

A Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern

the charter for the
NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE LAITY
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First published in December, 1977

The signers of this Declaration are members of the Catholic community in Chicago.

For decades, the church in Chicago nurtured a compelling vision of lay Christians in society. The vision was eventually accepted and celebrated by the Second Vatican Council. That same vision produced national movements and networks which generated a dynamic lay leadership. It attracted priests and religious who saw their ministry as arousing the laity to the pursuit of justice and freedom; who served the laity without manipulating them.

Shall we passively accept that period of history as completely over, and with it the vision that proved to be so creative? While many in the Church exhaust their energies arguing internal issues, albeit important ones, such as the ordination of women and a married clergy, the laity who spend most of their time and energy in the professional and occupational world appear to have been deserted.

"Without a vision the people shall perish." Who now sustains lay persons as they meet the daily challenges of their job and profession--the arena in which questions of justice and peace are really located? Where are the movements and organizations supporting the young toward a Christian maturity? Where are the priests [and other Church professionals] sufficiently self-assured in their own identity and faith that they can devote themselves to energizing leaders committed to reforming the structures of society?

We wait impatiently for a new prophecy, a new word that can once again stir people to see the grandeur of the Christian vision for society and move priests [and other Church professionals] to galvanize people in their secular-religious role.

We think that this new prophecy should retrieve, at least in part, the best insights of Vatican II. It was Vatican II that broadened our understanding of the church. It rejected the notion that church is to be identified exclusively with hierarchical roles--such as bishop and priest. The church is as present to the world in the ordinary roles of Christians as it is in the ecclesiastical roles of bishop and priest, though the styles of each differ.

Vatican II identified hopes for social justice and world peace with the church's saving mission. The salvation of the world is no longer to be construed as applying only to individual persons but embraces all the institutions of society. The church is present to the world in the striving of the laity to transform the world of political, economic and social institutions. The clergy [and other Church professionals] minister so that the laity will exercise their family, neighborly and occupational roles mindful of their Christian responsibility. The thrust of Vatican II is unmistakable:

What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature. It is true that those in holy orders can at times be engaged in secular activities, and even have a secular profession. But they are, by reason of their particular vocation, especially and professedly ordained to the sacred ministry. Similarly, by their state in life, religious give splendid and striking

testimony that the world can not be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes. But the laity, by their special vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. Today they are called 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. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs, it is their special task to order and to throw light upon those affairs in such a way that they may be made and grow according to Christ to the praise of the creator and redeemer. (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #31)

Although the teaching of Vatican II on the ministry of the laity is forceful and represents one of the Council's most notable achievements, in recent years it seems to have all but vanished from the consciousness and agendas of many sectors within the church.

It is our experience that a wholesome and significant movement within the church--the involvement of lay people in many Church ministries--has led to a devaluation of the unique ministry of lay women and men. The tendency has been to see lay ministry as involvement in some Church related activity, e.g. religious education, pastoral care for the sick and elderly, or readers in church on Sunday. Thus lay ministry is seen as participation in work traditionally assigned to priests or religious.

We recognize the new opportunities opened up to men to become permanent deacons, but believe that in the long run such programs will be a disaster if they create the impression that only in such fashion do the laity mainly participate in the mission of the church. We note that our misgivings are shared by the Apostolic Delegate to the U.S., Archbishop Jean Jadot, who commented recently: "I believe in the laity. And the laity as laity. I was very, very impressed, I must say, by my experiences in Africa and my closeness and friendliness with some African bishops who don't want to hear about a permanent diaconate. They say it will kill the laity in the church. It will kill the laity in the church because it will reinforce the conviction already existing that to work for the church you must be ordained."

Our own reaction to the 1976 Detroit Call To Action conference reflects a similar ambivalence. Without a doubt, it was historic, precedent-setting in its conception, in its consultative process, in helping all levels of the church listen to each other and in facing challenges to growth affecting the inner life of the church. But devoting, as it did, so much of its time to the internal affairs of the Church, the conference did not sufficiently illuminate the broader mission of the church to the world and the indispensable role of lay Christians in carrying out that mission.

During the last decade especially, many priests [and other Church professionals] have acted as if the primary responsibility in the church for uprooting injustice, ending wars and defending human rights rested with them. As a result they bypassed the laity to pursue social causes on their own rather than enabling lay Christians to shoulder their own responsibility. These priests and religious have sought to impose their own agendas for the world upon the laity. Indeed, if in the past the Church has suffered from a clericalism on the right, it may now face the threat of a revived clericalism--on the left.

We also note with concern the steady depreciation, during the past decade, of the ordinary social roles through which the laity serve and act upon the world. The impression is often created that one can work for justice and peace only by stepping outside of these ordinary roles as a business person, as a mayor, as a factory worker, as a professional in the State Department, or as an active union member and thus that one can change the system only as an outsider to the society and the system.

Such ideas clearly depart from the mainstream of Catholic social thought which regards the advance of social justice as essentially the service performed within one's professional and occupational milieu. The almost exclusive preoccupation with the role of the outsider as the model for social action can only distract the laity from the apostolic potential that lies at the core of their professional and occupational lives.

Although we do not hold them up as models adequate to present-day needs, we do note with regret the decline and, too often, the demise of those organizations and networks of the recent past whose task it was to inspire and support Christians in their vocation to the world through their professional and occupational lives. We have in mind such organizations as the National Catholic Social Action Conference, the National Conference of Christian Employers and Managers, the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, the National Council of Catholic Nurses, Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers, and the Catholic Council on Working Life.

Although concerns for justice and peace are now built into Church bureaucracy more so than when such organizations flourished, there is no evidence that such bureaucratization has led to further involvement of lay Christians. As a matter of fact, the disappearance of organizations like the above, and our failure to replace them, may have resulted in the loss of a generation of Catholic leadership.

As various secular ideologies--including communism, socialism and liberalism--each in turn fail to live up to their promise to transform radically the human condition, some Christians seek to convert religion and the Gospel itself into another political ideology. Although we also yearn for a new heaven and a new earth, we insist that the Gospel of Jesus Christ by itself reveals no political or economic program to bring this about. Direct appeals to the Gospel in order to justify specific solutions to social problems, whether domestic or international, are really a betrayal of the Gospel. The Good News calling for peace, justice and freedom needs to be mediated through the prism of experience, political wisdom and technical expertise. Christian social thought is a sophisticated body of social wisdom which attempts such mediation, supplying the middle ground between the Gospel on the one hand and the concrete decisions which Christians make on their own responsibility in their everyday life.

In conclusion, we address these words of hope and of deep concern to the members of the church throughout the nation as well as to members of the church in Chicago. We invite them to associate themselves with this Declaration. We prayerfully anticipate that our words and theirs will prompt a re-examination of present tendencies in the church and that out of such a re-examination will emerge a new sense of direction, a new agenda.

In the last analysis, the church speaks to and acts upon the world through her laity. Without a dynamic laity conscious of its personal ministry to the world, the church, in effect, does not speak or act. No amount of social action by priests and religious can ever be an adequate substitute for enhancing lay responsibility. The absence of lay initiative can only take us down the road to clericalism. We are deeply concerned that so little energy is devoted to encouraging and arousing lay responsibility for the world. The church must constantly be reformed, but we fear

that the almost obsessive preoccupation with the Church's structures and processes has diverted attention from the essential question: reform for what purpose? It would be one of the great ironies of history if the era of Vatican II which opened the windows of the church to the world were to close with a church turned in upon itself.

Third Sunday of the Coming of the Lord, 1977
Tenth Printing, Summer 1999

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