

The Call of the Baptized: Be the Church, Live the Mission

By Paul Lakeland

Editor's Note: *Following is the transcript of Paul Lakeland's keynote address to the [Catholic Coalition for Church Reform's](#) September 18 [Synod of the Baptized: "Claiming Our Place at the Table."](#) It is reprinted with permission.*

In England tomorrow morning Pope Benedict will beatify the 19th century English cardinal and theologian, John Henry Newman. I think Newman could be a kind of patron for us here, even a forerunner. When asked by his fellow-clergy what the significance of the laity was, he replied: "We would look foolish without them." And though Pope Benedict certainly knows Newman's famous dictum that "to live is to change and to be perfect is to change often," I do wonder if he is aware that Newman described the papacy of his day, that of Pius IX, as "a climax of tyranny." The Holy See, he went on, was once "the court of ultimate appeal," not "the extreme centralization that it now is."

Isn't it reassuring that someone can say these things and still be beatified?

Pope John Paul II once said, while he was still Cardinal Archbishop of Krakow, that in his opinion the central insight of Vatican II was its insistence that the two priesthoods, ordained and baptismal, "differ essentially and not only in degree." Many people, including me, found that a curious claim. Surely it was the idea of the Church as the people of God, or the new focus on the collegiality of the bishops, or the "turn to the world," or a new spirit of religious toleration, but not the two priesthoods? But the more I have thought about this remark over the years, the more inclined I have been, if not entirely to agree with John Paul, at least to accept that he was right that this distinction was very important. Perhaps even critically important for the future of the Church, though not perhaps in the way he might have intended.

Let's think about this distinction for a minute. The baptismal priesthood or what is sometimes called the priesthood of all the faithful or the common priesthood was the only priesthood that Martin Luther recognized. That was

one reason among many others why it wasn't a big marketing item in the Counter-Reformation. In the centuries after the Council of Trent it often seemed as if what the other side said was by definition something to be rejected. Praying to the saints, devotion to the Virgin, the Real Presence and all those sacraments, well, Protestants had "Reformed" those out of their Churches! And as for the priority of faith over works, or the insistence on reading Scripture and a liturgy in a language the people could understand, well, Catholics knew that these things were not important at all, mainly because Protestants thought they were.

So if Luther rejected the ordained or ministerial or hierarchical priesthood (all ways in which it can be described) and focused on the baptismal priesthood, then the Catholics were going to do the opposite. Actually, they had been doing the opposite for a very long time, slowly but surely forgetting the significance of the whole priestly people. There were many steps in this process, and here are just a few: the division of the Catholic people into clergy and laity in canon law; the separation of clergy and laity through lifestyle by means of the formalization of the law of celibacy for priests; and the development of medieval "character theology," with its insistence on ordination conferring substantial ontological change upon the ordinand. So, as the 12th century theologian Gratian wrote, there are two classes of human beings, the clergy and religious in the one group and the laity in the other. As for the laity, he said that they had "no active part in the sphere of sacred things." Almost 700 years later similar if not worse comparisons were being made by no less a person than Pope Pius X. "The Church," he famously wrote, "is essentially an unequal society," composed of course of clergy and laity. "The duty of the multitude," wrote the Pope (thinking, of course, of the laity) "is to allow themselves to be led and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors."

In the light of this historical background, how refreshing (indeed, how amazing) to hear the Council fathers little more than 50 years after the Pope's pronouncement, declaring that the two priesthoods "are none the less ordered one to another," and that "each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ." The remarkable theological turnaround recorded in this passage, however, does not of itself explain how the two priesthoods are related to one another. But one conclusion is unavoidable, namely, that ordained priesthood is not a promotion within the ranks of the faithful, but an additional responsibility. In other words, it is not "more," it is "different." If it were a distinction of degree, then the ordained priest would be more a priest than the baptized Christian and baptism would only confer a limited

kind of priestly status. But in fact, ordained priesthood is something else added on. The ordained priest is one of the faithful, not someone set above them. The ordained, in other words, are priestly twice over and each in slightly different ways, not more priestly than the non-ordained. The great theologian of Vatican II, Yves Congar, put this well when he said:

A priest, a bishop, a pope is first of all a layman. He has to be baptized, to become a Christian, to offer his life as a spiritual sacrifice, to receive communion, to do penance, to be blessed, to work out his salvation. It is impossible to separate his personal religious life, that of layman, and the religious life of his office, that of the priest or of bishop.

