

**How Do  
I Live Out  
My Life as  
A Lay Person?**

by

Jeffrey S. Tunnicliff

C230, Theology and  
Spirituality Of the Laity

Fr. John Colacino

April 2, 2002

The Church *cannot* exist without the laity. If we follow the servant model of the Church (Dulles, 89-102) the Church exists to serve its members. So who are its members? The Laity. In the United States, the clergy are outnumbered by 1000:1 by the laity. Therefore, the laity *are* the Church.

Each and every one of us, by our *baptism*, is called to be a disciple, live in communion with one another, contribute to the fulfillment of the mission of the church, and in all this live a life of holiness. Before proceeding, we must recognize a difficulty here. It is the problem of using baptism to define a person as laity. Since infant baptism is the norm in the Catholic Church, it is not a *chosen* state so how do we distinguish between a baptized Christian who never attends Church and the baptized Christian who regular attends Church, serves at masses, works in the church food pantry, etc. Under this model there is no difference.

If we accept the definition of the laity as the baptized we must still realize we each have our different paths to live out our holiness. Under the traditional model, there was only one path to holiness, to leave society by becoming clergy or religious. The lack of large numbers of lay saints supports this premise. Two years ago, I had the opportunity to make a retreat for one weekend at Mount Savior monastery in Big Flats, New York. The Benedictine monks there live the monastic lifestyle secluded from society. While I understand how for many being free from the distractions of society can help them find God, this is not for me. I choose to seek to find God within society. Does this mean I cannot be holy? I do not believe so! Of course, I have the prospective that while I am a member of the laity, I am currently studying and discerning to become a priest. But even after ordination, I expect to engage in society, merely in a different capacity. Part of the role I see for myself a priest is to reach out the unchurched. How can I do this if I separate myself from the world?

In the Gospels, Jesus was accepting of all people. He did not reject the sinners, the lepers, or the Gentiles. The Church is universal, it exists for all. As we each have different callings in the Church and the world we each have different pasts. I, myself, hardly have what would be considered a model Catholic past. While I was baptized at 10 months of age, my parents are of mixed religion. My mother is Catholic and my dad is Baptist. And my parents divorced when I was ten years old. After I was confirmed at the age of twelve I did not attend Church again until I was 28. Despite the fact that this is not a traditional Catholic upbringing (but of course is becoming more common today) it is my life and as such it is my path to holiness. As the *dysfunctional* family becomes more *normal* I have the ability to relate to those families. I accept people from such families as people who are in need of Christ. And because of my sixteen years as a lapsed Catholic I can appreciate the position of those not going to Church, yet I also offer to them how, despite the fact that I did not feel I needed church in my life, it has changed my life.

So, in determining what the universal call means what do the terms discipleship, holiness, and communion mean? First, what does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? First and foremost one must follow the teachings of Christ and seek to do the will of the Father. Of course, this assumes we know what the church teachings are and how they apply to us. This is where the sixth element, formation becomes important. However, many of us fail to do this all the time (24/7). Jesus was not the Son of God only on Sundays or a 9-to-5 basis. He lived his vocation 24/7. So are each of us called to do. We must be willing to show Christ in all we do. Thus, we discover our third and fourth elements, *secularity* and *integration*. When I was still employed and began going to church after many years of being lapsed, I was reluctant to discuss or show my religion at work at first. It did not seem like a place for it. I was keeping my secular life separate

from my church life, i.e. I was not integrating the two together as we called to do as witnesses of Christ. But as time went on, I found others that desired to discuss religion and were eager to do so. If we keep the two separate, then the only way to be holy is to deny our secular life. Hence, the need to separate ourselves from society under the traditional model of the path to holiness. In contrast, we have the modern view on society today that we must deny our religion to be accepted in secular society today.

What does it mean to be holy? In simplest terms, to be holy is to strive to be Christ like, and to do the will of the Father, i.e. to be a good disciple. I have already discussed my own path to holiness in some ways. I think my own return to Church was because of my own search for meaning in life. I was experiencing a longing for something more than what life seemed to have to offer. The materialistic society of today has never been for me. Thus, my quest for holiness was started<sup>1</sup>.

Holiness would really seem to include all six elements that are being discussed. For our six elements, holiness is perhaps the most abstract, with the others becoming more concrete. In order to discuss holiness let us consider some definitions of holiness. The New Riverside University Dictionary, in its definition for holy says, “3. Living according to a strict or highly moral religious or spiritual system,” concentrates on the action of striving for holiness. Holiness is an ideal to be lived up to. The Modern Catholic Dictionary refers to a definition more in accord with the monastic approach to holiness, “In the Old Testament the Hebrew Kadosch (holy) meant being separated from the secular or profane, or dedication to God’s service, as Israel was said to be Holy because it was the people of God.”

---

<sup>1</sup> We each start our quest for holiness from birth. It is simply at this point in time when the quest became a conscious activity for me.

