

# A Growing Awareness of the Identity and Mission of the Laity in the Church

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*The Very Rev. Thomas A. Baima*

*The Archbishop's Annual Mass with Candidates for Lay Ecclesial Ministry*

*Saint James Chapel, Chicago, Illinois*

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## **An Image of the Church**

As we gather for this annual Mass and meeting of the candidates for Lay Ecclesial Ministry with our archbishop, Cardinal George, I want to begin my reflections on something Pope Francis said in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

The Holy Father offers in important image of the Church. Listen:

Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God. The minority – ordained ministers – are at their service. There has been a growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church. We can count on many lay persons, although still not nearly enough, who have a deeply-rooted sense of community and great fidelity to the tasks of charity, catechesis and the celebration of the faith. At the same time, a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because, in their particular Churches, room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-

making. Even if many are now involved in the lay ministries, this involvement is not reflected in a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors. It often remains tied to tasks within the Church, without a real commitment to applying the Gospel to the transformation of society. The formation of the laity and the evangelization of professional and intellectual life represent a significant pastoral challenge.<sup>1</sup>

## **Dialogue on salvation and covenant**

Here in the Archdiocese of Chicago, we are fortunate that this local church has had a clearer awareness of the responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation. From the emphasis on specialized Catholic Action during the time of Cardinal Mundelein, through the emergence of lay ministry after the Second Vatican Council, to the last thirty years that the Archdiocese has had formal lay ministry formation programs, to the present work of Cardinal George and his leadership in the emerging vocation of Lay Ecclesial Ministry, this local church embodies some of the dimensions of the lay vocation Pope Francis describes. At the same time, we have not achieved the penetration of Christian values into the social, political and economic sectors to the same degree as we have internally in church ministry. We have to admit that although Catholics have risen to leadership positions in business, industry, labor and government, they have not been as successful at infusing virtues and the Catholic vision of society into their areas of expertise. So, while we have much to commend

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*: Apostolic Exhortation on the New Evangelization (November 24, 2013), no. 102.

ourselves for, we likewise have much yet to do in bringing the laity to full stature and to the full appropriation of the demands of their baptism. The vocation to lay ecclesial ministry which, of necessity focuses on tasks within the Church, cannot substitute for the obligation to transform society with the healing power of the Gospel.

We are forming you, therefore, to serve within the church, so that those baptized faithful you form, catechize, and equip with the truth of Christ, can, in turn, go out into the world for its transformation.

## **Application**

When the Archbishop of Chicago calls you as a lay ecclesial minister and commissions you to a participation in the pastoral office in a specific parish, you should, in an intentional way, remember what Pope Francis said about the ordained ministers, because it applies to all ecclesial ministers. If you allow me to paraphrase, "Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God. The minority - [ecclesial] ministers - are at their service." Any ecclesial minister, bishop, priest, deacon or lay ecclesial minister, is authorized for service of the whole people of God, so that they might fulfill the mission of evangelizing the world. In this way, each of us participates in the New Evangelization, especially by assisting those we serve in the pastoral ministry to fully realize and actualize the demand of their baptism. The full realization of baptism, then, is the real goal of the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the laity.

As we spend this day with our bishop and each other, let us keep Pope Francis' words in view. The *Decisions Document*, which Cardinal George welcomed as the plan for his pastoral ministry here in Chicago, had two sections: Evangelization and Ministerial Personnel. Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* has spoke of the same two themes in such a way as to show the necessary connection between them. Ecclesial ministers participate in the New Evangelization by being first evangelized themselves and then serving the laity in the appropriation of their baptism and its demands. Let this insight guide your formation and eventual ecclesial ministry.

*The Very Reverend Thomas A. Baima is Vice Rector for Academic Affairs of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake and the Archbishop's Liaison for Formation Programs in the Archdiocese of Chicago.*