

The Formation of the Ghanaian Catholic Laity as Agents of the New Evangelization

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“The Church’s mission is concerned with the salvation of men; and men win salvation through the grace of Christ and faith in him. The apostolate of the Church therefore, and of each of its members, aims primarily at announcing to the world by word and action the message of Christ and communicating to it the grace of Christ... Laymen have countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very witness of a Christian life, and good works done in a supernatural spirit, are effective in drawing men to the faith and to God... This witness of life, however, is not the sole element in the apostolate; the true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers to draw them towards the faith, or to the faithful to instruct them, strengthen them, incite them to a more fervent life...” The Church is missionary by her very nature, and evangelization is the duty of every Christian. Yet we need agents to be at the forefront in championing this cause. There is not only the need to evangelize but also to evangelize newly or re-evangelize. “Laymen (and women) have countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification...”¹

Introduction

The Seventh General Assembly of the Ordinary Synod of Bishops², commonly known as the Synod on the Laity³, was held in Rome from 1st October to 30th October 1987. Since this Synod the Church has paid more attention to the vocation of the laity especially in the mission of salvation for all. Following the aforementioned, in December, 1988 *Christifideles Laici* – an Apostolic Exhortation was signed by Pope John Paul II. He declared this as a fruit of the Synod process and “a faithful and coherent expression of it,⁴” having explicitly quoted about forty-five out of the fifty-four of the Synod’s final propositions. As the most important papal statement on the laity since the Second Vatican Council, this document has occasioned considerable publicity, aroused immense interest, inspired so much passion, and generated numerous treatises and comments from both experts and practitioners.

State of the Question

Particularly since Vatican II, the Church has called for a renewal in the life and role of the laity. This makes our topic all the more imperative. Yet many Catholic faithful do not have a firm understanding of the lay vocation and its role in the Church’s mission. For many, and especially in Ghana, there is a notion that the only real vocation in the Church is the ordained or vowed priesthood and religious. They believe ‘the Church’ is the ordained office and only people in habits, clerical collars or cassocks are called to serve. Apparently, many think that the role of the laity is to just help out around the parish, or “simply pay, pray and obey”.

It must, however, be noted that lay people have a distinct and very important role to play in the spreading of the Gospel. This role is needed most in our present times, where there are many distortions of the Christian message.

By “laity” the Church means the following:

“All the faithful, except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church. That is, the faithful, who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ and integrated into the People of God, are

¹Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, 6. VATICAN II 18 November 1965.

²The institution of the Synod of Bishops was created by Pope Paul VI in 1965 aiming at addressing issues that are *pastoral* in character, *urgent*, and of importance for the *universal* Church. The word “Synod” means “a journey together.” This Ordinary Synod differs from the Extraordinary Synods held in 1969 and 1985 in that they have more participants, have fuller agenda and take place over a longer period.

³Addressing the Italian Episcopal Conference in May 1985 John Paul II recalled the importance that Vatican II had placed on the laity’s contribution to the mission of the Church in the world and gave two reasons for choosing the vocation and the mission of the laity as the topic of the 1987 Ordinary Synod of Bishops, the first being “the increased awareness of the role that the laity play in the work of salvation,” and the second relating to the need to respond to the suggestion of many bishops throughout the world. See John Paul II, “[Address to the Italian Episcopal Conference:] Propose Suitable Pastoral Lines in the Light of Loreto Discourse,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (30 September 1985) 9.

⁴*Christifideles Laici*, no. 2.

made sharers in their particular way in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ, and have their own part to play in the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the World.” CCC, 897.

“[The laity] are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. They are consecrated for the royal priesthood and the holy people not only that they may offer spiritual sacrifices in everything they do, but also that they may witness to Christ throughout the world.”¹

Need to form the Laity

What must go into the formation of the laity as agents of the New Evangelization? *Redemptoris Missio* (33, 34) suggests that to know this, we must look at the prevailing situation because situations need to be addressed differently. Is it a situation where Christ and His Gospel are not known? Is it a situation where the Church is fervent in faith and carries out her activities and pastoral care? Or is it a situation where the baptized members have lost a living sense of their faith?

What do we see in Ghana today, as far as the religious spectrum is concerned? Proliferation of churches; distortions in the message of Christ; extortion of people in the name of Christ; loss of the faith especially among Catholics; the over reliance on social media by the youth and the new wave of preaching the ‘prosperity Gospel’; the practice of the Catholic youth attending the First Mass on Sundays so as to receive the holy Communion and thereafter rushing to other Churches to receive the “word”; etc. All these indications tell us that it is not enough to merely talk about the New Evangelization and end it there. We need to move beyond a mere talk and see with the eye of action and immediacy the importance of the formation of pastoral agents: the lay faithful.

