Secularity of the Lay Faithful: Living Expression of Christian Hope

Considerations along the Lines of St. Josemaría’s Teachings

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I. SECULARISM AS A FALSIFICATION OF HOPE

The interventions of the Pontifical magisterium at the beginning of the third millennium are characterized, among other things, by an insistent and ever more explicit appeal to Christian hope. In the Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Europa the very structure of the document is built on the consideration of the present and the future of Europe from the perspective of that theological virtue.

One of the passages that the Post-Synodal Exhortation dedicates to the diagnosis of the cultural and sociological situation of the old continent—which is indeed perfectly transferable to other geographic and human areas—describes with intense flourishes some of the symptoms of a marked “dimming of hope”: “by a kind of practical agnosticism and religious indifference whereby many Europeans give the impression of living without spiritual roots—somewhat like heirs who have squandered a patrimony entrusted to them by history. . . . Many people are no longer able to integrate the Gospel message into their daily experience; living one's faith in Jesus becomes increasingly difficult in a social and cultural setting in which that faith is constantly challenged and threatened. In many social settings it is easier to identify oneself as an agnostic than as a believer. The impression is given that unbelief is self-explanatory, whereas belief needs some kind of social legitimization which is neither obvious nor taken for granted.”

It is not difficult to relate this description to that which Pope John Paul II sketched, years back, of secularism, a vision of the world and of all that is human that—by theoretical persuasion, or by methodical pragmatism—closes itself in an immanent perspective, restricting in a dramatic way the sense of temporal realities and the existential horizon of man. “It is therefore no wonder,” Ecclesia in Europe recapitulates, “that in this context a vast field has opened for the unrestrained development of nihilism in philosophy, of relativism in values and morality, and of pragmatism – and even a cynical hedonism – in daily life,’ European culture gives the impression of ‘silent apostasy’ on the part of people who have all that they need and who live as if God does not exist.”

The relationship between this distancing from faith and the adulteration of hope is immediate: “as the Synod Fathers made clear, ‘man cannot live without hope: life would become meaningless and unbearable.’ Often those in need of hope think that they can find peace in fleeting and insubstantial things.”

And the consequences of this disorientation of hope has direct consequences on the right order of love. Thus, after enumerating some of the more widespread versions of an “alternative hope, elaborated as a successor to that which is true,” John Paul II concluded: “All these, however, show themselves profoundly illusory and incapable of satisfying that yearning for happiness which the human heart continues to harbor. The
disturbing signs of growing hopelessness thus continue and intensify.

This is the same vicious circle faced by the parched traveler who, lost in the desert, sees in the distance a mirage that leads him to spend his waning energies in running, on the wings of a false hope, towards a goal that overwhelms him when it proves deceptive, perhaps until, looking once more at the horizon, he thinks he sees another oasis and forces himself to run towards it, exhausting his ever growing weakness more and more... It is no paradox to say that, if true hope is lacking, the more intensely a man is involved in temporal realities, the greater becomes the hope that he puts in them, the more he separates himself from their meaning and the meaning of his own life, in a spiral of despair that is no less damaging because of his activity or even hyperactivity.

The Founder of Opus Dei, in a homily given in 1968 and later published under the title The Christian’s Hope, reflected in this sense on the indispensable function of that virtue in earthly life: “I am always moved to respect and even to admiration by the tenacity of those who work wholeheartedly for noble ideals. Nevertheless, I consider I have a duty to remind you that everything we undertake in this life, if we see it exclusively as our own work, bears from the outset the stamp of perishability... This precariousness does not stifle hope. On the contrary, once we recognize the insignificant and contingent nature of our earthly endeavors, the way is then open for true hope, a hope which elevates all human work and turns it into a meeting point with God. An inexhaustible light then bathes everything we do and chases away the dark shadows of disappointment. But if we transform our temporal projects into ends in themselves and blot out from our horizon our eternal dwelling place and the end for which we have been created, which is to love and praise the Lord and then to possess him forever in heaven, then our most brilliant endeavors turn traitor, and can even become a means of degrading our fellow creatures.”

Indeed, the secularist vision not only ignores the wisdom of the faith in dealing with human realities, but, by shutting up the person in a perspective “restricted to this world and closed to transcendence,” twists hope and denatures true charity, beginning with a proper love for the world. Hence the assertion which closes the cited passage from the preaching of St. Josemaría: “Perhaps there is no greater tragedy for man than the sense of disillusionment he suffers when he has corrupted or falsified his hope, by placing it in something other than the one Love which satisfies without ever satiating.”

II. CHRISTIAN SECULARITY: IN THE HEART OF THE “GOSPEL OF HOPE”

In confronting the urgent task of announcing the “Gospel of hope,” to which the whole Church finds itself called, it seems especially fruitful to consider the fact that secularism is diametrically opposed to Christian secularity. This is an attitude towards the world that comes out of the faith, radically determined by authentic hope and, for this reason, capable of accepting the world and all that is human in a love which does not turn traitor, but which enables the person to be fulfilled in the proper order of his fundamental vocation to love. And this above and beyond the characteristic ambiguity with which—precisely because of the proper truth and consistency that they contain—earthly realities present themselves for our evaluation.

The proper attitude towards this persistent ambivalence of the world is, undoubtedly, one of the keys to authentic Christian secularity, to the extent to which it requires one to give meaning to one’s own life and to prove the consistency of one’s faith through one’s everyday life. Only true hope permits one to resolve, in a manner respectful towards the truth of creation and without rupture, the tension between earthly life and the beyond, because “this conviction spurs me on to grasp that only those things that
bear the imprint of God can display the indelible sign of eternity and have lasting value. Therefore, far from separating me from the things of this earth, hope draws me closer to these realities in a new way, a Christian way, which seeks to discover in everything the relation between our fallen nature and God, our Creator and Redeemer.  

This new drawing close to earthly things, an unmistakable fruit of hope, is a determining factor which informs Christian secularity: “The true Christian, who acts according to his faith, always has his sights set on God. His outlook is supernatural. He works in this world of ours, which he loves passionately; he is involved in all its challenges, but all the while his eyes are fixed on heaven.”

Certainly, given that the Church lives in the world and appears before it as the sign or universal sacrament of salvation, one can speak of a secularity of the Church itself; and one might also consider the secular dimension (that is to say the relationship with secular realities), of the Christian life of each of the faithful—with its corresponding features and hues according to its various conditions and vocations. For everyone, sacred ministers, consecrated faithful and laity, participate, each in his or her own way, in the mission of the Church for the life of the world. Nevertheless, as is known, the Second Vatican Council, at the time that it proclaimed the call to sanctity of all of the faithful—a teaching which Pope Paul VI considered “the most special characteristic and final goal of the whole Conciliar magisterium” —spoke of secularity as the “specific characteristic” of the lay faithful. In the case of the laity, therefore, secularity—the secular characteristic of their Christian life—appears as the precise feature that defines their proper and specific way of seeking sanctity and of participating in the evangelizing mission of the Church.

From this point of view, the circumstances that characterize the beginning of the third millennium—that theoretical and practical dimming of hope to which I referred—emphasize in a special way the evangelizing transcendence of the Christian mission and vocation of the laity. “It is to the laity, though not exclusively to them, that secular duties and activity properly belong.”

