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The Physician and Vatican II

Angelo Ferrara, M.D.

INTRODUCTION

In the light of Vatican II, we have come to hear and recognize many of the "in" words such as *assiornamento*, dialogue, commitment, emerging laymen, etc. On Nov. 19, 1965, after more than a year's deliberation and discussion, a group of learned men gave a final vote of approval on a most important document. This was the "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity." Of the 16 formalized declarations and decrees of Vatican II, at least 4 of them have outlined more precisely our role in the Church.

For instance, in "The Constitution of the Church, *De Ecclesia*," which is the great charter of the Vatican Council, the layman at last acquires a personality. The role of the layman, becomes soundly based here on firm theological foundation. We see the end of a cleavage between clergy and laity that has been the source of so much confusion and so many misdirected efforts in the past. Then if we stop to consider the "Declaration on Religious Liberty" and the "Constitution of the Church in the Modern World", we notice that these proclamations are a full recognition of the lay nature of the present society. We also find that

the Church does not cease to teach with authority but she now enters into a dialogue with mankind, she outlines a theology of earthly realities, and she ascribes to lay people the specific and proper task of the christian witness in the secular world while remaining it.

LAYMEN IN THE CHURCH

Our immediate reaction on this redefinition of the laymen may be "Well, how does this affect me?" Let's progress a bit further. We are all laymen in the Church. (*The Church is a continuing expression of God's feeling towards the world into which He entered through Jesus Christ.*) The Church really exists for the world and we are a part of both. We are citizens of both the Church and the world and as such we bridge the two. In comparison, the priest stands between God and man, the layman between the Church and the world.

Pope Pius XII elaborated quite precisely on the layman: "The faithful, and most appropriately, the layman, are found in the front lines in the life of the Church; through them the Church is the vital principle in human society. For this reason, they especially should have a concept more

and more clear, not only of belonging to the Church, but of constituting the Church itself...they are the Church."

If we have pinpointed our position, what is our posture in the Church, in the world? What is our mission? The Church's mission in the temporal order includes two things: the enunciation of christian principles which must govern man and the implementation of these principles to concrete issues and problems of life. The first work is done by the teaching Church, the magisterium. This is what the Popes have been so tireless in doing with their encyclicals. This is what the Bishops are doing in their statements and pastoral letter to their people. The other work, the application of these principles to concrete situations and issues is the MISSION of the christian layman. Who but he can bring the teachings of the Church from the pages of an encyclical to his home life, or to the hospital, or to the golf course? Here is where he lives, works, and recreates and therein does the work of the Church. Kraemer in his "Theology of the Laity"¹ states this concept in a similar manner: "But if the laity of the Church dispersed in and through the world, are really what they are called to be, the real *uninterrupted* dialogue between Church and world happens through them. They form the *daily* repeated projection of the Church into the world. They embody the meeting of the Church and world."

I carefully underscored the words "uninterrupted" and "daily" from Kraemer's remark. Many of us never saw our role in the Church as such an ongoing process. It's a daily living with a continuing spiritual growth. True

Kraemer, Hendrik: *Theology and the Laity*. Westminster Press, p. 170, 1958.

Christianity cannot be compartmentalized to Sunday. It must be perennial to experience the Christian joy spoken about of those in the early Church. For most of us "cradle Christians", this new attitude of a layman doesn't come easily. It almost requires a "shot" of spiritual adrenalin, a rebirth of a modern day Pentecostal experience. Today there are many instruments of Christian renewal in the Church. Some of these are movements like the Cursillo or the Better World Movement. Others are modern approaches to retreats or discussion clubs (such as the Christian Family Movement) where spiritual principles form the pivot in a group dynamic setting.

EXPERIENCE AT SAINT VINCENT'S HOSPITAL

About 2 years ago, following a retreat weekend experience, a group of us at Saint Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, started a bi-monthly group meeting. The format was simple. We started with scriptural reading followed by commentaries, then pre-assigned topics were discussed. They were varied and included "Male and Female Image in Our Society", "World Population", "Liberalization of the Abortion Laws", "Working Mothers", "Keeping Silent in Face of Controversy", "Birth Control", and many other areas of possible interest. The meetings were opened to all and the physicians, nurses, nuns, and student nurses who participated invariably profited.

Within a short time, our small group became more enthused and we gathered hospital personnel to join us in different liturgical experiences such

as the Pascal meals and the Eastern Rite services held in our chapel.

One of the highlights of success was our Interfaith Workshop involving our community brethren. In a three week series and with the help of 9 clergymen of different faiths, we conducted panel discussions followed by group participants and ending in general comment by the audience. The panel topics included, "Views on Ecumenism", "God in the World Today", and "Man's Conscience in the Secular World". The overall reaction on a community level was an excellent one. I must say that in the least we did create brotherhood and fellowship if not a sense of building a community. Our good nuns, the Sisters of Charity, responded in a great way not only in their own "house" but also in the neighborhood churches.

In all of these endeavors, we are not trying to create an IMAGE OF ACTIVISM (all action without depth) but rather to learn from these invaluable expressions and to grow more sensitive in a christian way to the needs of others, be they superiors, peers, or workers. Remember, we as physicians have been blessed with more than one "talent" but unless we use these "talents" well in respect to our families, our fellow-man, and our patients, then as christians we have failed. Think of it.

CONCLUSION

Choose what means you see fit but become a true Christian in the light of Vatican II. If you have time for a

medical convention, you also have time to become spiritually updated and thus influence your total environment, be it your home, your hospital, your office, or your leisure areas. You'll see changes in your attitude toward home life. Bonds of marriage will grow firmer. You'll be giving your children spiritual values. (They are always showered materially in this affluent society.) In your medical profession, you'll deal ethically and live by your moral convictions, even in the face of controversy. Your indigent population will be looked upon with christian dignity and will be given time and patience with your professional competence. Your ecumenical spirit will overflow.

St. Paul said to the christians at Corinth: "And I brethren could not speak to you as to spiritual men but only as carnal, as to little ones in Christ. I fed you with milk, not with solid food, for you were not yet ready for it." At one time it was rather generally taken for granted that Christians were expected to remain in a state of childhood as far as their lives in the church were concerned. Laymen were thought to be incapable of mental prayer, of solid religious education on the adult level, of assuming responsibility in the work of the Church, of acting on their own. They were fed with milk and not solid food. This does not exist anymore. Even though some of us do not see it, the layman has come of age. As more and more of us grow to full stature as Christians, not only we but the whole Church will gain immeasurably.