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JOHN PAUL II



APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION  
*CHRISTIFIDELES LAICI*

12.30.1988



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### The Various Vocations in the Lay State

56. The Church's rich variety is manifested still further from within each state of life. Thus within the lay state diverse "vocations" are given, that is, there are different paths in the spiritual life and the apostolate which are taken by individual members of the lay faithful. In the field of a "commonly shared" lay vocation "special" lay vocations flourish. In this area we can also recall the spiritual experience of the flourishing of diverse forms of Secular Institutes that have developed recently in the Church. These offer the lay faithful, and even priests, the possibility of professing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience through vows or promises, while fully maintaining one's lay or clerical state<sup>1</sup>. In this regard the Synod Fathers have commented: "*The Holy Spirit stirs up other forms of selfgiving to which people who remain fully in the lay state devote themselves*"<sup>2</sup>. We can conclude by reading a beautiful passage taken from Saint Francis de Sales, who promoted lay spirituality so well<sup>3</sup>. In speaking of "devotion", that is, Christian perfection or "*life according to the Spirit*", he presents in a simple yet insightful way the vocation of all Christians to holiness while emphasizing the specific form with which individual Christians fulfil it: "*In creation God commanded the plants to bring forth their fruits, each one after its kind. So does he command all Christians, who are the living plants of his Church, to bring forth the fruits of devotion, each according to his character and vocation. Devotion must be*

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1. Cf. Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater* (2 February 1947): AAS 39 (1947), 114 124; CODE OF CANON LAW, Can. 573.

2. *Propositio 6*.

3. Cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Sabaudiae Gemma* (29 January 1967): AAS 59 (1967), 113123

*exercised in different ways by the gentleman, the workman, the servant, the prince, the widow, the maid and the married woman. Not only this, but the practice of devotion must also be adapted to the strength, the employment, and the duties of each one in particular... It is an error, or rather a heresy, to try to banish the devout life from the regiment of soldiers, the shop of the mechanic, the court of princes, or the home of married folk. It is true, Philothea, that a purely contemplative, monastic and religious devotion cannot be exercised in such ways of life. But besides these three kinds of devotion, there are several others adapted to bring to perfection those who live in the secular state”<sup>4</sup>.*

Along the same line the Second Vatican Council states: *“This lay spirituality should take its particular character from the circumstances of one’s state in life (married and family life, celibacy, widowhood), from one’s state of health and from one’s professional and social activity. All should not cease to develop earnestly the qualities and talents bestowed on them in accord with these conditions of life and should make use of the gifts which they have received from the Holy Spirit”<sup>5</sup>.*

What has been said about the spiritual vocation can also be said - and to a certain degree with greater reason - of the infinite number of ways through which all members of the Church are employed as labourers in the vineyard of the Lord, building up the Mystical Body of Christ. Indeed as a person with a truly unique life story, each is called by name, to make a special contribution to the coming of the Kingdom of God. No talent, no matter how small, is to be hidden or left unused (cf. Mt 25: 24-27).

In this regard the apostle Peter gives us a stern warning: *“As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace”* (1 Pt 4: 10).

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4. SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES, Introduction à la vie dévote, I, 111: Oeuvres complètes, Monastère de la Visitation, Annecy 1983, III, 1921.

5. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 4