Yet I believe Mitchell says it best in *A Life between Two Fires*, “Living God’s word moment by moment allows a person to fulfill the will of God—indeed to *become God’s will* and thus *become Holy*” (180). This is the way I strive to be, to incorporate my faith, to integrate my secular and church lives as one, making my faith life part of who I am.

There are various facets of the term of the communion. With regards to the universality theme, I think the definition that is most appropriate involves living in harmony with one another. The Modern Catholic Dictionary views communion as togetherness. To live as when people, as a collective force, collaborating with our individual gifts is to form the Body of Christ. Yet, how can this be rectified with the traditional idea of the path to holiness being one of separation from society into the monastery? One could always turn to the idea of the monastery as a communion of its own. But I would rather seek to make the whole world one community, than to seek to find a small and isolated community of people just like me. For myself, I find a need to be with people, in society, but at the beginning and end of each day I need time alone to reflect and pray, thus realizing there can be a balance between the secular world and monasticism.

As I previously mentioned the Gospels tell us Jesus was not judgmental of others. To live in peace with one another, we must accept others for who they are, no matter what their past. Jesus forgives us our sins, who are we to teach another? When I am dealing with a person of another opinion than mine I do not attack their position as a soldier. Rather, I attempt to understand their position, and then work to show them the error in their ways while also realizing that they may have something good to say too which can be a very humbling experience.

Our second element in studying the spirituality of the laity is the *specificity* of how we live out our role as laity. It is not just a matter of *not* being a cleric or religious that defines us as

laity but rather how we live out that role. There are three levels in which we can discuss our specificity in our roles: our state, vocation, and situation.

When we talk about our state in the world or church there are three primary states we're referring to, clerics, religious, and the laity. One could question that we must consider the possibility of a fourth state for those outside the church for they are not baptized. As previously discussed, baptism is the simplest definition for laity yet it is inadequate. Perhaps we need a fifth state, which I will refer to as the "3a" state, for the baptized who are unchurched. Nonetheless, we will use the traditional three state model here.

It should be a simple question for anyone to ask what state they are in, what state they have chosen. I have been and am currently a member of the laity, but I am in the process of becoming a cleric. In a sense, currently I am a member of the laity by default. While I was baptized as an infant, once I was confirmed around the age of twelve, I did not return to church (notwithstanding funerals and weddings) until I was 28. During that time, I would have belonged in the "3a" state, baptized but unchurched. So choosing from among the states for me was never a conscious choice. At the time when I was graduating high school in considering what to do the rest of my life, priesthood or religious life was that something not even remotely in my mind. Therefore, I was simply laity because I did not choose to be anything else. I satisfied the baptismal definition of laity but would not have satisfied any higher definition of the term, laity. To carry this lack of a choice even further I did not choose to be baptized as an infant, but I was. So even to be within the church was not a chosen state for me.

There are various ways in which the term vocation is used. One that applies to me, certainly in the future, but also throughout my adult life is the single life. While I never ruled out marriage, I was satisfied with being single and never pursued marriage.

After my return to church, I developed a second vocation, quickly became active in various ways. I was developing a vocation to serve in ministry. For me, this is because it gave me a sense of purpose in life. For me, this is part of what makes something a vocation, when you can *feel fulfillment* in doing it. My years working as an engineer lacked this. I enjoyed the engineering side of things. But yet because of other parts of the job I felt tied down and unsatisfied. And in all of this, my vocation(s) are in a state of flux right now as I study and discern for the priesthood.

Weber (Apostola, 33-34) describes three categories of the Laity. The first are those who work for the Church as professional employees for their livelihood. Next, are those who find their employment in the secular world but are actively involved with the church and engage in volunteer ministry. Finally, the third category as those who attend church and are faithful but choose to live out their lives in the secular world. After my return to church, I would have belonged in the second category as I maintained my job as an engineer but outside of work, church became a very large component of my life. And now, while I am not “employed” by the church I would place myself in the first category since I am a full-time student studying for full-time ministry in the church.

And as my state and vocation are in flux so too is my situation, the third category. But in some ways, it is easiest to describe my situation. Because I am choosing to change my state in life, my situation is that I am currently a student, studying philosophy and religion in preparation to enter the major seminary. I am also active with the youth group at St. Boniface Parish. But again, and there is ambiguity in my situation. For as a student, I have two places I call home, Becket Hall and Watkins Glen. So all of this for me is a second career, to use a secular phrase, for me.

The next two elements, secularity and integration, have common elements to them. They both deal with how I choose to live my life. The question being, do I bring Christ into all parts of my life (secularity) and in do I allow my secular life to be part of a spiritual life (integration). For all the years I was not going to church, certainly my faith life was not visible in my secular life. This is not to say that I had no faith, merely that was sort of off to the side. But yet in such things as my moral beliefs and practices the teaching of my faith was evident to me. And even as I return to church, work was work and church was church and never the two should meet. Yet, as I became more active in church, my faith life and volunteer work with the church began showing through at my job. If I took time off for church, people would ask what I was doing. Or perhaps some days during lunchtime I would be working on stuff for church and people would see me. It was then that I discovered that there were others at work interested in talking about church. So I was beginning to bring my religion into my secular world. At the same time my family was becoming aware of my involvement in church and discussions followed.