This is how Pope John Paul II emphasized it in his recent Post-Synodal Exhortation for Europe: “The contribution of the lay faithful to the life of the Church is essential: they have an irreplaceable role in the proclamation and the service of the Gospel of hope, since 'through them the Church of Christ is made present in the various sectors of the world, as a sign and source of hope and of love.' As full sharers in the Church’s mission in the world, they are called to testify that the Christian faith constitutes the only complete response to the questions which life sets before every individual and every society, and they are able to imbue the world with the values of the Kingdom of God, the promise and guarantee of a hope which does not disappoint.”

Here is the special responsibility of the lay faithful, in the service of mankind and the world; to revitalize all earthly realities, vivifying them and contributing to shaping them in conformity with that hope that does not defraud, a mission which will be greatly aided by a right understanding of the meaning of the secular nature of the Christian vocation.

III. A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD

Most Catholics are immersed in the vicissitudes of the world, involved in the dynamic of temporal realities which absorb most of their time and energy. This fact makes up a complex human and Christian reality, whose diverse aspects should be evaluated together in order to discern their meaning in God’s plan of salvation. One of those aspects, of course, is the negative influence of “the world,” insofar as it has been disordered by sin: creatures, who tried to raise themselves as rivals to the Creator, and
also to one another; those perishable goods and interests which, if they are considered as absolutes, blind and mislead hearts; earthly interests, mean or otherwise, which trap a person in a tangled web of demands and passions, threaten to turn his eyes away from the only interest capable of fulfilling his anxiety for the good. In that sense, “the world,” as the sphere of influence of “the prince of his world” in rebellion against the plan of God, is an enemy of the soul, because not only does it not favor Christian life, but rather opposes it.

Nevertheless, Christian reflection on the world has to necessarily take into account also other aspects—particularly its original goodness in the plan of God and the consequences, not only of sin, but also of the redemption. A theological evaluation of the world which unilaterally accentuated, or simply emphasized, its negative aspect, would necessarily lead to intensifying the opposition between the realities of this world and those of the next, and to the consideration of life in the world as an obstacle, or at least as a heavy burden for holiness. It would, therefore constitute in practice, a falsification of hope, in a way opposed to that induced by secularism, but equally un-welcome.

Throughout history various manifestations of that outlook have appeared in the theory and practice of Christian life, although their vital consequences, which took various forms and intensities, were not normally very extreme. In any case, it is undeniable that a predominantly negative evaluation of the world, more or less explicit, would tend to give rise to the limitation of sanctity, as a real and effective possibility, to only a part of Christianity. Although without denying the sanctifying power derived from the condition of being baptized, it would lead one to feel, nevertheless that the world, understood as the circumstances, the surroundings, the hostile place in which the life of many faithful develops, conditions and makes difficult (in the best of cases), the full development of Christian life towards perfection. This outlook also led to a “devaluing” of the ordinary faithful when it came to consciously and actively taking up their indispensable role in the mission of evangelizing.

In contrast, a deep and efficacious understanding of the truth of the vocation of the laity to sanctity and apostolate, as the natural, and therefore attainable, goal of their Christian life, requires as a prerequisite a renewed theological evaluation of the world, to avoid reducing the unequivocal call which resounds in the preaching of Christ to an exhortation which is as beautiful and inspiring as it is unattainable in practice, because of an irreconcilable opposition between the world and holiness.

The key to that understanding can be uncovered through analyzing the teaching of the Second Vatican Council as a whole on the reality of the universal call to holiness and the condition of the lay faithful who live in the world.

IV. THE VOCATION AND MISSION OF THE LAITY IN THE CONCILIAR TEACHING

When the Dogmatic Constitution Lumen Gentium refers specifically to the laity, it begins by emphasizing what they have in common with all of the faithful: “These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetical, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.” The Council thus confirms that the laity, incorporated in Christ, are called like all the other faithful to be saints and to carry out the apostolic mission of the Church; but it clarifies at the same time that they do this in their own special manner: “in their own way.”

The Conciliar text goes on immediately to describe this special manner in which the laity carry out their Christian vocation: “What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature. . . . The laity, by their very 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. 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. 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 these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer.  

In the pages that follow I will note some considerations that can contribute to the assimilation of this Conciliar text. But before going into these, it seems useful to note that, in order to adequately appreciate the significance and range of this teaching, it is first necessary to understand that the universal call to holiness is for each of the faithful a true “personal vocation.” In that perspective, the secular nature of the lay faithful appears in all of its depth as the basic key to a true and effective renewal of the meaning of his or her life as a Christian vocation.

1. THE SECULAR CONDITION OF THE LAY PEOPLE AS A MODE OF THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION.

The Conciliar affirmation that “what specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature” should not be considered the mere rhetorical expression of an obvious fact (that the lay faithful live in the world and dedicate themselves to secular tasks and realities). On the contrary, this is a doctrinal declaration of great importance, which contains in essence the theological evaluation of secular realities that underlies the universality of the Christian vocation to holiness and apostolate.

With those words the Council is trying to indicate precisely that the secular condition of the lay life should not be understood as a simple fact, nor as “simply an external and environmental framework, but as a reality destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of its meaning,” because that reality configures a form of the Christian life, a way of being a Christian. In the words of John Paul II, “among the lay faithful this one baptismal dignity takes on a manner of life which sets a person apart, without, however, bringing about a separation from the ministerial priesthood or from men and women religious. The Second Vatican Council has described this manner of life as the "secular character." 

If one keeps in mind the earlier comment about the call to holiness as a true personal vocation, one will understand better why secularity cannot be understood as simple environmental data (that is, as a group of circumstances which of course, have an influence on the life of the lay faithful, but from without: as in a landscape in which their history evolves). Actually, in each existing lay faithful the vocation to holiness and the secular character of their life are inseparable. It is not a matter of having a Christian vocation on the one hand and on the other hand, as a merely coincidental circumstance, the fact of living in the world. The condition of being a Christian and the secular character are intertwined in the unity and totality of the personal vocation.

This is expressed in these words of St. Josemaría Escrivá: “I dream —and the dream has come true — of multitudes of God’s children, sanctifying themselves as ordinary citizens, sharing the ambitions and endeavors of their colleagues and friends. I want to shout to them about this divine truth: if you are there in the middle of ordinary life, it doesn’t mean Christ has forgotten about you or hasn’t called you. He has invited you to stay among the activities and concerns of the world. He wants you to know that your human vocation, your profession, your talents, are not omitted from his divine plans. He has sanctified them and made them a most acceptable offering to his Father.”
And so, in this context, the expression “secular character,” or more briefly, “secularity,” means precisely the proper manner of being Christian of the lay faithful. Consequently, the fact of being in the world and occupied with the affairs of the world and of being Christian cannot be understood as two conflicting realities that, when they occur in one and the same person, tend to enter into conflict and reciprocally limit each other in such a way that the increase of one of them is in detriment to the other. A similar error would be found in the more or less conscious conviction that one cannot be fully secular if one is fully Christian, or fully Christian in a life which is fully secular.

If a member of the lay faithful were to have a poor understanding of secularity or of the Christian vocation, or of both, there could easily enter into his life a tension, a disjuncture between those aspects of his Christian life. And a conflict with those characteristics cannot last a long time but would sooner or later result in either giving up one of the alternatives or, what is no less bad, reaching the false solution of establishing a precarious compromise between one’s Christian and one’s everyday life. This could take any of its well-known versions (a superficial “compatibility,” or a distinction and division, no less superficial, between public and private life; between spiritual and “real life”; between obligations and devotions; belief and science; logic of faith and logic of immediate realities). Naturally, in either of those two cases, rupture or compromise, the transforming force of the Christian vocation would be sadly neutralized.

