

## The Laity since Vatican II

“Traumatized! The laity were traumatized and so were the clergy!”

This was the response I received to the question: What did the Second Vatican Council do to the laity? Some feel the trauma subsiding with a return to the “good ol’ days” of the Church. Others feel a new trauma setting in. Relief is not within reach. What do we do?

We must gather the facts and discern where the Spirit of God is calling us. October 21 marks the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) by “Good Pope John.” In the words of the Jesuit Church historian John O’Malley, the Council was the *largest meeting ever held in human history*. The Council was comprised of 2900 bishops, a working agenda, and the production of sixteen key documents. In the past, councils condemned heresies. This council was different; it was a *pastoral* council. The Church was poised to redefine itself and reflect on how it was going to relate to the modern world.

For the first time ever, the magisterium produced documents on the role of the laity in and outside the Church. By the term *laity*, we mean the non-ordained, the vast majority of the Church. A new consciousness emerged regarding the laity as subjects rather than objects of their own destiny. The language of Vatican II is even different, evoking the new consciousness, when it says: “all are called to holiness;” the all are to “collaborate and participate with their pastors in the mission of the Church;” the laity are no longer passive observers, but are called to “full, conscious, active participation” by virtue of baptism. Baptism implies commitment.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, highlights the role of the laity in paragraphs 30-38. For example, the mission of the Church belongs to the laity, not just to the clergy. The clergy must recognize the ministries and legitimate charisms of the laity. It is a common task that laity and clergy cooperate together in building the kingdom (Eph. 4:15-16) (LG 30, 32, 33, 37). The laity carry out the mission in the

secular world by engaging the world and illuminating it with Gospel values and command to love (LG 31, 32). The apostolate of the laity is to cooperate with the hierarchy (LG 33, 35). Evangelization is the *proclamation of Christ* in the secular milieu and ordinariness of daily living (LG 35). The laity have a right to all the sacraments and are duty-bound to express their opinions to their pastors (LG 37). The laity are to *eucharize* their experiences, offering them up, and trusting in transformation on the altar of the world (LG 31, 34).

The purpose of Vatican II was not to update or modernize the Church, but to announce the message of “Peace on earth and good will to all.” Shifting one’s gaze toward the God of Promise invites change. Change is always traumatic.

Robert Dueweke, OSA

September 28, 2012