The Christian family is a “church in miniature”, a “domestic church” (*Ecclesia domestica*) (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, no 49). This alone is enough to make us pay special attention to the family (lay faithful). It is in the family that the gospel is proclaimed first and where it takes its root.

Aurelie Hagstron, writing on the mission of the laity, points out that “the ordinary activities of life that make up the day of lay women and men find deep meaning and fulfillment through the grace of Baptism”². Evangelization, therefore, is the co-responsibility of clergy and laity together³.

THE CHALLENGE OF EVANGELIZATION TODAY IN OUR DIOCESE(S)

A cursory look at the Ghanaian religious spectrum reveals a proliferation of churches apart from the historic churches. Market places have been turned into sacred places; there is religion on wheels and vehicles have been turned into mobile sacred places of worship. However, recent statistics indicate that the growth in the number of Catholics in Ghana is not all too encouraging. To achieve better results, the formation of the lay faithful as agents is indispensable. The growing trends of an institutionalization and rationalization of corruption and the many social vices in civil society present yet a categorical imperative for the formation of the lay faithful in our dioceses today.

Many people today, it may sound surprising to hear, have not heard the authentic “Good News” because the Word that is preached in our world today is increasingly becoming secular and fake. Not quite long ago, our Ghanaian fabric of life was one of belongingness, oneness and the quest for the welfare of the other. Today, we witness a culture in which individualism, relativism and self-indulgence are prized, making it difficult to propose a lifestyle of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation in any kind of compelling way.

Avery Cardinal Dulles observed that, “In the absence of favorable influences from parents, leaders and the social environment, few persons will find their ways to strong personal faith.”⁴ These words underscore the importance of the role of the laity. For many Catholics (Ghanaian), an evangelizing identity is something new and an intimidating one. This is so, in part, because of the total reliance on, and the notion of priests and the religious as those that are entrusted with the mission of evangelization. However, the fullest expression of the prophetic charism of the laity is a laity capable of sharing faith in a way that is both natural and authentic.⁵

In the face of the climate of our contemporary culture, there is the need for articulate and authentic witnesses for the success of the New Evangelization. Pope Paul VI made an observation of our modern mindset: “People today put more trust in action than in theories“. Formation begins with participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Local Parishes are and should be made schools of formation for mission, especially for the laity. Our parishes are no exception. An overarching constituent of the state of our problem is that many parishes are not equipped to be schools of formation. The opportunity, therefore, for education and formation of adult Catholics is lacking. Hardly do we have education programs about the Church for the laity. We normally do not organize on-going formation for the lay faithful. Even when we do, the Church’s location is usually so distant

¹Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Pope Paul VI, November 18, 1965, (3).

² Aurelie Hagstron, *The Emerging Laity: Vocation, Mission and Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 2010), 68-69.

³ Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II, Vol., The Conciliar and Post conciliar Documents* (Eerdmans, 1975) *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, #1

⁴Avery Dulles, “Evangelizing Theology”, *First Things* (March 1996).

⁵ Addressed both in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, #28-32 and *Christifideles Laici*, #60...

from a greater number of our members, as a result of which many do not turn up.

THE (CALL FOR) ACTION IN THE FORMATION OF THE LAITY

In the 1987 Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, St. John Paul II writes that “a new state of affairs both in the Church and in the social, economic, political and cultural life calls with a particular urgency for action of the lay faithful”. (*Christifideles Laici*, #3). Donald Cardinal Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington echoes these words when he writes, “we are not baptized only for our own salvation. Incorporation into the body of Christ is not an action of personal piety. Rather, we are engaged in the new life of the Spirit so that working in and through us the spirit might transform the whole world”.¹

What must we do, and continue to do? In other words how should we form and continue to form?

The Church in Africa, especially in Ghana, cannot be immune to the challenges mentioned therein. The diocese of Sekondi-Takoradi, for instance, known across the world as a burgeoning oil industrial hub, is also witnessing and will witness more in a few years to come the ever present need to ground the laity in the Catholic faith. This is so because of the many persons that are and will be attracted to work and settle in our diocese. There will be different people with different backgrounds; mentality; sects; and religious backgrounds. The issue of interfaith and mixed marriages with their associated challenges will occur. These settlements present enormous opportunities as well as challenges. Pragmatic steps to lead out the transformation and formation of our laity and continuous formation must take place in the now and be given the needed support.

