of the apostolate. And the final two chapters cover specific issues of connections with the clergy and training for the apostolate. There is an overall focus on the spiritual and family background to all other activities.

III. The introduction states the goal of encouraging greater apostolic endeavors by the laity, which are needed even more now because of the increase in science, technology, population and communication in the world. The introduction gives the positive observation that people are now more aware and willing to take up causes for the Church, but also the warning that the secular world has in many ways lost a moral and religious foundation. That observation, now more true in the Western world than then, makes the lay apostolate all the more crucial.

IV. Chapter 1 describes the overall principles that are behind apostolate of the laity. There is a strong focus on the idea that a faithful and spiritual life, united in prayer and devotion to Christ and Mary, is essential for any good apostolate. The warning is against trying to build apostolic activity without a firm foundation in the spiritual life, in virtue, and in one’s family.

A. Section 2 says that every member of the Church, the body of Christ, is called to take part in her actions; and all actions of the Church that bring the Gospel to the world are rightly called

apostolates. The hierarchy guides the many different gifts people have in the threefold ministry of sanctifying, teaching and governance (or priestly, prophetic and royal.) The apostolate of the laity is likewise meant to evangelize the world, to sanctify the world, and to make even the secular realm a sphere enlightened by the Gospel values.

B. Section 3 describes first the spiritual basis for lay apostolates. All apostolates spring from the sacraments, especially baptism and the Eucharist, and are carried out with the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity. In addition, people should be open to the abilities and charisms of the Holy Spirit for the widely varied ways of living out the call to work for the Church and the world. There is an emphasis on the tapping into the power of heaven and then engaging in apostolates, rather than making prayer a separate field. The section notes that there is a unity in the faith that brings the varied gifts together, a unity that the pastors of the Church should maintain.

C. Section 4 continues the theme that an authentic apostolate must be lived out in the context of a deep spiritual life in union with Christ.

1. It encourages the laity to maintain a strong connection to the liturgies and devotions of the Church and to focus on living out the virtues of faith, hope and charity. There is a strong notion of being free of materialism, anger, deceit and other vices and instead making a virtuous life the basis for bringing the faith to the world.
2. The section then focuses on one's vocation, in married life, single, life widowhood or celibacy, as the foundation of apostolates. It likewise speaks of a sense of civic duty and good organizations as helpful to the apostolate.
3. And, finally, it calls for a devotion to Mary to guide one's activities to bring the faith to the world.

V. Chapter 2 then describes the goals of the apostolates of the laity. After an introduction, the emphasis is on evangelizing and sanctifying the world, purifying the temporal order and performing charitable works.

A. Section 5 sets up the discussion by emphasizes that the sacred and secular realms are distinct, but also united in Christ and His plan of salvation. And thus, while the secular realm, which the laity are meant to consecrate, operates in some ways differently that the Church, there is one divine law governing both areas, which the laity should uphold.

B. Section 6 describes various overall means of accomplishing the goals of the apostolate.

1. The section begins by describing the Church's twofold mission of bringing truth to people and providing divine grace. The clergy accomplishes these goals primarily by

their ministries of the word and the sacraments. The former means focuses more on teaching, the latter more on sanctifying, but both elements are present in either ministry.

2. The rest of the section then describes the general ways in which the laity carry out this mission of truth and grace. First, there is the witness of a Christian life, in which people teach by example. The laity also teach those who do not yet have the faith, and strengthen those whose faith is weaker. The laity live and work in the midst of societies that are threatened with decadence, error and unfaithfulness. They defend the principles of the faith to sanctify this order.

C. Section 7 then turns toward the temporal order as created good, but in desperate need of sanctification.

1. The first paragraph describes the temporal realm as consisting of families, cultures, economies and politics, as well as the international realm. (These categories reflect the chapters in part II of Gaudium et Spes, which was promulgated two and a half weeks after this decree.) This paragraph describes the natural goodness of these different fields of realm as created by God and reflecting His goodness in their own ways.