The truth however is that there is no contradiction nor is there a purely casual or accommodated relationship between secularity and the Christian vocation. Far from it: for the lay faithful, secularity is their special form of both sanctity and the evangelizing mission. The affirmation of John Paul II, cited earlier, that the secular character provides a “form of the baptismal dignity” (or, that is, of the Christian vocation), is the equivalent of saying that the vocation to holiness and the apostolate—which, by its proper nature affects all of life and not just a part of it— is shown in the lay faithful specifically as secularity. Therefore the “secular character” of the lay faithful is not a mere external factor, either sociological or environmental, but a feature which has a vocational density.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD AS THE “PLACE” OF VOCATION

Obviously, this affirmation of the secularity of the laity as a vocational category implies a profoundly positive evaluation of the world and of temporal realities: not a negative one, nor a merely neutral one either.

A neutral vision of the world would see temporal realities as not having a definite meaning, neither good nor bad, in relationship with God and his plan of salvation, so that its ordination to God would always be extrinsic—put there exclusively by man. Thus the vocation and mission of the laity of “ordering” temporal things “according to God” would seem to be an attempt to do violence to the realities of the world, attributing to them, according to Christian believe, a meaning which of themselves they did not have; and of imposing this meaning also on those who profess other beliefs or do not profess any. From this point of view, if a lay faithful tried to have his faith influence the configuration of the reality of the world, he would be diluting his “secular nature,” the logic that was proper to him, at the same time as his personal condition as a man or woman of the world. His or her secularity would be a simple disguise, a pretext for mixing without hindrance into the dynamic of those realities while pursuing confessional ends.

But as we have seen one should understand the relationship of the lay faithful with the world “not simply an external and environmental framework, but as a reality destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of its meaning.” Well then, it is precisely that meaning in Jesus Christ that provides the ultimate meaning of the secularity of the laity as a vocational reality.

The book of Genesis tells us that God, after creating the world and man, saw that all
that he had created was good, that it was very good. 43 From the beginning, all of material creation formed part of the loving plan of God for man: it is intrinsically ordered, oriented to his good. According to its design from the beginning, the world, and all the realities of the world showed forth, in its way the glory of the Creator: enclosing in itself a harmony, a goodness, which refers man to God. 44

Genesis also tells of the original fall, by which sin and disorder entered into the heart of man and, in consequence, also into the world. Earthly realities then lost their original transparency and became opaque, capable of blinding man, holding back his sight and hiding God from him. With the proliferation of sin the disintegration of that original harmony spread out and deepened.

But God did not abandon man to his fate nor allow him to be definitively lost: he sent his own Son, “through whom everything had been made,” so that, as true God and true man, he redeemed man and restored the whole of creation. This explains the fact that in order to understand the meaning of secularity it is necessary to consider the meaning of the world, of created things, in the light of the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God, of the re-creation of all things in Christ. 45

Christ is “the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth. . . . He is the beginning, the first born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” 46 And God, who “was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself,” 47 had commended to the Church the “ministry of reconciliation.” 48 He wanted each Christian, incorporated into Christ by baptism, to be associated to that redemptive mission of his Son, which extended also to the primordial restoration of the meaning of all creation, in such a way that the world and all created things would once more show forth, with the newness of the risen Jesus, 49 the glory of God and attract mankind towards him.

This mystery of vocation in Christ is the motive and theme of the hymn of benediction with which the letter to the Ephesians begins: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. . . . For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” 50

The positive evaluation of the world which is a the base of Christian secularity is not, therefore, either an exercise of good natured ingenuousness, nor a resigned acceptance of the reality of evil present in the world, adduced as an expedient to justify a less exigent Christian life, acquiescent towards the inevitable. On the contrary, that optimistic evaluation derives from the unbreakable faith of the Church in the radical restorative power of the redemption; and it translates into a firm vision of secularity and, with its own features, the secular character of the laity, as a vocation to co-redeem the world with Christ. “We must love the world and work and all human things. For the world is good. Adam's sin destroyed the divine balance of creation; but God the Father sent his only Son to re-establish peace, so that we, his children by adoption, might free creation from disorder and reconcile all things to God.” 51

This is he precise meaning of the affirmation, made earlier, with which no. 31 of the Constitution Lumen Gentium indicates the intimate interpenetration of secularity with the Christian vocation of the laity: “They are called there by God (that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations [and] in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life).” The world, thus understood, is the place of the Christian
vocation. But it is not only a physical place, a sort of stage or milieu in which they play a role—the life of a Christian—which does not necessarily have a real relationship with it (a neutral vision of the world); but rather, in the expression of the Council, the existence of the lay faithful, assumed in each and every one of its facets by divine vocation, "is as though interwoven" with secular reality. Therefore, the divine vocation of the laity is not a call to save themselves by fleeing or distancing themselves from those realities (a negative vision of the world): "They are not called to abandon the position that they have in the world. Baptism does not take them from the world at all . . . on the contrary, He entrusts a vocation to them that properly concerns their situation in the world."

3. CHRISTIANS ARE IN THE WORLD AS LEAVEN IN THE MASS

The expressions that describe the vocation-mission of the laity, in the Conciliar passae that we are dealing with, speak of "ordering" temporal realities "according to God;" of "illuminating and ordering them so that they come to be and develop constantly according to Christ."

The nature of that illumination and ordination should also be understood in the light of the consequences that result from considering the relationship of the lay faithful with the world, their secularity, from the mystery of the Incarnation.

As we have seen, human realities are not neutral, but really possess a meaning: an order and an opening to transcendence which are intrinsic, that is to say, which constitute the most radical key to their truth and their goodness. When that order was broken by sin, all of those realities, which were linked by the Creator's plan for the fate of mankind, experienced a deterioration also "from within": their intrinsic truth was falsified, and with it their goodness itself was affected. This deterioration, that is, made it difficult and at times prevented human realities from being sent to God. But those conditions of present human life are not foreign to the lay faithful, since their personal life, with all of its vocational meaning and with all the revitalizing power that the newness of Christ brings with it—is interwoven with them. Even more: the vocation-mission of the laity forms part of the redemptive plan of God, of his immovable faithfulness which does not allow him to abandon man and the world. In effect, if one considers the meaning of secularity in the light of the Incarnation, one understands immediately that the Christian is not an alien: that he has not come to the world from without, to take possession of something that does not belong to him, in the name of his faith. On the contrary, Christians "already are" in the world: the world belongs to them as much as it does to others—more, in a certain sense, because it belongs to Christ, whom they form a part of. And "that is where God called them," not to supplant the truth of the world by some other "logic" that is alien to it, but to restore, recuperate and bring to its fullness its original truth and meaning, intrinsic to human realities, with the regenerating power of the redemption. "By the very fact of being a man, a Christian has a full right to live in the world. If he lets Christ live and reign in his heart, he will feel — quite noticeably — the saving effectiveness of our Lord in everything he does."