As we think about the implications of this distinction for the role of the laity in the future of the Church, it is critical to realize that it is baptism and not ordination that constitutes entry into mission. To some degree this truth has been obscured by the Catholic practice of infant baptism and the slow but steady decline in the meaning of confirmation. Baptism has become simply a rite of initiation, and confirmation sometimes seems not to be much more than a signal that Sunday school is no longer a requirement and, indeed, Sunday Mass has become a personal lifestyle choice. Baptism and confirmation, however, are the two parts of initiation into a missioned community. In baptism the Christian is not so much rewarded with new advantages as s/he is charged with new responsibilities.

One of the many ironies of the post-conciliar Church is that this insight about the centrality of baptism and its critical relation to a missionary Church is in large part lost on the non-ordained. How many Catholics, do you imagine, would point to the baptismal priesthood as a signifier of true Catholicity, rather than, say, the papacy or devotion to the Virgin? A major reason for this failure to appreciate the message of the Council has surely been the failure to preach the message of the Council. We need not assign any conspiratorial theories to explain the fact, but a fact it remains that the preaching of the Word, when it touches on ecclesiology, tends to preach the preconciliar Church. When did you hear a homily on the collegiality of the bishops or the theological completeness of the local Church or on the responsibilities of lay people to speak up when serious issues arise? How often have you heard pastors speak of the universality of the offer of salvation, and how those of other faiths and none find their way to God in and through their own traditions and the deepest impulses of their own hearts? When did you last hear a homily on the way in which the whole

faithful people's Spirit-filled intuition shares in the gift of infallibility? How often are we challenged to explore the implications of our apostolicity, a gift of baptism?

In the rest of what I have to say to you here today it's very important to keep in mind the unity of the baptismal priesthood. "Laity" and "clergy" are not, to my mind, happy terms and they certainly have acquired exclusive connotations that do not help us to think about the unity of the Church. My own preference is to distinguish the ordained and the non-ordained under the Pauline heading, "a variety of gifts but one Spirit." (Excursus on negative terms for the laity.) Almost everything we can say about the important roles the non-ordained must play in the Church today applies equally well to the ordained. And first and foremost among these responsibilities is that of stressing the unity of the faithful, all of us priestly, prophetic and "royal," all of us charged with an apostolic mission through the sacrament of baptism. In an ideal world, the non-ordained will exercise a ministry of unity, carrying along with them the ordained into a new ecclesial future in which the stress is on our many gifts shared for the good of the Church and the world, and not on ranks, differences, or who is in charge.

All that having been said, what does it mean for those of who possess the baptismal priesthood to be described as priestly, prophetic and "kingly"? A theological analysis, the details of which I am going to spare you, would stress the priestly role as one of bringing God and God's creation into contact with one another, so that the love of God flows into the world and the cares of the world are brought before God. Evidently, it is in the Eucharist that this primarily occurs in the Church, and for this reason if for no other it is supremely important to emphasize that the Eucharist is the work of the whole Church, not the work of the presiding minister alone. The priest presides, but the whole people celebrate. The prophetic role is that of apostolic witness, teaching the world through showing the world that God loves and wills to bring the entire created order into conformity with the divine will. This too is not exhausted by the work of the ordained, though the bishops are charged with leading the way in explicit teaching. As we all know, good teaching is best provided through witness rather than lectures, in works rather than words, and the effectiveness of episcopal teaching is dependent on the faithful witness of the whole people. (Here, by the way, arises the tricky and sensitive question of what is going on when the faithful witness of the whole Church and the explicit teaching of the bishops are not in full agreement with one another.) Sometimes we have to be prophetic inside our own Church. Finally, to be royal or "kingly" is rightly related to the

function of service. A kingly people serves the world, as a good king serves his people. All the baptized serve the world, though on the whole the ordained serve less directly, serving directly the whole priestly people who in their turn directly serve the world for the sake of the gospel.