2. The second paragraph then describes the corruption due to sin, which in the modern world has especially taken the form of turning technology into an idol.

3. The third paragraph describes the goal of the Church to sanctify even the temporal realm and pastors as meant to teach the moral truth and give people assistance in living it out.

4. The fourth paragraph describes it as the duty of the laity to bring their faith, along with their abilities, to renew the temporal realm. The fields of the temporal realm have their own principles and rightful autonomy, but they are still to be governed by the law of God, and the laity should ensure that this order is upheld. Works of charity are a particularly important means of doing so.

D. Section 8 then outlines the importance of these works of charity.

1. The first three paragraphs describe works of charity as especially important means of carrying out the love of neighbor that is tied inexorably into the love of God and thus making Christ's love for us more visible. It recalls the glorious witness to the faith that sprang from the great works of charity in the early Church.

2. The next two paragraphs describe both the great opportunities for charitable works in the modern world, and the great necessity for them.

3. The next paragraph describes the specifically Christian spirituality that should underlie these efforts, namely, the fact that we see in each person a son or daughter of God. This spirituality includes the common sense that we must always be just and humble, not looking down upon the recipients but striving to help them be independent.

4. The final paragraph encourages broad efforts as well, involving the entire nation and the international community. Although there is a specific Christian spirituality to charity, the document encourages cooperation among all people of good will.

VI. Chapter 3 then turns to more specific matters by describing the main areas in which the lay apostolate works. After an introduction, the progress is from the church to families to the world at large.

A. Section 9 introduces the chapter and notes that women are increasingly playing a larger role in society and in the apostolates, which can be focused more upon the church or more upon the world.

B. Section 10 promotes the lay apostolate in the Church, at the parish and diocesan levels and in even broader spheres.

1. The first two paragraphs describe the benefits of active participation in the parish groups in terms of the necessary and practical benefits of being able to do more, but also in terms of uniting the clergy and laity, drawing more people into the Church and giving the world a good example of the gathering of different people.

2. The third paragraph also encourages the laity to be open to projects involving the entire diocese or even at the national or international levels.

C. Section 11 emphasizes the centrality of the family in the apostolate, both for the family members themselves and for the entire Church.

1. The section begins with the divine to educate children in the faith and by providing good example and upbringing generally.

2. The next paragraph then goes on to focus on the fact that each Catholic family is called upon to defend the rights, duties and importance of family life in the midst of a world in which they are often threatened. The fifth paragraph particularly emphasizes this role in areas where the Gospel is first being preached. In a role reversal, many of those mission countries now honor the family, while the historically Christian areas neglect or demean the sacredness of marriage.

3. In describing the family as the central society upon which every other society is built, this section also lists numerous ways in which families support the Church and society, such as active participation in liturgy, teaching, and charitable works.

D. Section 12 then encourages the youth to be very involved in apostolates and for the rest of the Church to encourage them.

1. It recognizes that, in a changing culture where young people have more freedom and responsibilities, there are great challenges and struggles to use that freedom well. The solution is not in limiting those opportunities but rather to have young people more involved in the apostolates as they are more able, always with the spirit of Christ and fidelity to the Church. Thus, they help the Church and especially other young people, as well as grow themselves. Even children are witnesses of the faith, particularly to other children.

2. The section goes on to encourage youth and the rest of the Church to mutual cooperation and dialogue so that the very differences will be mutually enriching.

E. Section 13 turns to apostolates in the world, calling upon everyone to consecrate the situations in which they naturally live, work and grow as people.

1. There is first of all a call to be a witness of the Christian faith simply by one's way of life in the family, society and work, a generosity, honor, and love that makes the splendor of the faith shine forth.

2. The third paragraph also emphasizes that the laity are called as witnesses of the faith by teaching and explaining her truths. For many people, the lay faithful with whom they deal is the only portion of the Gospel that they see or hear.

F. Turning to the national and international spheres, section 14 then calls upon the laity to be very active in making this world a better place.