And I have been trying to use when I have learned and gained from my secular life in my involvement with church. Such as my abilities with computers (creating a web page and brochures for church), and fundamental elements of my engineering education and work.

Our fifth element that needs to be examined in my life and member of the laity is mission. All of us, by our baptismal vows are called to be priest, prophet, and King. As such, we are each called to participate in the church is mission to sanctify, witness, and serve. By sanctity, we are called to both strive to become more holy ourselves and to help others strive to do the same. I will discuss how I strive to become more holy myself when I discuss the sixth element, formation. I believe a big part of contributing to others' sanctity is to witness how Christ is present in my life. A big part of this is our third and fourth elements, secularity and



integration. By showing the importance of Christ our lives by not separating our secular and church lives near showing the value of a religion. And perhaps also if I am willing to be the first to show my faith others will follow. Someone has to be the first, to be the example, so why not me?

Perhaps, my attempts to tear down the walls between my secular life and my church life are most evident in how I ministry, how I fulfill my mission, I witness and bring God's love to others. The best example of this is my employment last year as a chaplain at a Boy Scout camp. My role there was chaplain, but in order for the scouts to see me as approachable I try to show them how I was an ordinary person just like them. I tried to act like a chaplain at all times but also to be a friend in the secular sense. I always approached the scouts non-judgmentally no matter what their own faith background was and strived to be non-threatening. Returning to the theme of communion in holiness, while the scouts can be of different faith backgrounds including atheism, we are still all one body in Christ. Because the faiths involved including those outside Christianity people would ask me how can you not preach Jesus. I always replied I have the scouts for one week, with a ½ hour in the service and that is all. I strive to first show them God's love and hopefully when they seek that out, there will be others to bring them all the way to Jesus.

What does it mean to serve? For me, most all of my service done in Christ name is directly in the church. The one exception being, concurrent with my return to church, there is a period of time when I tutor for literacy volunteers. This came from a desire to help others to share the gifts I have (Referred to John Paul's document in the 1987 Synod). We each have different gifts, and by our baptism we are not called to live just as individuals, but rather to working unison combining our various gifts to make a stronger as one body, one community, the

body of Christ. Of course, applying this view to my tutoring is very much hindsight, considering I was not going to church of time I started tutoring. But nonetheless, it strikes at the purpose of serving to me, to use what God has given us for the greater good of all God's people.

Other than this and my previously mentioned work with the Boy Scouts, the ways in which I have served are internal to the church. While we should all be active beyond the church as institution I believe my focus on internal servant hood is rooted in my vocation, in my current desire and calling to change my state in life to be a good about cleric. In this, I have served in common roles of Lector, Minister of communion but I have also worked with church youth groups, the millennium planning process for our diocese, and various ways in which I assisted by former pastor with his loss of eyesight and working on parish Lenten Missions. I have also had the opportunity to lead services including offering reflection. In many ways, the reflections I have offered become a form of witness for me because I preached what the scripture means to me. Each of us is called to fill the mission of the church in a different way. I see part of my role as to gain what knowledge I can and shares that was the laity so they in turn came share it with the world. In this, I do not mean to say that I have no role to serve the world directly. As I previously, I see a role for me in the unchurched.

Now we come to our final element, formation. In this context, we are not referring to the formation we receive at Sunday school or Sunday mass, but rather what we do to go beyond that. Their various ways that I try to do this. First, I belong to a prayer group in Watkins Glen where we share what was going on each other's lives, offer our views on such, and discuss what the scripture means to us. This helps each of us to see how Christ is ever present in our lives. Another way in which I seek to grow in my faith is having made the Cursillo weekend and attending monthly Ultreya meetings. Yet the third way is the use of a spiritual director. All of my studies

contribute in some way to my formation but beyond that there are mediations, retreats, etc that I do as part of my discernment all working to bring me closer to God.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Dulles, Avery, S.J. Models of Church. Double Day. New York. 1987.

Hardon, John A, S.J. Modern Catholic Dictionary. Eternal Life. Bardstown, Kentucky. 1999.

Mitchell, Donald W. "A Life between Two Fires: Chiara Lubich and Lay Sanctity." Lay Sanctity, Medieval and Modern: A Search for Models. Ed. Ann W. Astell. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame. 2000.

New Riverside University Dictionary, The Riverside Publishing Company, Boston. 1984.

Weber, Hans-Ruedi, "On Being Christians in the World: Reflections of the Ecumenical Discussion about the Laity." A Letter from Christ to the World: An Exploration of the Role of the Laity in the Church Today. Ed. Nicholas Apostola. WCC Publications, Geneva. 1998.