



The Co-responsibility of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

Episcopal Commission for Doctrine
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

I. What is Christian Responsibility?

1. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. . . . We love because he first loved us.”¹ The life of a Christian is first of all a *response* to the love of God. When we hear the word “responsibility” we often think of obligations and duties, but Christian responsibility ultimately means a *response* to that original love of God offered to us in Jesus Christ. Christ expresses this love by incorporating us into his Body in Baptism. We belong to him and thus belong to that community where he is uniquely present in the world, his Church. Only with this awareness can we begin to respond to his love.
2. What, then, is this responsibility of the Christian? It is to respond to God’s love, given for the salvation of the world. Through Baptism, every Christian receives incomparable dignity and a noble mission: bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. Because Baptism makes us part of Christ’s body, which is the Church, we never respond to him alone. Just as we form one body in Christ, so our response to God’s call is always lived out in harmony with the other parts of the body of Christ. As Saint Paul told the Corinthians, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12.12-13).
3. This is why the particular responsibility each person has within the Church is not separable from the responsibility that all Christians have by virtue of their Baptism. St. John Paul II made this clear: “Because of the one dignity flowing from Baptism, each member of the lay faithful, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility for the Church’s mission.”² A Christian cannot carry out this mission in isolation, but only in communion with the entire People of God.

1 1 John 4.16b,19.

2 Saint John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 15.

God, then, calls us to mission in communion with the rest of his Body. Just as each body is energized by its spirit, so we who belong to Christ's Body are empowered by his Spirit for the task we have been given. As Pope Francis states, "the Holy Spirit also grants the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness (*parrhesía*) in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition. . . . Jesus wants evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God's presence."³

II. The Laity in the Church and in the World

The Laity's Role in God's Plan

4. Each Christian has a particular part to play in fulfilling God's plan for the world. Yet "God's plan for the world" can appear to be an ambiguous phrase, easily open to misinterpretation. How do we discover what God wishes us to do in order to carry out that plan? God's plan and the responsibility that he asks of us in enacting it is not a prescribed set of rules but is revealed to us through our vocation as baptized Christians. God makes clear what he wants of us in a concrete way, in the history of our lives. This requires that we live with an awareness of belonging to the Church, for it is in the life of the Church that God makes his intentions clear to us. In this way, "*the Lord entrusts a great part of the responsibility to the lay faithful, in communion with all members of the People of God.*"⁴ For this reason, our responsibility is indeed a co-responsibility. We live it not only by cooperating with others, but with the deep consciousness that each baptized person, no matter the state of life, enjoys a weighty responsibility for the life of the Church.

5. Co-responsibility, then, concerns the mission of the Church in the world and is not primarily a *role* a person plays. In that sense we are called to take seriously the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on the significance of the laity in the Church and in the world.⁵ Pope Benedict XVI's remarks on this are particularly important:

Co-responsibility demands a change in mindset especially concerning the role of lay people in the Church. They should not be regarded as 'collaborators' of the clergy, but rather as people who are really 'co-responsible' for the Church's being and acting.⁶

3 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 259.

4 Saint John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 32.

5 See, in particular, *Lumen Gentium* 30–42.

6 Benedict XVI, "Message on the Occasion of the Sixth Ordinary Assembly of the International Forum of Catholic Action" (10 August 2012).

6. The laity exercises co-responsibility in the Church not by following a predetermined program but by a response within a relationship. The lay faithful are called to participate in the life of the Church and the world. In the Church they have responsibilities at the family, parish and diocesan levels and beyond, such as exercising particular liturgical roles (e.g., reader, altar server, choir member, extraordinary minister of Holy Communion), providing catechesis, consulting in financial matters, participating in pastoral councils, working in ecclesiastical offices, or holding positions in a diocese. These are a few examples of the many responsibilities the laity might have within the Church. However, co-responsibility is not identified so much with these functions or roles themselves, but rather with the concern that we have for the entire mission of the Church in exercising them.

The Dignity of the Lay Vocation and the Danger of Clericalism

7. At times we confuse taking on various functions and roles in the Church with exercising co-responsibility. This kind of confusion can be demeaning to the laity in that it reduces the vast playing field of the lay person, which is the world. This in fact is a form of clericalism, because it is based on the assumption that the roles of the clergy are something to which laity should aspire. Pope Francis has spoken out forcefully against this phenomenon, calling it “a double sin” because both laity and clergy are often complicit in it: the priests tend to clericalize the laity, and the laity ask to be clericalized.