1. The first paragraph calls for Catholics to be informed and involved in the political sphere, noting that if we consistently do so, laws will in fact promote justice and the common good. The second paragraph emphasizes the importance of dialogue with others as promoting a better world.

3. The third and fourth paragraphs focus upon the call to promote mutual cooperation, understanding and assistance to those in need. As the fourth paragraph notes, the apostolate of the international realm does not only involve the wealthier helping the poorer, but all nations benefitting from each other's gifts and Christians witnesses to the unity of the people of God.

VII. Chapter 4 focuses on the apostolate of individual and groups, with a particular commentary on Catholic Action.

A. Section 16 notes that, even as individuals, we are called to apostolic activity. Thus, for example, Christians are called to bring the faith to the world by their witness of life, through explaining the faith to others, through works of charity, and through trying to make the groups and communities they are involved in to be directed more by the true and noble values.

B. Section 17 picks up on a theme raised in section 16, namely, that in areas of persecution or where there are few of the faithful, the individual apostolate must take a central role. They often teach, lead in prayer and otherwise promote a divinely guided life.

- While the Council was not directly referring to situations in the Western world, one can see the application to Catholics in schools or professions where there is popular prejudice against the Christian faith or specifically against the Church.

C. Section 18 describes a variety of benefits flowing from the formation of groups to promote the apostolate. The first benefits described are the fulfillment of the human need for society and the witness to common life. But of course the joining together of people also allows for a much greater field of accomplishment as well. In addition, there is the need for a common defense of the faith against worldly values and pressures.

D. Section 19 then makes some comments on the many types of group apostolates.

1. The first paragraph lists four types of group activities for the faith: (1) carrying out roles of the church herself (e.g., liturgical and catechetical programs, youth groups, hospitality); (2) promoting evangelization and holiness in the world (e.g., communications and door to door visits); (3) improving the temporal realm (e.g., prolife groups and groups that reach out to public institutions); and (4) carrying out charitable endeavors. Most groups combine these goals.

2. The second paragraph specifically recognizes groups that help the laity live out their faith in the seemingly ordinary aspects of life. Examples would be Catholic professional associations or Catholic groups in public schools. Some religious orders such as the Salesians and Legionaries of Christ, along with the personal prelature Opus Dei have this goal as a part of their apostolate. In an increasingly secular world, it is particularly important that Catholics not leave the faith behind when they go into society.

3. The third paragraph also calls for international associations in an increasingly international world.

4. The fourth paragraph calls for a balancing between having a variety of organizations and having so many that efforts are too diffuse. One must also adapt the organization to each nation.

E. Section 20 addresses Catholic Action and similar organizations. It particularly supports the groups officially called Catholic Action in different areas. But it also says that other groups can be called Catholic Action if they likewise meet certain criteria, namely: (1) they are specifically geared toward the evangelization and sanctification of the world and for the Church; (2) the laity run the group in unison with the hierarchy; (3) there is a very concerted unity of action; and (4) the group is directed by the hierarchy. There is a group in America called Catholic Action for Faith and Family. More broadly, such groups as the Legion of Mary and the Knights of Columbus could be considered part of Catholic Action, although they have their own styles and structures. The idea is that such groups are lay run, but have a particular unity with each other and with the clergy.

F. Sections 21 and 22 also praise other types of groups, especially those particularly endorsed by bishops and international groups. Section 22 also praises professionals who provide services to the Church and calls for reasonable remuneration when needed for their families.

VIII. Chapter 5 turns to the topic of cooperation between the hierarchy and the laity with reference to lay apostolates.

A. Section 23 sets up the chapter by describing the need for cooperation and unity among the apostolates of the Church even as their independence is respected.