I hope you will have noticed that I did not make a sharp distinction between the ordained and non-ordained, relative to mission. While the former serve the mission of the Church more indirectly, and the latter are more directly involved, it is a difference of degree. All the ordained are also possessors of the baptismal priesthood and members of secular society, who may from time to time and in different ways be more or less involved in the world. And we would not be here today if we did not think that at times it is important for the non-ordained to turn their attention to the state of the Church itself. But I want to insist that we "laity" are concerned for the Church above all because without a healthy Church we cannot be effective ministers to the world. When Vatican II told us that it was our right and responsibility to speak up for the good of the Church, it was not a license to meddle but the recognition that we are owed leadership that supports a mission-oriented faith-community, not one that undermines it, and sometimes—in all humility—we have to call that leadership to account.

It may surprise you to hear me now say, after all this talk about mission, apostolicity and so on, that it is not our job to convert the world to Christ. Here, I believe, is where we have to part company with so many of our evangelical brothers and sisters, and for good reasons that grow right out of solid Catholic theology. Our mission is to aid in God's will to be all in all, not to convert people to become Christians or Catholics. Those who become Christians or Catholics will do so because they want to share in the mission to aid in God's will to be all in all, to bring creation back to God, which is the responsibility they will acquire when they ask for and receive baptism. Our missionary role as Catholics is to be signs, to be the sacrament of the grace of God in the world. We are not the grace of God, though we share in it. And it is not only present in the Church, but also in the world, because the Spirit of God is greater than the Church. The great Yves Congar wrote so well about this when he said that "final salvation will be achieved by a wonderful re-floating of our earthly vessel rather than by a transfer of the survivors to another ship wholly built by God."

The mission of the Church, in which the non-ordained are in the front ranks, is to further the reign of God. But the reign of God is not the Church. In so far as the reign of God is present in history, it is present wherever grace is

present, in the Church and, yes, in the world. We further the reign of God in history whenever we practice the love that does justice. We the Church, individually and collectively, are called to be the living sign of the love that God has for the world, and that God has poured out on the world in and through Jesus Christ. When we live our lives in the world as exercises in the love that does justice, we are fulfilling our baptismal mission. When we are a community of faith that evidently practices the love that does justice within the community, then we are the more credible when we put this love that does justice into practice in the secular world.

But here, of course, is the problem. What do we do as individuals when our community of faith is failing in some serious way to show the love that does justice, internally and externally? Of course we continue to practice the love that does justice in our everyday lives, but we also have to find the energy to turn inwards to address what is our right and our responsibility, the good of the community of faith. Our need to do this is not church-idolatry. It is the simple realization that when the community as community fails to live in the love that does justice, then its sacramental value is obscured, and our individual efforts are just so much more of an uphill struggle. When we call for reform in the Church we are simply asking that the structures support our apostolic mission to practice the love that does justice.

The Church is there to strengthen us in faith, and when the Church makes faith harder, when hope is dimmed because of the Church, then we need to recall the hard words of Jesus in chapter nine of Mark's gospel, "if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck." Our faith and our hope are in God, not in the Church. The Church is God's instrument and at the same time a weak and sinful human community. We all of us, ordained and non-ordained alike, are responsible for the state of our Church. We "laity" cannot just blame our leaders and exonerate ourselves, but when we see our Church in need of deferred maintenance, we also cannot sit back and wait for our leaders to act.