The Gospel simile of fermentation, of the leaven, evoked by the Conciliar passage that we have been considering, is especially fitting to explain how that mission of the laity is carried out: realizing their proper function in the world, contributing "to the sanctification of the world from within, like a leaven." Indeed, the leaven does not change the nature of the dough, but it lets it make the best of itself. It is not within it as a foreign body, but perfectly mixed, forming a homogeneous part of the dough itself, it is dough; and uniting its beneficent influence to the natural good qualities of the other ingredients, it becomes transformed, with all of them, without distinction, into a single loaf of bread. The leaven alone is not bread, but the quality of bread depends to a great extent, on its action.

V. NEUTRALIZING TEMPTATIONS OF THE LAY VOCATION
The image of leaven also illustrates two necessary characteristics of the vocation and mission of the laity. For leaven to fulfill its function it is necessary, above all, that it not remain outside of the mass of dough, but that it be perfectly mixed into it; and, in addition, that it be in good condition, that it has not deteriorated and lost its capacity to ferment.  

The aptness of the example is obvious if one considers it in relation to these words of Pope John Paul II: “The post-conciliar path of the lay faithful has not been without its difficulties and dangers. In particular, two temptations can be cited which they have not always known how to avoid: the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world.”

The gravity of those temptations is due to their capacity to neutralize the divine efficacy of the vocation of the laity. If, as we are considering, the lay condition is a specific modality of the Christian life whose proper mission—for which it possesses therefore, a specific supernatural power—is to sanctify the world “from within,” as a leaven, it is evident that its efficacy depends on fidelity to its own way of being: to its secularity. This implies, essentially and inseparably, that the lay faithful live fully involved in the temporal realities with which their life is intertwined: and that that life is fully Christian. To the first of these is opposed the idea, or the temptation, that the full assumption of the Christian vocation on the part of the laity consists in an increase in their work within the Church structure. To the second, the temptation of secularism, of a worldly spirit.

An adequate response to these two temptations requires that we explain, at least in its most essential lines, the ecclesial meaning of the mission of the laity in the world and of unity of life; two questions that in reality could be reduced to the latter, but which it is useful to treat separately for greater clarity.

1. Ecclesial meaning of the secular mission of the laity

The Synod of Bishops on the laity used the term clericalization to refer to the error of considering the promotion of the vocation and mission of the laity to consist basically of opening up to them access to functions and offices previously reserved exclusively for the clergy, or to consider it as consisting in making greater use of their collaboration in those functions. This first temptation pointed out by Pope John Paul II supposes a reductive conception of Christian life as an “intraecclesial” life: and in that case the co-responsibility of all of the faithful would be reduced to their sharing without discrimination in ecclesiastical tasks. The common participation in the mission of the Church would be identified, in practice, with liturgical activity, or with collaboration in organized initiatives and activities. But in that case the leaven would not really be mixed with the dough and the proper vocation of the laity would not produce the fruit that God wants: the renewing force of the Christian life would be, in practice, impoverished.

On the contrary, if one does not lose sight of the fact that—in conformity with the Conciliar teaching that we are analyzing—the quid [essential nature] of the special vocation of the laity in the Church is their Christian life in the world, one also clearly understands that dedication to their mission in secular life constitutes he most substantial and effective aspect of their mission in the Church (precisely through that fidelity to one’s proper vocation that it supposes).

It is necessary, once more, to affirm that there is no dilemma here, no alternative: either a mission in the Church or a mission in the world; but that both dimensions converge in a true unity of life, which is a manifestation of the unity and totality of one’s personal
vocation. To understand this is decisive, because it explains that the quality of Christian life and the intensity of the commitment and participation in the mission of the Church is not counted by the greater or lesser dedication—or availability to dedicate oneself—to intra-ecclesial tasks. The Christian commitment and the dedication to the mission of the Church are always full, in each of the faithful in accord with their own vocation. This fullness of dedication which is presupposed by the secular character of their Christian vocation is an essential key to understanding the mission of the laity.

Thus, when a lay person lives with fidelity to the demands of his vocation any facet of his life or activity, his Christian life and his dedication to the mission of the Church are full. For this very reason, one cannot say that one participates more in the mission of the Church if one takes up more intra-ecclesial commitments or services, or that the laity have a participation in the mission of the Church which is limited by their dedication to secular tasks, because their full dedication as Christians to secular tasks is dedication to the mission of the Church, in the part that is most proper to them by their divine vocation: “The vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their involvement in temporal affairs and in their participation in earthly activities.”

The lay faithful, living members of the Body of Christ, by reason of their being part of the communion which is the Church—communion with God and with all of their brethren—are themselves the Church, in such a way that through their life and activity, which constitutes one of the modalities of that diversity united in communion, they also carry out the mission of the Church in the world. The whole life of the laity, even in its most earthly and ordinary manifestations, possesses then an ecclesial dimension, and consciousness of this reality is, in whoever cultivates it, a joyful invitation to hope and fidelity. Anyone who considers that his life is strongly rooted in the communion of the Church cannot have a feeling of distance, of coolness, with respect to ecclesial life, but instead will feel the power and responsibility of knowing that in taking care of the realities that by his human and Christian vocation he is involved with, he is also—through his communion with God and all his brothers and sisters—the Church who is acting, making Jesus Christ present among mankind.

2. UNITY OF LIFE

That ecclesial dimension of the whole life of the Christian in virtue of communion is one of the numerous consequences of the unity of life that radically characterizes it. And unity of life is also affected by the second temptation described by Pope John Paul II: that of “legitimating the undue separation between faith and life, between acceptance of the Gospel and concrete action in the most diverse temporal and earthly realities,” a rupture of such gravity for Christian life and for the efficacy of the mission of co-redeeming that it was considered by the Second Vatican Council as “one of the gravest errors of our time.”

Unity of life signifies that one must not separate, oppose or compartmentalize the different aspects and realities which make up the life of the Christian, according to whether they are considered proper to one’s baptismal condition as a child of God, or one’s condition as a man or woman and a member of the society of mankind. Undoubtedly the life of each person is complex, and presents a multiplicity of facets, but this is not a simple accumulation or amalgam of unconnected circumstances. They are distinct, but really interrelated, above all because they make up a single life, with a single protagonist, a person, who is not divisible and, in addition, because they each have a relationship, each according to its nature, with the same ultimate end to which the life of that person is ordered.

In a Christian, unity of life should be precisely the Christian life, because the person who is the protagonist of this concrete life is, in the deepest and most definitive sense, Christian, not simply someone who, among other circumstantial bonds, has a
commitment which connects him with the Church. Therefore one should not raise dikes between one’s human life and divine vocation; between living in the Church and living in the world; between one’s effort to be a Christian and obligation to attend to other tasks; between realities with a spiritual content and everyday realities; between supernatural and earthly logic; between faith and life... The Founder of Opus Dei expressed this with unusual power in a homily, preached in 1967, which condensed his constant preaching since 1928: “No, my children. We cannot lead a double life. We cannot have a split personality, if we want to be Christians. There is only one life, made of flesh and spirit. And it is that life which has to become, in both body and soul, holy and filled with God. We discover the invisible God in the most visible and material things.”