FORMATION OF THE LAITY AS AGENTS OF THE NEW EVANGELISATION

Mindful of the fact that in the Church there is diversity in ministry but oneness of mission, the laity is a pivotal part in the exercise of this ministry, playing a vital part of the salvation message. With reference to the Apostolic Exhortation (*Christifideles Laici*) of Pope John II, the formation of the Laity can be put in the following levels, at least, for the New Evangelization considering our needs today.

1. The spiritual formation of the Laity – their continual growth in communion with Christ is nourished by the help to holiness offered by the Church.
2. Doctrinal formation – which will enable them to explain to the world the reason for their hope. Systematic catechesis is also necessary.
3. A proper formation of social conscience, especially with the help of Catholic Social Teaching.
4. An integrated program of formation that cultivates the human values and skills necessary for the lay faithful’s apostolic activities.

The Spiritual Formation of the Laity

The Second Vatican Council provided some basic components for crafting the spirituality of the laity. The most basic and fundamental reality in any spirituality is union with Christ, which then, in turn flows into mission and in our case a mission called for by the New Evangelization in a variety of ways.

The first spiritual help common to the faithful is the word of God since it is an indispensable source of nourishment. A seeming passivity appears to have paved its way on the part of the laity toward the Word of God. There is no denying the fact that the Word acquires its fullest meaning in the Eucharist. Yet for many lay people, the readings at the Mass and other liturgical celebrations are enough. Apart from Mass, many Catholics in Ghana do not seem to have any other avenue to read and listen to the scriptures.

Those who decide to listen to Bible lessons from FM stations are bombarded with heresies and erroneous teachings. Many dioceses, fortunately, have Retreat Centres and Grottos that could serve as platforms in helping in the spiritual development of the lay faithful. Introduction to Scriptures and related topics could be organized for the laity at these centers. The idea is that, these leaders would in turn be of benefit to their communities.

Given the number of priests and parishes in our dioceses, one could say we have what it takes to make the lay faithful become conversant with the Word. We must, as a matter of urgency, make such opportunities available to the laity, who we know are hungry and searching for this alternative. Our failure to do so could lead to some members falling prey to the many voices that call today for “a pain-and-worry-free Christianity”. It is by appreciating and living the faith that the laity will be better positioned to step out in participating in the New Evangelization. This will convince them of the great need and participation in the mission of the New Evangelization.

A point of action worthy of note is the prayer and communal lives in our Catholic homes. We can observe that in many Christian homes that are not Catholic, there is a form of morning and evening devotion (so to speak). This can be encouraged in our Catholic homes to ground children firmly in the faith. Children, who understand their faith, are a great potential for well-informed laity for the future.

¹Donald Wuerl, “The Gift of Blessed John Paul II”, *The Word among us* (2011): 131.

2. Doctrinal Formation & the Formation of Social Conscience

A careful examination of the situation in Ghana today shows some weakening of the sense of sin which is accompanied by a proportional weakening of the sense of the Sacred and the holy. The greater the sense of the Sacred, the stronger the sense of Sin; and the vice versa is true. There is a growing tendency of rationalizing sin and evil. Occultism, atrocious and unethical or immoral attitudes are explained away. There is a growing tendency for Ghanaians to rationalize (water down) all their values – human, Christian (Catholic), priestly, religious – instead of reasoning! Reverence for the Sacred, which once marked our spirituality, is fast-fading away. For instance, how many Catholics, Priests or Religious, would genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament in Church today? How many go for confessions today? Where are our confessionals today? All because of the weakening sense of sin!

Superstition is becoming the order of the day and there is over emphasis on fatalism: what has been ordained cannot be undone. Africans, and by implication Ghanaians, these days look for spiritual causes for every unpleasant thing: sickness, failure in examination, retrogression in business, loss of elections, etc. There must always be a spiritual force or someone behind them. This has led to violence, witch-hunting and maltreatment of many innocent people. Syncretism is creeping into the camps of many Catholic families. Indifferentism is no exception.

We need lay men and women today, who are not only aware of the challenges of the present time but are also well equipped to deal with such threatening challenges.

The Church's doctrine, especially social doctrine, must be a part of the continuous formation of the laity and this can be established within lay ecclesial associations. This is precisely so because it is in these associations that people gather in the name of their Christian vocation due to their particular cultural and, or professional enterprise. An example can be made of the Catholic associations of doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc. In this way, the laity brings to the fore the Christian presence of service where the welfare of the human person and his human dignity are paramount. This formation, we know, cannot be achieved without the former (spiritual formation) because that will enable the individual to renew himself interiorly and have the conversion of self-abnegation that arouses the concern for others.