Identifying the fundamental problems in today's Catholic Church is not an easy task, though it is a critical one. Of course we can quite easily come up with a list of things that we may feel need to be addressed. You all know pretty much what that list would include, and you can find those problems discussed in any of my more recent books: the place of women in the Church, clericalism, human rights in the Church, and so on. If you have followed my argument so far, you will not be surprised to hear that in my

view it is not this issue or that on which we should focus, but rather on the need for the structures of our Church to support our faith, to strengthen us in our capacity to practice the love that does justice, to rekindle our missionary enthusiasm for the fate of the earth. Whether we are concerned for the roles of women in the Church, or our inclusiveness with the respect to the Catholic LGBTQ population, or our openness to the divorced and remarried, we have to challenge our leaders to explain and defend their often negative and unwelcoming positions. We cannot let them start talking about how the Eucharist or priesthood or marriage is not a right. Show us, we must say, how exclusion aids the community of faith to be the sacrament of the love of God in and for the world. I have yet to hear any opponent of women priests take up this challenge and, frankly, I do not think it can be done. I cannot see them making a better case for calling gays and lesbians "disordered." The same litmus test needs to be applied to all the issues that divide our Church, and the same question has to be asked about the structures of the Church itself. Take the way in which almost everyone in the faith community is entirely excluded from any voice at all in the selection of bishops, and the entire local community has no say whatsoever in who might be its next pastor. How does this help us to be the sacrament of the love of God in and for the world? If these essentially structural rather than theological issues cannot be shown to be integral to maintaining the Church as strength and support for the apostolic mission of all the baptized, then while they are not thereby necessarily wrong, they are certainly not beyond being changed. When things are not going too well, moreover, the burden of proof is upon those who would keep the creaking structures intact.

If we pay close attention to our national or even our local Church, which is certainly where we can have the most impact, I think it is helpful for us to reflect on the not altogether alarming possibility that our Church has entered hospice care. This startling thought, with which I first became acquainted in an address that Fr. Bryan Massingale gave to the priests of the Milwaukee archdiocese, suggests that the structures of the Church as we have known it are dying. Like the loved one in hospice care, it is coming to the end of a long, fruitful and loving life spent in the service of God. Its accomplishments should be cherished and celebrated, in the knowledge that God is about to wonderfully change them into some new life. After death comes resurrection, in the Christian view of things. But as Christians we also know that it is God who brings the new life and that it will be wonderfully changed from the old life while being its culmination and fruition.

Whenever a loved one is dying, the temptations to denial and despair are

always present, and this is no less true when the patient is the American Catholic Church as we have known it. In my view, this is what is going on in the conservative or traditional temperament, whether among the baptized in general or in the ranks of the hierarchy. They love the Church, just as more progressive Christians do. But they love it in denial of the life of the Spirit, which will persist beyond the death of the present form, so they cling to the details of the Church the way it has been. But be warned, the liberals have their own form of this problem. If traditionalists are in denial, liberals can be tempted to despair. Like the traditionalists, liberals too can fail to put enough trust in the Spirit, in this case in the power of the Spirit to overcome the entropy of traditionalism. For both groups, hope in the power of the Spirit to lead us into the future is sometimes lacking.

Looking to the future, on the other hand, is not a matter of waiting for the Spirit to act, but of acting prayerfully with trust in the guidance of the Spirit. As the great Lutheran theologian Dorothee Soelle wrote, "the only eyes God has are our eyes, the only hands God has are our hands." So with this in mind, let's think about some of the resources in our American Catholic experience upon which we can draw in working towards a healthier future, and end with some specific challenges which stand between us and that healthier future. I do not need to remind you of the advice of St. Augustine, "Pray as if everything depends on God but act as if everything depends on you"?

In my most recent book I have made an effort to identify some themes for reflection on the challenges for today's Church that emerge from the American experience. I have done this not because I believe that the American story is somehow privileged or particularly valuable to the world Church, but rather because the world Church is a tapestry of local churches, and each has something to contribute to the beauty and complexity of Catholicism. This "inductive" or "grassroots upwards" approach to theology in general and ecclesiology, or the theology of the church, in particular is a conscious effort on my part to correct the excessively centralized and top-down or "deductive" method that has dominated the Catholic Church for several centuries. So let me say something briefly about the three images of pilgrim, immigrant and pioneer. You will see immediately, I hope, that what all three have in common is the sense of adventure into new and sometimes alien territory. In other words, they relate directly to our Church's mission to the secular world, the particular responsibility of the baptismal priesthood.