It is one of the evils, one of the evils of the Church. But it is a ‘complicit’ evil, because priests take pleasure in the temptation to clericalize the laity, but many of the laity are on their knees asking to be clericalized, because it is more comfortable, it is more comfortable! This is a double sin!⁷

The truth is there is authentic dignity to each vocation: lay, holy orders, and consecrated life. Clericalism denies the universal call to holiness so clearly taught by Vatican II.⁸

The lay vocation is always devalued when this clericalization takes place, whether by treating lay people as inferior (a problem more common several generations ago) or by charging them with tasks and characteristics proper to the clergy (something more common in our day). The great call of the laity, however, is fundamental to the Church’s mission and cannot be abrogated: it is to bring Christ to the world from within; to evangelize it from the inside out.

7 Francis, Address to Members of the ‘Corallo’ Association, 22 March 2014. Also, Francis, Address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America, Rio de Janeiro, 28 July 2013, n. 4.

8 Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 40.

8. Just as yeast leavens bread from within, so the laity are called to be a leaven in the world.⁹ This is not accomplished primarily by expounding on particular doctrines or speaking about Christian values. Rather, the Christian himself or herself is the leaven. Lay people live in families and in communities. They work or study and are involved in the social and political life of their communities at the local, national, and international levels. They become a leaven through the unique way they approach work and study, live in society, and participate in politics. This is another way of saying that the true vocation of a lay person is, in a sense, outside the Church, as opposed to that of the clergy and religious. Pope Francis explains: “Even if many [laity] 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.”¹⁰

Promoting the Lay Vocation

9. If the laity is to exercise co-responsibility in the Church and the world by virtue of its Baptism, then it needs to nurture itself and to be nurtured. It is important “that a mature and committed laity be consolidated, which can make its own specific contribution to the ecclesial mission with respect for the ministries and tasks that each one has in the life of the Church and always in cordial communion with the Bishops.”¹¹

Bishops and priests must do their utmost to foster the sense of the co-responsibility of the laity. The daily contact with the internal life of the Church must not lead the hierarchy and clergy to mistrust the authentic responsibility of the laity, even implicitly, nor should it lead them to reduce that responsibility merely to consultation on material or worldly matters.

Neither must the members of the Church put all their hopes for revival of the Church in pastoral programs or in the parish structure. Pastoral programs, like all programs, must always be open to correction, and the Spirit can blow in any direction. A co-responsible laity will always act in communion with the Bishop or pastor, but will also suggest correctives to a pastoral plan as it is enacted in everyday life.

⁹ *Lumen Gentium* 31. “They [i.e., the laity] live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.”

¹⁰ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 102.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, “Message on the Occasion of the Sixth Ordinary Assembly of the International Forum of Catholic Action” (10 August 2012).

10. The parish is a fundamental unit in the Church and a visible sign in a given territory; however, it is not an end in itself but rather a locus for preparing the laity and clergy to exercise a co-responsibility for the life of the Church in the world. The various new lay movements and associations, which have been a great gift of the Spirit to the Church, must by their very presence always help parishes to grow in this awareness.

III. Where Do We Respond?

Going to the Peripheries

11. The whole Church must always strive to go out to the extremities, the peripheries. These farthest reaches are not merely geographical or social. As the laity participate in social and political life, their motivating factor must be love, above all a love for Christ that grows ever deeper in a relationship with him. In this love is nurtured an affection for all human beings, and a desire that all might find the ultimate meaning of their lives, which is Christ. What drives any Christian in work, study, social and political life is not worldly success but the desire that the world be transformed by Christ. This demands that each Christian remain in that loving relationship with Jesus Christ, through the sacraments and the life of the Church. Only in this way is it possible to be co-responsible for the life of the Church. Otherwise we lose sight of our ultimate destination.

12. By going out “into the peripheries,”¹² Christians venture out into the distant reaches of the world to encounter men and women. The risk of not doing so is that we end up with an inward-looking Church, perhaps running efficiently but not keenly attuned to the needs of others, bringing them the Good News. Francis warns strongly against this: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.”¹³

Responsibility and Justice

13. The Church teaches us that co-responsibility for the Church in everyday life requires a particular attention to people and issues that are of fundamental importance. Pope Francis, like his predecessors, has reminded us of many of these. He asks us to have a special attention for the poor and downtrodden, those who lack the means of sustenance, the unemployed, the ill and dying, and in particular those who lose hope in a world that seems to have forgotten them.¹⁴

¹² Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 20.