This does not mean, however, that all of those aspects present themselves or should present themselves mixed up haphazardly, because they are really distinct. Nor is their “unity” brought about because some of them absorb and annul the others. That unity of the distinct, which is not confusion, has to be understood according to a theological model analogous to that which describes the special co-penetration—not absorption, annulling or confusion—between grace and nature, the supernatural and the natural. Grace does not destroy nor annul nature, rather it assumes it, heals it, and elevates it, leading it to transcend the purely human dimension.

a) UNITY OF LIFE AND THE MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION

This is so because unity of life refers also—as does every authentic dimension of secularity—to the mystery of the incarnation of the Word. It's understanding is based, concretely, on consideration of the basic truths rooted in that mystery: that the Word of God, upon becoming man, has taken up all that is human;and that the Christian vocation, a vocation in Christ, encompasses the whole person. Let us look briefly at the implications of this foundation of unity of life.

That the Son of God, upon becoming true man, took up all that is human, has as its consequence that there are no human realities that lie outside of the redemption. Everything has been made by Christ into a path and occasion for the fulfillment of the will of the Father. The new Adam, Head of creation which is recapitulated in Him, is the only one who can say in a full sense, those words of the Roman poet Terence: “I am a man, and I do not consider anything human foreign to me.”

There is then nothing human and noble which does not have a relationship with the Christian life: “Nothing can be foreign to Christ’s care. If we enter into the theology of it instead of limiting ourselves to functional categories, we cannot say that there are things — good, noble or indifferent — which are exclusively worldly. This cannot be after the Word of God has lived among the children of men, felt hunger and thirst, worked with his hands, experienced friendship and obedience and suffering and death.” And this dimension of the Incarnation, which illuminates the deepest truth of things, affects the most important human realities as well as the most humble and ordinary, without distinction: “Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it.”

The affirmation that vocation involves the whole person is equivalent to saying—as we saw when we dealt with the vocational meaning of the secular condition of the laity—that it is not a partial aspect of life, but rather, being in the order of being, of identity, it extends of all facets of one’s personality and aspires to cover all of one’s work. The Christians, incorporated into Christ, made another Christ by baptismal grace, has to take up as He did all of reality with a sense of redemption, because nothing human is foreign to one’s life in Christ and living in Christ embraces all dimensions of his personal existence.
And so, unity of life is not an artificial and forced unification, a voluntaristic program, but rather has a real human basis, supernaturally perfected: it constitutes the harmonious development of the economy of the Incarnation which is both natural and supernatural at the same time. It is to this such an extent that, in my belief, the sense of unity of life can be explained analogically by the formula with which the Council of Chalcedon confessed the unity of the two natures, divine and human, in the person of Christ: “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence.” 75

b) UNITY OF LIFE AND CHRISTIAN CONSISTENCY

Unity of life is, therefore, a realizable aspiration, because it has a real foundation: there is no obstacle on the part of the realities of the world, because, without losing their own natural values, their autonomy,76 all of them possess a profound and definite Christian meaning. And there is also no obstacle on the part of the Christian, who without ceasing to be a person like any other, is called to live and act among those realities not like those “who have no hope,” 77 but in such a way that they are, for him and for others, fully human and at the same time, and for this very reason, fully transcendent: the occasion and the place of a meeting with God, the matter of sanctification.78 This last should lead the lay faithful to value the vocational dimension of their responsibility in respect to the faithful fulfillment of their duties of state. 79

In spite of everything that I have said, it is quite certain that the daily life of each person appears to be fragmented and divided in many senses (faith and reason; mind and heart; duty and tastes; immediate present and the future; hopes and reality; differences of surroundings, activities, loyalties, anxieties and interests . . .). Therefore, unity of life is not something that is accomplished automatically, it has to be achieved, in the light of the personal discovery that everything can and should tend to the same ultimate end, God, even though the immediate end might be very diverse. This evidently is the characteristic perspective of hope: “with the intensely human impetus of Christian hope,” 80 every circumstance can be converted into the path of faithfulness to vocation, according to the admonition of St. Paul: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” 81

The attainment of unity of life consists, then, in taking up more and more fully the vocational meaning of one's own life. This has such importance that one can well say that the effort to discern in each circumstance what is demanded by consistency with one's own vocation, in the various aspects of life, is the path of Christian maturity. A Christian is mature to the extent to which whatever happens spontaneously—what one's freedom asks—is to consider things and make decisions with a supernatural sense, with a profound sense of one's vocation and mission.

To act with naturalness, for a Christian, is precisely to live that consistency. It would be deeply erroneous to understand naturalness as if what was normal was to act in such a way that faith and hope are not noticed: that the action of a Christian cannot be distinguished from that of those who are moved by purely worldly interests and criteria.82 That false naturalness would, in reality mean that one has given in to the temptation to shatter one's unity of life: in this way, the light would cease to illuminate, the savior would lose its savor; instead of sanctifying the world, the disciple of Christ would become worldly.83

In summary, the efficacy of the vocation and mission of the laity necessarily requires an understanding of the secular character of their life and their proper path of fidelity to Christ and the true naturalness of their conduct consists in being faithful in the world.
c) UNITY OF LIFE AND APOSTOLIC MISSION OF THE LAITY.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, dealing with the apostolic mission of the laity, recalls the conciliar doctrine, according to which “Since, like all the faithful, lay Christians are entrusted by God with the apostolate by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation, they have the right and duty, individually or grouped in associations, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth.”  

It goes on to present in summary fashion the conciliar doctrine on the participation of the laity in the triple function—priestly, prophetic and royal—of Christ, indicating various manifestations of that apostolic mission. I will limit myself to pointing out now, in the light of that doctrine, that unity of life, with Christian consistency and naturalness as its operative manifestations, explains also that the apostolic mission of the lay faithful is expressed and realized in a way that is inseparable from its secularity.

The first consequence of this reality is that—for the same reason that the call to holiness and life in the world cannot be separated—the apostolic mission is indissolubly united to ordinary life, and it cannot be reduced to certain activities formally qualified as “apostolate” which also form part of the lay mission. The second is that, therefore, the apostolic mission is not an occasional or intermittent occupation, on the contrary, as an essential element of the Christian vocation, it should be present in all manifestations of the life, “just as there is no way to separate Christ, the God-man, from his role as redeemer.”

It is impossible, therefore, to give an exhaustive list of the manifestations of the lay apostolate, which are as diverse and constant as the situations and variations of life in the world. But it is unquestionable that their mission to “to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer,” must be carried out, in the first place, in the characteristic places of ordinary life: family, work, friendship, social life. Considered from this perspective, everything has an apostolic facet: optimism in family matters, cooperation in household tasks, punctuality and good example at work, sobriety in one's lifestyle, conversations with neighbors, proper choice of clothing or the place for vacations.

In addition to pointing out this apostolic dimension of daily life, the Council forcefully calls on the laity to accept their responsibility for the apostolic mission especially in those places, circumstances and activities in which the Church can be the salt of the earth only through them. This is a proper and specific demand of the secular nature of their vocation: “The priority of the task of the New Evangelization, which involves all the People of God, requires, today in particular... a full recovery of the awareness of the secular nature of the mission of the laity. This enterprise opens vast horizons, some of which have yet to be explored, for the lay faithful. The faithful can be active in this particular moment of history in areas of culture, in the arts and theatre, scientific research, labor, means of communication, politics, and the economy, etc. They are also called to a greater creativity in seeking out ever more effective means whereby these environments can find the fullness of their meaning in Christ.”