Employed inductively, the model of the Church as pilgrim is appealing

because it grows out of the history and culture of America and helps explain so much. The pilgrims who arrived at Plymouth Rock were on an adventure, escaping from a more restrictive religious and political reality into a new world in which they would be free to worship and organize themselves according to their own convictions. Or so they thought. Survival in the new reality, for the pilgrims as for all others in similar situations, depended upon their adaptability. Without abandoning the distinctive way of life that they had traveled here in order to preserve, their prosperity and security required that they find within themselves untapped and perhaps unsuspected reserves of flexibility and creativity, to go with the courage and faithfulness that was already well-established.

Courage, faithfulness, flexibility and adaptability in a new world in which not everyone shares your religious beliefs or your political convictions and in which some would likely welcome your disappearance and do not want to hear your opinions. Does this sound familiar? Isn't this in fact a pretty good description of where the American Catholic Church stands today? Like the pilgrims of old we have a venerable and honored tradition that helps protect our continuing identity. But our future requires us to find all kinds of resources within the tradition to transform ourselves into a community that will thrive in a pluralistic and constantly changing environment. We need to be able to speak with authority when ethical values are challenged or misunderstood, we need to find ways to maintain a vibrant religious identity at a time when institutional commitment is not a high value even among those who consider themselves Catholic, and we need to be so comfortable in an environment of a pluralistic and at times secular democracy that we can admit elements of that democracy into our own ways of governing ourselves as a community of faith.

The idea of the immigrant suggests a way of being Church that is truly American while no less Catholic and Christian. American Catholics—perhaps all people with strong religious identities could say the same—have to be bicultural. We have to be equally at home with our Christian religious identity and our sense of ourselves as American. Today, because in our recent past Catholics were so desperate to be accounted true Americans, this may mean to reappropriate our Catholic identity as a strong challenge to some distortions of our society without abandoning anything truly valuable in American culture. Here perhaps is an internal problem for American Catholicism, that the people and the institution are in different places vis-à-vis the culture in which they have made their home and to which they owe allegiance. The internal challenge of the Church today is in large measure a

matter of Catholics who are thoroughly and healthily American trying to deal with an institution that is modeled upon very different assumptions, drawn not from the Bible but from human cultural and political preferences for imperialism, benevolent despotism and paternalistic patterns of governance.

In the end, the immigrant model of Church reminds us of the provisionality of much of the baggage we carry as an historical institution. Like any immigrant we possess ideas, habits and practices that have their origins in times long past but that we tend naturally to assume are fixtures of what a human being or a human society must be. And then we meet another culture, one in which we are going to have to find a way to be at home, in which cultural expectations are not at all the same. Moreover, to be the immigrant Church is to be "always immigrant," living constantly with the sense of provisionality and flexibility, always ready for a new turn in the road along which we will always be the People of God, always called to spread the good news, but by no means always called to do it in the same way. We will probably always carry with us some at least of the marks of our origins, and our genetic make-up will indicate our continuity with the Catholics of the fourteenth century and the fourth. But as successful immigrants we simply cannot always be looking back over our shoulder for reassurance. The Holy Spirit that guided the Church in the fourth and fourteenth centuries is no longer in those past times, but in this present time, coaxing and guiding us towards the next bend in the road.

Of all the images that resonate with Americans, the mythic power of that of the pioneer must be the strongest. The Conestoga wagons heading west, forging a new life in a new Eden, is an image that is instantly recognizable to almost everyone. The people in these wagons travel lightly and travel in hope, not sure what their exact destination will be but knowing that they plan to settle somewhere in the setting sun. They have left the relative familiarity of the land "back east" to head into an uncertain future, filled with hope and not a little fear. They know that the people and the places they have left behind they will probably never see again. As pioneers they are building a new life for themselves, and they are fashioning a new country for their children and their children's children, even though many of them will die before they see it come to fruition. The pioneer is adventurous, determined, courageous, resourceful and—if not entirely foolish—aware that success depends more upon the grace of God than it does upon sheer good fortune or unaided human energies.