¹³ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 49.

¹⁴ Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* Part II (186–216).

It is not possible for us to speak of co-responsibility without being attuned to the needs of the sick, the chronically ill, the elderly and others who live in solitude, and the dying, without being aware that we bear a responsibility for them, and that we are called to bring them not only material help but also the assurance that they are not alone.

14. We also must be aware of the victims of injustice. The laity cannot neglect them on the grounds that they do not know them or have not caused their problems.¹⁵ That prospective migrants are barred by many countries, that they die en route to their destination, that women are often denied basic rights or young people find themselves with no prospects of employment, that the developed and developing worlds bear witness to ever deeper social and economic inequities, that our natural environment is often exploited without consideration of the consequences, are all matters of concern to the Christian. In addition to prayer and community life, the parish must actively work for social justice, bringing the salvific word of Christ to all those who suffer. All these challenges are properly the responsibility of the laity, who are already in the world and involved in all these domains.

15. The laity, in exercising their co-responsibility, must always uphold the true value of human life and thus affirm that a human being bears an immeasurable dignity by virtue of the image of God which he or she bears. Fostering the dignity of human life is never an ideology. That dignity is always a discovery that shines out to us in a living relationship with Christ. The Christian who lives co-responsibly for the life of the Church always wishes to communicate and defend the dignity of life in all that he or she does, whether in work, in society, or in the political sphere.

Responsibility and Society

16. The political dimension often touches on matters that are dear to the Church. Among these is the family, the basis of society, which is so often under attack and which deeply suffers nowadays. Rather than simply idealizing the family, we should begin by looking at our neighbours, including the members of our Church, who often find themselves in trying or difficult family situations. Co-responsibility means being ready to accompany individuals and families on their difficult path, not simply with words but with our actions. Lay people must also be ready to defend any attack on the family in the political sphere, with reason and charity.

¹⁵ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 201: "While it is quite true that the essential vocation and mission of the lay faithful is to strive that earthly realities and all human activity may be transformed by the Gospel, none of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice."

17. Another important issue that often emerges in the political realm is education, in particular the right of parents to be the primary educators of their children. This is especially true in matters concerning faith, religion, and moral life. The whole Church bears the responsibility of defending the fundamental right of parents to be the first teachers of their children, above all in matters of religion and morality.

18. Matters of justice are also an important aspect of the political life. The laity are primarily responsible for promoting justice for those in the courts and in prison. They must be sensitive to any shortcoming or policy in our justice system that infringes upon the dignity of the accused or the guilty, in the name of efficiency.

The political touches on many other areas, and in each of these the laity are called to defend the dignity of life and promote justice. Above all the laity must have a concern for the freedom of the Church itself in society and must share the responsibility of defending the Church from any political attacks that might diminish its liberty. Any lessening of the Church's freedom is always an attack on the freedom of society as well.¹⁶

IV. Conclusion: Responsibility and the Good News

19. The co-responsibility that clergy, religious, and laity share by virtue of their Baptism will remain a mere concept unless each individual cultivates a relationship with Christ and therefore lives by faith. The faithful suffer to see the loss of meaning in the lives of friends, colleagues, or neighbours; the rampant consumerism in society; injustice, neglect of the poor, the infirm, and imprisoned; the lack of a loving relationship across generations; the neglect or abandonment of children; the attack on the life of the unborn and newborn or the movement to kill the infirm before their natural death; the quest for instant gratification in an increasingly technological society. To live co-responsibly in the Church means "to testify how the Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response – consciously perceived and stated by all in varying degrees – to the problem and hopes that life poses to every person and society."¹⁷ Let all the members of the Body of Christ take up together the responsibility of bringing Christ, the only Saviour, to the world, in a spirit of family, friendship, and communion.

¹⁶ *Dignitatis Humanae* 4: "The freedom or immunity from coercion in matters religious which is the endowment of persons as individuals is also to be recognized as their right when they act in community. Religious communities are a requirement of the social nature both of man and of religion itself."

Dignitatis Humanae 13: "Among the things that concern the good of the Church and indeed the welfare of society here on earth – things therefore that are always and everywhere to be kept secure and defended against all injury – this certainly is preeminent, namely, that the Church should enjoy that full measure of freedom which her care for the salvation of men requires. . . . The freedom of the Church is the fundamental principle in what concerns the relations between the Church and governments and the whole civil order."

¹⁷ Saint John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34.

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