When both spiritual and doctrinal formations are well synthesized or synergized, interior conversion and at the same time the improvement of social structures are realized. Not so long ago in the USA, a Catholic refused to sign licenses for a homosexual union. In spite of the consequences she was likely to face, she stood by her decision of defending the doctrine on marriage and the family. The doctrinal formation will clearly be seen in the promotion and affirmation of the right to life from conception to natural death, the right to freedom of conscience, and the defense of marriage and the family, the fight against corruption etc.

3. An integrated program of formation that cultivates the human values and skills necessary for the lay faithful's apostolic activities.

The parish is a very fertile ground for formation programs because it is here that Parish Laity Council can be more effective in drawing programs and coordinating the formation activities of the various lay movements. It is also at the parish level that small Christian communities (a practice which could bring the faith closer to the faithful) could be instruments of the formation of the laity. Such programs of formation must go beyond the annual Laity Week and Catechetical Week celebrations.

An integrated program for formation will have its locus first of all in the family, where children and parents alike share and live the faith. Parents at this level should be encouraged to send their wards to Catholic schools where the chances of deepening their faith and of forming a good conscience are made readily accessible. We live in a country where the running of Church schools has virtually been taken over by the State. In some of these institutions, moral standards are on the decadence, academic performance is becoming poor, discipline and core values of the Church are becoming things of the past, and the Catholic character is gradually missing. Religious and Moral Education is not gaining the attention it deserves. Yet it is mostly in the education institutions that the youth receive their "manual of instruction". To change this unfortunate trend, Catholic schools cannot continue to be only catholic by name but in the structure and teaching life of the school.

Dioceses in Ghana must strive at all cost to recruit as many devoted Catholic teachers as possible to advance this objective. The family (parents and children) and the schools (Church and teachers), if well integrated, can become pacesetters in the quest to sowing the seeds for adequately prepared lay members for the New Evangelization. Consequently, the youth, who constitute the hope and future of Church and State and who possess the energy for work, will be well-equipped for the task ahead. Our parishes, therefore, must put premium on preparing the youth for this daunting task and challenge.

The reality, however, is that even though our Church has all that it takes to prepare the individual in working at his salvation, a kind of laxity is witnessed in this regard. Many other Christian sects are capitalizing on this seemingly laxity to draw the faithful from the Church. Many of these sects organize prayer and other engaging sessions and talks where they consciously or unconsciously indoctrinate unsuspecting catholic victims.

Since many of our parishes do not provide any such “cherished” programs, the alternative is to seek it elsewhere.

There is the need to support the laity through Christian formation so that they can assume their proper responsibilities in public life. For that reason, catechesis, at least once in a month, (a miniature of what the Holy Father does every Wednesday, General Audience) could be replicated as a step for the faithful to hear and be taught by their bishops/priests on the faith and matters arising in our world today. It would surprise us to learn (if a survey were to be conducted) how only a few Catholics in our dioceses are aware of the social teaching of the Church.

As part of an integrated program for the formation and continuous formation of the laity, the laity need to be fully equipped to meet the changing demands of our world today.

CONCLUSION

Evangelization means, *inter alia*, to make the Word present in the world. The formation of the laity as agents of the New Evangelization must seriously take into consideration new ways of reaching out to the marginalized and persons with disability. How strong is our presence in prisons, as compared to the frequency on the part of ministers of other churches? The same can be said of hospitals. Do we consider wheel-chair access to our churches to serve the physically challenged? What about providing sign-language translation in our services for the benefit of “the deaf” and Braille Bibles and prayer books for “the blind”. How wonderful would it be if we had the blind among our lectors? We strongly believe the laity, with their rich expertise, could help the dioceses to achieve these. Our failure, as dioceses, to address some of the issues mentioned above, would not only make us lose members but also make us less attractive.

The New Evangelization requires that all our meaningful efforts be adopted as ‘new’ ways of reaching God’s people. The formation of pastoral agents, who will bear in mind the challenges and opportunities of our time, remains an indispensable approach to helping our situation.

Jesus’ commission to us in Matthew’ Gospel (The Great Commission) behoves us, irrespective of our vocations, to reach out to the ends of the world, and to reach out is to be well formed and informed to make the outreach meaningful and sustainable without ‘diluting’ the original message. What else could the Church do than to form pastoral agents to realize this mission? Anything short of formation and continuous formation will mean becoming our own enemies and victims of our actions and inactions.

The words of Pope Francis, in his address to Bishops in Rio de Janeiro on 28th July 2013, say it all: “At times we lose people because they don’t understand what we are saying, because we have forgotten the language of simplicity and import an intellectualism foreign to our people. Without the grammar of simplicity, the Church loses the very conditions which make it possible “to fish” for God in the deep waters of his Mystery.”