We are dealing with areas in which there is no such thing as the Catholic “solution” or “position.” In all these fields, the initiative and responsibility belong properly and exclusively to each of the lay faithful. We are not dealing here with cooperation in the apostolates of the hierarchy to which the lay faithful may be called from time to time. These, of course, must be carried out in accord with the directions and indications of the legitimate Church authorities. The freedom that each of the faithful enjoys in temporal matters, demands the talent and inventiveness to seek in each case the most appropriate means to illuminate and consider issues in a Christian way, or to cooperate in solving them, in a way consistent with the faith. We are not dealing, then,
with a freedom that “liberates” one from consistency with the faith, but of a joyful freedom to be faithful.

This was expressed with great clarity by the Founder of Opus Dei in the homily, already cited, of 1967: “A man who knows that the world, and not just the Church, is the place where he finds Christ, loves that world. He endeavors to become properly trained, intellectually and professionally. He makes up his own mind with complete freedom about the problems of the environment in which he moves, and he takes his own decisions in consequence. As the decisions of a Christian, they derive from personal reflection, which endeavors in all humility to grasp the will of God in both the unimportant and the important events of his life. But it would never occur to such a Christian to think or say that he was stepping down from the temple into the world to represent the Church, or that his solutions are ‘the catholic solutions’ to the problems. That would be clericalism, ‘official Catholicism’, or whatever you want to call it. In any case, it means doing violence to the very nature of things. . . . It is obvious that, in this field as in all others, you would not be able to carry out this program of sanctifying your everyday life if you did not enjoy all the freedom that proceeds from your dignity as men and women created in the image of God, and that the Church freely recognizes. Personal freedom is essential to the Christian life. But do not forget, my children, that I always speak of a responsible freedom. Interpret, then, my words as what they are: a call to exercise your rights every day, and not merely in times of emergency. A call to fulfill honorably your commitments as citizens in all fields—in politics and in financial affairs, in university life and in your job—accepting with courage all the consequences of your free decisions and the personal independence that is yours.”

VI. FORMATION AND INTERIOR LIFE, PILLARS OF CHRISTIAN SECULARITY.

To be able to attain a settled unity of life, and to have our works show the consistency that is a sign of maturity in the Christian vocation, there are two indispensable resources, “which are like living supports of Christian conduct: interior life and doctrinal formation, the deep knowledge of our faith.”

We saw previously that the Christian statement that the world is good does not respond to a naive attitude, nor does it gloss over the manifestations of evil present in the world. It does not mean, as we know, that all realities, just as they appear today in fact—stained by the disorder, consequence of sin—are perfectly good; but that they possess in themselves a meaning, a truth that ordains them to the glory of God, and we have to discover and recover this.

It would, then, show a “false naturalness” to see secularity as simply living in the world and accepting the logic of worldly realities as they exist in fact. This would mean forgetting that strong statement of St. Paul: “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now.” Even the tone of this Pauline text shows us that hope is the right antidote for that false naturalness.

In fact, naturalness—as has been said—is not the predominance of worldly logic in one’s life, but Christian consistency, living worldly realities in the light of their relationship to God’s plan. In this way, as we have seen, two things opposed to secularity are the abandonment of the Christian mission in the world by lay people and contagion with the worldly spirit: adopting a bourgeois life-style. And to avoid this danger, a Christian formation is essential to provide the faithful with the capacity to discern good and evil, to judge first what pleases God without allowing oneself to be carried along by the criteria of fashionable behavior, by what everybody is doing or by what is in fact happening.
A Christian has to be ready, at all times, to sanctify society from within. He is fully present in the world, but without belonging to the world, when it denies God and opposes his lovable will of salvation, not because of its nature, but because of sin.99 To live in the world while being faithful to that mission to purify all human realities and to ordain them according to God, one needs an intense Christian formation, which—for that very reason—the Code of Canon Law has proclaimed as a fundamental right of the faithful, and specifically, of the laity.100

The faithful, together with their human and professional formation, should strive to acquire, first, a clear doctrinal formation: a deep and exact knowledge of the truths of faith—in conformity to each person’s capacity; a correct Christian anthropology; the essentials of moral science, especially in what relate to their profession and circumstances; and a solid knowledge of the Church’s social teachings. But all these elements must be oriented, not simply to erudition, but to a true formation of the person’s conscience.101 This is a task that requires special effort and dedication—from the lay persons themselves and from their pastors, given that Christian consistency must be shown precisely in a secular life characterized by a broad freedom of decision and action102 Christians must be able to explain their hope to whomever asks it,103 but first of all, to themselves, facing all the vicissitudes of their earthly life with the transcendent vision of a hope properly based and knowledgeable, capable of accepting and seeing in perspective, the totality—human and supernatural—of the changing situations and realities of life in the world.

To this end, it is interesting to keep in mind that in Christian life, formation cannot be reduced to more or less detailed “information.” Christian life is not a philosophy or a series of opinions, but a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is not enough, then, to know a doctrine, a group of propositions, more or less profoundly in theory—the formation must become life, unity of life: “Every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.”104

The knowledge of the faith would be of limited use, then, if there were not a sincere life of personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The cultivation of the spiritual life is an indispensable condition for unity of life. One cannot persevere in consistency of faith without an intense living of a personal and transforming relationship with God, and this is what our vocation consists of.

The fount and summit105 of this spiritual life is the Eucharist, its “center and source.”106 Christians, participants in the priesthood of Christ by baptism—the “common priesthood of the faithful”—are called and empowered to join their whole life to the Sacrifice of Christ, the great redeeming act in which the whole of creation, taken up by its Head, becomes a pleasing offering to the Father and the Holy Spirit: “For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.’ Together with the offering of the Lord’s body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.”108

The Eucharist becomes, in this way, a magnificent focus of attraction of unity of life, first of all by sacramentally actualizing the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ: “In the paschal event and the Eucharist which makes it present throughout the centuries, there is a truly enormous ‘capacity,’ which embraces all of history as the recipient of the grace of the redemption”;109 a “universal and, so to speak, cosmic character. Yes,
cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation. The Son of God became man in order to restore all creation, in one supreme act of praise, to the One who made it from nothing. He, the Eternal High Priest who by the blood of his Cross entered the eternal sanctuary, thus gives back to the Creator and Father all creation redeemed. He does so through the priestly ministry of the Church, to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity. Truly this is the mysterium fidei, which is accomplished in the Eucharist: the world which came forth from the hands of God the Creator now returns to him redeemed by Christ.110

Together with that essential and objective redeeming dimension, and precisely because of it, the Eucharist brings about a progressive Christianization of the subjective dispositions of the faithful: "It is because of this that we can consider the Mass as the center and the source of a Christian’s spiritual life. It is the aim of all the sacraments. The life of grace, into which we are brought by baptism, and which is increased and strengthened by confirmation, grows to its fullness in the Mass. 'When we participate in the Eucharist,' writes St. Cyril of Jerusalem, 'we are made spiritual by the divinizing action of the Holy Spirit, who not only makes us share in Christ's life, as in baptism, but makes us entirely Christ-like, incorporating us into the fullness of Christ Jesus.' . . . We may have asked ourselves, at one time or another, how we can correspond to the greatness of God’s love. We may have wanted to see a program for Christian living clearly explained. The answer is easy, and it is within reach of all the faithful: to participate lovingly in the holy Mass, to learn to deepen our personal relationship with God in the sacrifice that summarizes all that Christ asks of us."111