The image of pioneer adds to our images of hospice, immigrant and pilgrim

a note of more protracted fortitude in the face of the elements, natural or of human origin, and a welcome call for humility in the face of our encounter with the new. The future is always almost with us, and even though we cannot anticipate it we have to be on our toes and ready to deal with it. The pioneer Church will have gritty resolve and joyful hope in equal measure. Its success will depend on being able to distinguish between what it needs for the journey and what it would be wise to leave behind, and what it can take along in the knowledge that it may need to jettison it along the way. The pioneer image calls on us to think about what we do and do not need to cling onto. The heavily-loaded wagon may be more comfortable in the short term but isn't likely to make it over the next mountain pass or through the next swamp. Just as the Church as pioneer is always on the way, so it is also always about to begin the next stage of its journey, always needing to ask itself what to discard and what to pack, in the knowledge that it will never return to this precise spot again, unless of course the journey is abandoned. The pioneer Church which abandons the journey is eternally fixed in the past, and the past moment in which it is stuck is not the living point in history that it once was but a kind of wax effigy in which no blood flows.

As I draw this talk towards a conclusion, I want to be both practical and optimistic about the future of our Church. The work lies in all our hands, ordained and non-ordained alike, though the work is differently structured for the two groups. Church leaders need our help to see that what we need from them is leadership that nurtures Gospel faith and strengthens us for our role in the vanguard of the Church's mission. What Church leaders need from us, though some of them may not realize it, is adult and accountable Christian witness in the world, licensed by our baptism and confirmation. The apostolic witness of Christians does not flow from Church authority but from the sacrament of baptism. So let me end by briefly discussing three developments that would materially affect our community of faith for the better, and thus that we ought to be demanding of our ordained leaders, three things that would make it much easier for us to be the Church and live the mission.

The first is a two-way structure of communication and accountability in the Church. So many of the hot-button issues that bedevil life in our faith-communities today are, if not false problems, bigger problems than they need be because there is nowhere, no place where ordained and non-ordained alike, bishops, priests and people, can hear one another. Or, perhaps more importantly, listen to one another. Our Church today is top-down and centralized in teaching and authority in a way that it never was for

the greater part of the Church's history. However, the over-centralization that is only possible by ignoring large parts of the teaching of Vatican II and that even hog-ties bishops, let alone us, has occurred at just the time at which non-ordained Christians in large parts of the world have become accustomed to participatory democracy in secular society and do not see why benevolent despotism must be the way of the Church. Some will tell you that these are only issues for the decadent Church of the north, of North America and Europe, and that the future lies with the Church south of the equator. That may be true, but I would caution against the racism that assumes that developing peoples have less taste for democracy or are less likely to find their way to participation in the shaping of their own societies.

There is a structure in canon law which is set up precisely for the purpose of speaking and listening to one another, and that is the diocesan synod. I imagine that most of you here would have preferred a diocesan synod to a "synod of the baptized." Canon law places responsibility for calling a synod in the hands of the bishop, which is probably where it should be, and lays down fairly clear rules for significant lay representation. But because it is the bishop's judgment when a synod is needed, they occur relatively infrequently. And yet it seems to me, at least, that the situation we find ourselves in the Catholic Church today is just the sort of set of challenges that the synodal structure exists to address. As canon law envisages it, of course, the synod is consultative rather than deliberative, but its proper use would go a long way towards assuring that "decent consultation hierarchy" that the Yale professor Bruce Russett called for some eight years ago. The chasm between bishops and rank and file in the Church today is not so much about the vote as it is about voice. Just as we have the right and responsibility to speak out for the good of the Church, so Church leaders have a responsibility to listen to all the people, liberal and conservative alike.

The second thing we need from our Church is good liturgy that is evidently the work of the whole Church, centered upon the Eucharist which "makes the Church." In order to be able to be the Church and pursue the mission, this is a demand that we have the right and responsibility to make of the ministerial priesthood. The implications of this for Church order are considerable. The ordained ministry exists above all to meet two priority needs for the faithful; to preside over good liturgy and to offer expert and compassionate pastoral care. On this point I applaud Pope Benedict's new focus on the importance of liturgy, though not the particular directions in which he is taking it. The impending changes in liturgical language and the

growing practice of celebrating mass with back to the people (or the so-called "facing east") are signs, in different ways, of failing to stand with that principle of the Vatican II liturgical reforms, "the Mass is the work of the whole people." The priest presides, the community celebrates. It is more important that the language be clear to the community than that it be closer to the original Latin (Latin wasn't the original language in any case) and it is more important for the body language of liturgy to represent the Eucharist as a communal meal than as a private sacrifice. Decorum and even solemnity is perfectly possible with the priest facing the people.

