



ORDO FRANCISCANUS SAECULARIS
- Initial Formation for Candidates -

Module 3: "ELEMENTS OF ECCLESIOLOGY & THE THE-
OLOGY OF THE LAITY"
sheet 3

2. The Identity of the Lay Person
(I) Secular Character

'laos' is Greek for 'people', but in ecclesiology 'laity' traditionally refers to those who are not in holy orders, or members of a religious order.

...the term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in a religious state sanctioned by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are established among the people of God. They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ. They carry out their own part in the mission of the whole Christian people with respect to the Church and the world. [LG, 31]



Before Vatican II the model of the Church was 'hierarchical' - pyramidal in shape: pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, deacons, religious and (right at the bottom, the vast majority of the Church) 'the laity'. The documents of Vatican II encouraged a new model—speaking of the whole Church as 'the laos [people] of God', each individual having a role within the family of Christ. This new understanding allowed the work of the Holy Spirit to take central stage once more, and the use of the gifts of the Spirit to be encouraged. Nevertheless, 'laity' still rightly refers to Christians in the world [secular], the lay person in the Church, whose special mission flows from the Christian newness brought about by baptism. By this sacrament we are reborn, grafted into Christ, made alive by the Spirit. The secular character is proper and particular to lay people.

Through baptism the laity participate in the messianic 'munera' [functions] - priestly, prophetic, royal—in a particular and original way which is secular.



(1) The priestly function

Rom 12.1

I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

That is, offering one's concrete daily life to the Father in the spirit which animated Christ himself in his self-offering. The priestly function of every Christian differs from the 'presbyteral' function of the priest ['presbyter' - the man in holy orders we call "Father"]. Deeds, prayers, apostolic activities; work and family life, if done for Christ, are given to him as our spiritual sacrifice which is 'holy and acceptable to God' - our spiritual worship.

(2) The prophetic function

Rom 10.9

...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

The lay person often has access, through work, social contacts, family life, to those unable to be reached by others. In this sense 'confessing' is not of the sacramental kind but means telling others about Christ. Not only with our lips, but also with our lives, we preach the good news [Gospel]. The 'prophet' speaks on behalf of God; he is a forthteller rather than foreteller.; a clarion-caller rather than a clairvoyant. 'The laity show themselves to be children of the promise, if, strong in faith and hope, they make the most of the present time and with patience await the glory that is to come. Let them not, then, hide this hope in the depths of their hearts, but even in the framework of secular life let them express it...' [LG, 35]

(3) The royal function

1 Cor 4.8

Already you are filled! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!

The rule exercised by the lay person is properly that of the baptised who have the freedom of the children of God. Baptised 'into Christ' we have become 'in Christ', and as such we share in his royal state as his adopted brothers and sisters. We do not have power over others, but we empower them—by our witness to Him we help bring God's scattered children home.