

Consecrated Life is for Lay People too

David Harold-Barry SJ



David Harold-Barry SJ

In Catholic circles we often witness, or at least hear of, people being ordained priests or making their religious profession or commitment. It is different from marriage but contains the same element of a permanent gift of oneself.

But when did you last attend a profession of commitment by lay people? For me the answer is, *'yesterday, at Kasisi in Zambia!'* It was without all the trappings of an ordination or profession but contained the same atmosphere of promise and joy.

They were professionals, men and women, who have practiced a life in the Spirit for some years and now wish to permanently commit themselves to a way of life based on the gospels. You might say, *"well, we do that already without making a public show of it!"* No doubt, you do and many others too. But the public commitment – as in marriage or anything else – focuses minds and provides method and structure. And those who witness the commitment now know that they have a task to support the ones making this choice.

The eight who made this lifelong promise are members of the Christian Life Community, a world community based on the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. Ignatius' way was not just for Jesuits but opened up a path for anyone wishing to live the gospel more closely.

I was struck by this simple ceremony because it focuses attention on a movement in the Church which is as transforming as leaven in flour. I have lived long enough to have seen packed seminaries and novitiates on every continent. We were seventy novices when I entered the Jesuits in the days before Vatican II. Many left in the 1960s and '70s and few came in the 1990s and '00s. Today numbers are a fraction of what they used to be but we are not panicking. Quietly, we are trying to understand what is going on.

One conclusion shouting at us from the evidence is that lay people are taking a far more active role in the church than they ever did. I can foresee a day when the Vatican

will be staffed by lay men and women with only the odd cleric here or there. This is already happening in diocesan offices. Catholic schools that were once almost exclusively staffed by religious – that was my experience at St Ignatius College in Zimbabwe when I arrived in 1966 – are now entirely run by lay people. Religious are still there and we will come to that in a minute.

So, lay people have taken over schools, hospitals, radio stations, social centres and similar works that used to be run by priests and religious. But the question we are facing is; are they running them as competent professionals only or do they also see themselves as missionaries of the gospel?

There should be no contradiction between these two attitudes for the truly 'professional' approach will always be in harmony with the gospel. But when I make this distinction here I am referring first to those who see their work as satisfying basic expectations laid out in their job description. Yet living the gospel defies job descriptions. Jesus used parables, not descriptions, because living according to the gospel opens up boundaries and sees no limits.

My experience is that lay co-workers are touched by gospel values and do wish to live them in their service of the Church as well as in their own lives at home with their families. But it is often hard to grasp what exactly it is to be a disciple of Jesus unless we have a way of discovering who Jesus was and what was his message. This cannot be got from books or training courses.

This is where the Christian Life Community comes in. They present a way of life which takes us into the heart of the gospel message. First, CLC is a community movement. The members meet regularly, often once a fortnight, and share their experiences in a context of prayer. They help each other to understand the meaning of their experiences and they encourage each other to face challenges. They also enjoy each other's company and build warm friendships.

Secondly, CLC uses the tool of Ignatian spirituality, that is, the dynamic of the Spir-

One conclusion shouting at us from the evidence is that lay people are taking a far more active role in the church than they ever did.

itual Exercises which comes down to a method of understanding (discerning) the motivations which dominate my own heart. How do I act and why do I act the way I do? These exercises are not training sessions, such as footballers and athletes go in for, though they have something in common in the sense of developing attitudes and honing spontaneities. The Exercises of Ignatius open up the person to pay attention to God who is at work in their heart. They do this by helping the one making the Exercises to see themselves as they really are. Like a doctor's diagnosis this can be frightening. But unlike a doctor's diagnosis there is always a remedy. The one making the Exercises follows Jesus through his proclamation of the kingdom, the cost of this to him in his death and the bursting forth of new life in his rising from the dead. The CLC member goes through this journey and draws on it for his or her own life.