This learning to make contact with God is decisive, because for the Christian soul to become sensitive to that vehement attraction that moves one to offer one’s life with Christ for the salvation of the world, a personal life of prayer—together with the Eucharist and the other sacraments, especially frequent recourse to penance—is indispensable. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, very significantly, captions its first chapter devoted to prayer: "The universal call to prayer." Thus implying that it is not possible to be faithful to the Christian vocation to holiness and apostolate without being faithful to the calling, no less personal, to prayer.112 A prayer that has numerous forms and manifestations, but which has to conduct each faithful to personal friendship, to a vital union with Jesus. "This is how the early Christians lived, and this is how we too should live: meditating the doctrine of our faith until it becomes a part of us; receiving our Lord in the Eucharist; meeting him in the personal dialogue of our prayer, without trying to hide behind impersonal conduct, but face to face with him. These means should become the very substance of our attitude. If they are lacking we will have, perhaps, the ability to think in an erudite manner, an activity that is more or less intense, some practices and devotions. But we will not have and authentically Christian way of life, because we will lack that personal relationship with Christ, which is a real and living participation in the divine work of salvation."113

Christian formation attains its fullest sense when spiritual life and doctrinal instruction interpenetrate in a deep unity, because, in the end, formation consists in identification with Christ, permitting the action of the Holy Spirit to form Christ in each of the faithful, according to that exclamation of St. Paul: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!"114 Spiritual life and formation coincide in their most profound sense under the action of the Sanctifying Spirit, facilitated by the docility of the Christian who generously cultivates the life of grace: "The Holy Spirit forms the human spirit from within according to the divine model which is Christ. Thus, through the Spirit, that Christ whom we know through the pages of the Gospel becomes the ‘life of the soul’, and man, when he thinks, when he loves, when he judges, when he acts, even when he feels, is conformed to Christ; he become ‘Christ-like’."115
This living according to the Spirit brings it about that the realities of daily life, themselves, turned into the place and matter of the life of prayer, are rediscovered through the eyes of Christ. We thus recognize our own existence as an offering that can attain co-redemptive value, united to Christ’s Sacrifice of in the Eucharist, in which the perfect unity of ordinary life, holiness and apostolate is found and the true reason for hope becomes present. John Paul II expressed this in his last Encyclical, with a reflection on the Church that is also applicable to every Christian: “The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church. In a variety of ways she joyfully experiences the constant fulfillment of the promise: ‘Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age’ (Mt 28:20), but in the Holy Eucharist, through the changing of bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord, she rejoices in this presence with unique intensity. Ever since Pentecost, when the Church, the People of the New Covenant, began her pilgrim journey towards her heavenly homeland, the Divine Sacrament has continued to mark the passing of her days, filling them with confident hope”.

2) “How can one not notice the ever-growing existence of religious indifference and atheism in its more varied forms particularly in its perhaps most widespread form of secularism? Adversely affected by the impressive triumphs of continuing scientific and technological development and above all, fascinated by a very old and yet new temptation, namely, that of wishing to become like God (cf. Gen 3:5) through the use of a liberty without bounds, individuals cut the religious roots that are in their hearts; they forget God or simply retain him without meaning in their lives, or outrightly reject him and begin to adore various “idols” of the contemporary world. The present-day phenomenon of secularism is truly serious not simply as regards the individual, but in some ways as regards whole communities, as the Council has already indicated: ‘Growing numbers of people are abandoning religion in practice.’ At other times I myself have recalled the phenomenon of de-Christianization which strikes long-standing Christian people and which continually calls for a re-evangelization.” (John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Christifideles Laici, [CL] December 30, 1988, no. 4).
3) Illustrative of nihilism as despair is this other passage of the pontifical magisterium: “As a result of the crisis of rationalism, what has appeared finally is nihilism. . . . Its adherents claim that the search is an end in itself, without any hope or possibility of ever attaining the goal of truth. In the nihilist interpretation, life is no more than an occasion for sensations and experiences in which the ephemeral has pride of place. Nihilism is at the root of the widespread mentality which claims that a definitive commitment should no longer be made, because everything is fleeting and provisional.” (John Paul II, Encyclical Fides et Ratio, September 14, 1998, no. 46).
4) EiE, no. 9.
5) EiE, no. 10.
6) Ibid.
7) In the homily of the Mass of inauguration of his Pontificate (April 24, 2005), Benedict XVI made use of that same comparison: “The pastor must be inspired by Christ's holy zeal: for him it is not a matter of indifference that so many people are living in the desert. And there are so many kinds of desert. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God's darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.” This image is not that distant from the divine lament expressed by Jeremiah (2:13): “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”
8) St. Josemaría Escrivá, Friends of God, no. 208. Because of the informative and pastoral orientation that I have tried to give these pages, I ask the reader’s indulgence of the numerous bibliographic citations which are de rigueur in an academic study of the subject of secularity in general. To develop the ideas that follow, aside from invoking the opportune teaching orientation, I base myself in a special way, explicitly and
implicitly on the teachings of St. Josemaría. The interior lights and motions that he received from God and that he faithfully spread through his pastoral activity since 1926, cast a specially strong light on the universal call to sanctity, the vocation of ordinary Christians, the value of secular realities, ordinary life as a path and place of meeting God and the apostolic mission of the lay faithful. All of this in a pastoral and theological context in which those concepts, or better, the understanding of their radical connection with the history of salvation, were not common teaching. Undoubtedly the teaching and pastoral practice of the Founder of Opus Dei, “not only in the fruitful example of his own life, but also—prophetically anticipating the Second Vatican Council—in the extraordinary vigor with which he sought from the very start of his ministry to address to all Christians the Gospel’s call (Pontifical Decreed on the Heroic Virtues of the Servant of God J. Escrivá de Balaguer, April 9, 1990), is counted among the relevant contributions with which the Holy Spirit prepared the times and consciences for the providential renovation that the Second Vatican Council provided in this area. For this reason, they constitute a privileged guide for their theoretical and living comprehension: cf., Avaro del Portillo, As a Conclusion to the Symposium, in M. Belda et al. (eds.), Santidad y Mundo: Proceedings of the Theological Symposium for the Study of the Teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá (Rome, October 12-14, 1993), Eunsa, Pamplona 1996, pp. 277-294.

9) EIE, no. 10.

10) St. Thomas explains that “when our mind is occupied with temporal things as though trying to find its end there, it is lowered to them; in contrast, when these things are ordered to blessedness, one is not brought down by them, but, rather, one raises them to a higher level” (S.Th., II-II, q.83, a. 6 ad 3).

11) Friends of God, no. 208.

12) Cf. EIE, no. 33 and passim.

13) “‘It is a time of hope, and I live off this treasure. It is not just a phrase, Father,’ you tell me, ‘it is a reality.’—Well then . . . bring the whole world, all the human values which attract you so very strongly — friendship, the arts, science, philosophy, theology, sport, nature, culture, souls — bring all of this within that hope: the hope of Christ.” St. Josemaría Escrivá, Furrow, no. 293.


15) St. Josemaría illustrates an aspect of that ambiguity in the sphere of the spiritual life, in Furrow, no. 294, which refers to “that pleasant but insubstantial enchantment of the world . . . there all the time.” Cf. the enlightening balance with which the Council expresses the general statement of this theme in GS, 36 ff.

16) Cf. GS, 36

17) 1 Per 3:15.