B. Section 24 describes different levels of interaction between lay apostolates and the hierarchy. For general groups in the world, through which the laity try to improve the world and evangelize people, the clergy teaches the moral law and gives guidance about what it in accord with it. Other apostolates are essentially run by the laity as independent enterprises; they are very valuable and have a central role in the church. One thinks here of independent bookstores and schools, as well as informal prayer groups and Bible studies. But to use the name "Catholic," they must receive approval of the bishop or other Church official. (This principle is now behind Canon 216 of the Code of Canon Law.) Other lay apostolates are run mostly by the laity, but with direction and cooperation of the Church. One thinks of such groups as the Knights of Columbus, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and the Legion of Mary. And yet other apostolates, such as liturgical roles and teaching religious education in parishes, are more specifically run by the Church. The laity should also sanctify institutions "in the temporal order," namely ones that are not specifically tied to the Church. In those case, moral guidance should still come from the Church and her hierarchy.

C. Section 25 calls for priest and religious brothers and sisters to cooperate with the laity in guiding and assisting lay apostolates, and for some of them to be trained especially for this role. The section encourages a mutual respect among the different participants.

D. Section 26 then calls for the creation of parish, diocesan, national and international councils of the Church to assist and coordinate lay apostolates. It also calls for a special secretariat in the Vatican for this purpose. From 1967 to 2016, the Pontifical Council for the Laity served this purpose. (An American Cardinal Francis Stafford was president from 1996-2003.) Then, in 2016 Pope Francis replaced this Council, and the Council for Family Life, with the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. An Irish born American Cardinal Kevin Farrell is the Prefect of this Dicastery.

E. Section 27 also calls for cooperation between Catholics and other Christians for the sake of promoting Gospel values and even non-Christians for the sake of promoting natural virtues and justice.

IX. Chapter 6 describes training for the various apostolates. There is a great emphasis on natural training in the virtues and in the family.

A. Cross referencing Lumen Gentium and its call to universal holiness, section 28 sets up the chapter by describing the fact that all Catholics should train for apostolates in general and also that there is specific training for particular apostolates.

B. Section 29 then outlines some overall principles of such training for all people. The idea is that one must develop as a Catholic man or woman to begin with in order to be an effective apostolic witness. The section begins with the development of virtues and prayer. It then says that all people should receive at some level an education in ethics, philosophy, theology, and their culture. The section also calls for people continuously to advance in the ability to live all of their life in the context of the “light of faith,” which is a central theme of Pope Francis’ encyclical by the same name. From this unified approach, people can take their rightful place in the world. There is a subtle critique of merely specialized training without a grounding in first principles as well as an understanding of one’s culture.

C. Section 30 then develops this idea of training by emphasizing the universal calling involved. Training is not a specialized call for the few, but rather begins in the family and the parish and thus includes all people. In particular, the section begins with the role of parents in educating their children in the faith and in concern for others. There is also the call for priests and the parish to help children understand their roles in the apostolates of the Church. Likewise, Catholic schools and universities should help develop an outlook in which students desire to assist the Church and their neighbors. Lay groups and associations pick up on this call to train people in the apostolates, both with reference to their own work and for the whole Church.

D. Then section 31 turns to some specific fields of training with regard to promoting the faith, renewing the temporal realm, and engaging in charitable works..

1. The section emphasizes that the laity should learn to teach the faith and sanctify the world in the environments where they live. This training involves both a deep knowledge of their faith and the ability to live in a fashion that makes it attractive.

2. The section then calls for the laity engage in the renewal of the temporal both by developing their skills and by understanding the Church's social teachings and focusing on the rightful use of worldly goods. Since Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical Rerum Novarum, the Church has developed a rich treasure of teachings about the economic, political and social orders, which Gaudium et Spes largely summarizes. That treasury has been developed further with at least six encyclicals on social teachings by Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis.

3. The section also calls for the development of skills at charitable work and sympathy for others.

E. Section 32 promotes the increasing availability of such things as seminars, retreats, books, periodicals, and overall groups that promote the lay apostolate. And it calls for the laity to take advantage of these efforts.

X. Section 33 concludes the decree with an eloquent description of the fact that it is Jesus Christ Himself who is calling all sons and daughters of the Church to engage in active and faithful apostolates to carry on His mission in the world