And this is where we come to the third pillar, or hearth stone, of CLC: mission. Having come together as a community of friends and having journeyed together through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we are – like the disciples in the early Church – ready for mission. CLC sees four ways in which this can be done but I would like here to focus on the first way. The four ways are:

- ♦ The mission of living the gospel in daily life
- ♦ Individual works, salaried or voluntary, by which one serves the people
- ♦ Corporate works which several CLC run, e.g., a school (as in Nairobi)
- ♦ Advocacy work, e.g., at the UN where CLC has a voice

Living the gospel in daily life is what every follower of Jesus is called to do. But for many it can be rather general and unexamined. It is a general attitude of being a 'good guy' and 'doing the right thing.' But that can be a little fuzzy.

I spoke of the leakage of priests and religious in the 1960s and '70s but at the same time the Second Vatican Council was put-



So the mission of CLC, is first of all, to live the light of the gospel in those “places and circumstances” where only I, if I am a lay person, can make my contribution

ting a new emphasis on the mission of the laity. There are a number of striking passages in *Lumen Gentium* (#31, #34 and #36) and *Gaudium et Spes* (#36) but let me just quote one:

The laity are called in a special way to make the church present and operative in those places and circumstance where *only through them* can she become the salt of the earth (*LG* #33).

Jesus gave the Church a mission and this has primarily been understood as the preaching of the good news and the ministry of the sacraments. All other works – schools, clinics, work with refugees, etc. – are expressions of this announcing of the good news which is the love and compassion of God for his people. But now, in the twentieth century, the Church has understood that these are not enough. God wishes also to reveal himself right in the heart of

ordinary life and work: the fisherman at his nets, the mechanic at his lathe, the sales checker at her pay counter. They have to ‘announce’ the kingdom in a way in which it can be done *only through them*. This means all sorts of things, for example, integrity, imagination and attentiveness to the environment. A preacher on a Sunday morning can suggest to his listeners how to be honest. But there is no way he can suggest to them how to be imaginative. Yet imagination is part of the good news. We would never have advanced God’s creation, as we have, without it. So, living the gospel is not just a matter of being patient with your wife or husband; it is also seeing work as the place where I forge my contribution to the building up of the community of God’s people. Work may often seem rather dull and routine. But the joy is to strain from it all the brightness that I, as an individual, can contribute.

So the mission of CLC, is first of all, to live the light of the gospel in those “places and circumstances” where only I, if I am a lay person, can make my contribution.

A huge boost to this way of thinking was given by the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who died in 1955 and whose thinking influenced some of the bishops at the Council a few years later. Teilhard, a French Jesuit, went back into history as a palaeontologist studying the origins of life on our planet. Over the years he developed an understanding of evolution as a force in creation that strained forward towards what he called the Omega point, that is, the point where all creation achieves its goal.

For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. (I Corinthians 3:21-23)

Teilhard’s thought can be glimpsed from one short quotation:

Right from the hands that knead the dough, to those that consecrate the bread, the great and universal Host should be prepared and handled in a spirit of adoration.’ (Le Milieu Divin p 67, Fontana edition).

All nature, all matter, was charged with seeds of divine energy and the task of men and women everywhere is to bring those seeds to fruition. Lay people have the primary task here.

All nature, all matter, was charged with seeds of divine energy and the task of men and women everywhere is to bring those seeds to fruition. Lay people have the primary task here.

I have briefly described the call to the laity but where does this leave us, priests and religious? In what I have said I might be accused of downplaying our role as though we have become as redundant as former colonial officials! No, this will not happen. There is an essential role for priests and religious. In the language of CLC they are ecclesial assistants (EAs), or chaplains, although for some reason this last term is no longer used. What has happened is that roles have shifted. In the past the EA did virtually everything in terms of running the communities. Now he or she does not have to do all the administration and logistics and can concentrate on the *quality* of his/ her service in “opening the scriptures and breaking the bread” (Luke 24:32). Across the board – in schools, parishes and social centres – priests and religious can leave all the administration to lay people and concentrate on “serving the word” (Acts 6:4). Priests, religious men and women, bishops and popes are becoming freer and freer to devote their time to teaching the word and animating the community. In this way EAs and CLC members complement each other. This is one small model of the future Church. Our sisters and brothers who made their commitment at Kasisi on September 27, 2015, gave a striking witness to this.