But the third, for the now the final, and the most important requirement we have of our Church is that its ordained members attend to the spiritual welfare of the people and, if I may exaggerate just a little, leave the mission of the Church to the world in the hands of us, the experts. The grace of God is at work in wonderful ways within our Church, even at the worst of times. The Eucharist is always the Eucharist, and it can always nourish us. But the grace of God is also wonderfully at work in the world, though in a different way. God's grace in the world finds its way through the trials, struggles and complexities of living in today's very difficult world, through what the great theologian Karl Rahner called the "concupiscence" of the world. The Church as Church is not directly involved in and cannot control the ways in which God's grace works beyond the boundaries of the Christian community. Individual members of the baptismal priesthood, particularly the non-ordained, are of course called to be agents of the love of God in the world precisely because they live in the world and in the Church. We are both religious and secular. If we live as good Christians in solidarity with our fellow human beings in the secular world, then we are certainly pursuing the mission and being the Church.

The role of the Church as Church is not to interfere in the world, but to live as a shining example, a sacrament if you wish, of a community that practices the love that does justice. To be more concrete, it is far more important for the Church to practice justice within the Church than to proclaim the need for justice in the world. It is much more important to be a community in which all have their appropriate voice than it is to be inserting the Church as Church into the political process. It is inestimably more valuable that as a community we reach out in solidarity to victims, to the poor and oppressed, than it is that we lobby for our priorities with local and national governments or put pressure on politicians, Catholic or not, to conform to our priorities. Of course we believe that our vision of things is as right as a sinful people can be, but the means by which we promote a

Christian vision in the world should be in the shining example we set, not some misguided crusade for values in a world which can learn only from example, not from proclamations or political pressure.

While the Church at its more foundational levels, especially in the well-run parish, largely operates with just such a vision of the Church, higher levels of leadership often do not. I do not lay the blame on bishops or clergy, but on a slow drift into thinking of the Church as what James Alison has called a "system of goodness," charged somehow to persuade the world of the truth of the Church's vision. In today's intensely pluralistic and secular world, persuasion—if it happens—will come by way of example, not precept. At the present time it is not happening, at least not north of the Equator, and discouragement is not hard to explain. It is almost as if we cannot face the prospect that the shape of the Church is changing, perhaps radically, and we allow ourselves to slip into denial. Respect for teaching authority dissipates as credibility wanes, both respect from the wider world that could benefit so much from the wisdom of the Christian tradition, and, sadly, respect within the ranks of faithful Catholics. The role of the Church is to nourish the faith of its members, not to impede their Spirit-empowered apostolicity. And if this sounds a bit much or too high-falutin' altogether, then let us finally put it simply in words perhaps more suitable for a homily. The Church is a school of love. The role of the institution vis-à-vis baptized Catholics is to let them loose to love, not to bind them with rules about who or how to love. The future health of our Church depends upon recovering that sense of itself. It is a matter of choosing the way of Jesus over the ways of Microsoft, Wall St. or the Ford Motor Company. It is a matter of trusting in the spirit, being faithful to our baptismal call, being the Church and living the mission.

Let me end with a powerful New Testament story, that of the Syro-Phoenician woman recorded in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 7:24-30, see also Mt 15:21-28). This woman, a pagan, asks Jesus to heal her daughter and is rebuffed with the seemingly harsh retort, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," with Jesus stressing that his mission is to Israel. But the woman persists: "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." While most homilists focus on the woman's faith, some notice that in this passage Jesus is corrected and taught something of how to understand the limits of his mission, by a pagan woman no less! If Jesus can listen to and learn from a pagan woman, surely we should not give up hope in the capacity of our leaders in the faith to open themselves to the wisdom of all the baptized. Be the Church! Live the mission!

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