18) Friends of God, no. 208.

19) “The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man; it takes up the hopes that inspire men’s activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 1818).

20) Friends of God, no. 206.


22) Cf. LG, 11; 39-41.

23) Pope Paul VI, Motu proprio Sanctitas Clarior, March 19, 1969), p. 159. For his part, Pope John Paul II evaluated that teaching as follows: “The Second Vatican Council has significantly spoken on the universal call to holiness. It is possible to say that this call to holiness is precisely the basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the Gospel. This charge is not a simple moral exhortation but an undeniable requirement arising from the mystery of the Church” (CL, 16).


25) This is the way that the Synod of Bishops of 1987, dedicated to the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world, understood it, as they took up the challenge “of specifying the concrete ways of seeing to it that the splendid “theory” of the laity expressed by the Council might find an authentic ecclesial “praxis.” (CL, 16).

26) GS, 43.

27) CL, 7.

28) EIE, 41.

29) “... [begging] Our Lord to grant us an ever increasing hope, we will possess the infectious joy of those who know they are children of God. ... Let us be optimists. Moved by the power of hope, we will fight to wipe away the trail of filth and slime left by the sowers of hatred [cf. The Way, no. 1]. We will find a new joyful perspective to the world, seeing that it has sprung forth beautiful and fair from the hands of God. We will give it back to him with that same beauty. (Friends of God, no. 219).

30) As indicated by the title, I am going to refer directly only to the lay faithful, without dealing with other aspects or types of secularity. The purpose of the reflections that I propose here is to illustrate some of the
principle dimensions of the secular character of the lay vocation, leaving aside any kind of comparison or theoretical discernment of the different vocations and conditions or positions that exist in the Church. Within these coordinates, given that, in the case of the laity, secularity is translated as the secular character to which the Council refers, I will use both expressions as synonyms, without any further shades of meaning, to simplify terms.

31) Jn 14:30.
32) Cf. CCC, 2853.
33) Cf. in this regard, Jose Luis Illanes, Mundo y Santidad, Madrid, 1984, pp. 65 ff, and the bibliography cited therein.
34) LG, 31.
35) LG, 31.
36) These were originally spelled out in my book Fieles en el mundo: La secularidad de los laicos cristianos, Pamplona 2000, ch. 2.
37) In the decades following the Council, the expression “universal call to holiness” has become a part of the common vocabulary of Christians. But, perhaps for that very reason, it is very necessary to accentuate certain aspects of its meaning, to avoid it being vitiated. Among these, it would be good to call attention precisely to its character of being a call, that is to say, a vocation: that universal or general call is, for each Christian, a very personal vocation. The expression “universal call” is an attempt to place the accent on what is “new” in the Conciliar teaching with respect to the preceding doctrinal situation: that this call extends to all of the faithful by the fact of being such, that it does not exclude anyone. But this does not mean that it is a matter of a generic, impersonal call, without any specific addressee. On the contrary, every call from God, even when it seems to be directed equally at many people, or at a collectivity, is always translated into a personal for each one: into a divine vocation to which each has to respond personally. And it is also worth pointing out that this is a matter of vocation in the strict sense, because the concept of vocation has also with the passage of time suffered an analogous, and parallel, process to that obscuring of the call of all Christians to holiness: “Before the Second Vatican Council, the concept of ‘vocation’ was applied first of all to the priesthood and religious life, as if Christ had to the young person his evangelical ‘follow me’ only for these cases. The Council has broadened this way of looking at things” (John Paul II, Letter to Young People, March 31, 1985, no. 9).
38) CL, 15.
39) CL, 15.
40) St. Josemaría Escrivá, Christ Is Passing By, no. 20.
41) See below, note 74.
42) CL, 15.
43) Cf. Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 31.
45) “Creation,” says the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “is the foundation of ‘all God’s saving plans,’ the ‘beginning of the history of salvation’ . . . that culminates in Christ. Conversely, the mystery of Christ casts conclusive light on the mystery of creation and reveals the end for which ‘in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’ (Gen 1:1): from the beginning, God envisaged the glory of the new creation in Christ (cf. Rom 8:18-23)” (CCC, 280).
46) Col 1:15ff.
47) 2 Cor 5:19.
48) 2 Cor 5:18.
50) Eph 1:3ff.
51) Christ Is Passing By, no. 112.
52) LG, 31.
53) CL, 15. St. Josemaría explains that vocation with formulations similar to the following: “What illuminates our conscience is faith in Christ, who has died and risen and is present in every moment of life. Faith moves us to play our full part in the changing situations and in the problems of human history. In this history, which began with the creation of the world and will reach its fulfillment at the end of time, the Christian is no expatriate. He is a citizen of the city of men, and his soul longs for God. While still on earth he has glimpses of God’s love and comes to recognize it as the goal to which all men on earth are called.” (Christ Is Passing By, no. 99).
54) Very timely, in this sense, is the description of the circumstances of the pagan world that is shown in the first chapter of the Letter to the Romans.
55) “The world . . . ‘That is our field!’ you said, after directing your eyes and thoughts to heaven, with all the assurance of the farmer who walks through his own ripe corn. Regniare Christum volumus! -- we want Him to reign over this earth of his!” (Furrow, no. 292).
56) *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 183.


58) “We must therefore see ourselves as a tiny measure of yeast, prepared and ready to do good to the whole of mankind, remembering the words of the Apostle: ‘a little leaven is enough to leaven all the dough’, transforming it completely. We have to learn to become that yeast, that leaven, and so modify and transform the multitude is yeast, by its nature, better than dough? No. But it is what makes the dough rise and become good and nourishing food. . . . This result would never have been possible had it not been for the small amount of leaven, which dissolved and disappeared among the other ingredients, working effectively and passing unnoticed. . . . if leaven is not used for fermenting, it rots. There are two ways leaven can disappear, either by giving life to dough, or by being wasted, a perfect tribute to selfishness and barrenness” (*Friends of God*, nos. 257–258).

59) CL, 2.

60) Note that not only the second of these, as we have seen, but also the first could imply a deterioration or curtailment of Christian hope, to the extent that it implies a flight, a contempt, or a devaluation of human realities (cf. GS, 1; 34). Indeed “the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one” (GS, 39). The Church well knows that no temporal achievement is to be identified with the Kingdom of God, but that all such achievements simply reflect and in a sense anticipate the glory of the Kingdom, the Kingdom which we await at the end of history, when the Lord will come again. But that expectation can never be an excuse for lack of concern for people in their concrete personal situations and in their social, national and international life, since the former is conditioned by the latter, especially today. However imperfect and temporary are all the things that can and ought to be done through the combined efforts of everyone and through divine grace, at a given moment of history, in order to make people’s lives “more human,” nothing will be lost or will have been in vain (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, December 30, 1987, no. 48).

61) Cf. CL, 23.

62) This is not to say that there are not also intra-ecclesial tasks and offices that are ordinarily proper to the lay faithful, and others that these could exercise, and at times even to supply for the absence or scarcity of sacred ministers (cf. Interdicasterial Instruction *Ecclesiae de Mysterio*, August 15, 1997, Theological Principles, 4). The Church has an internal life with needs, initiatives and activities in which all of the faithful collaborate in accordance with their situation, preparation and possibility: in respect to those specific offices, services and ecclesial functions one can of course say that there is a diversity of kinds of dedication and availability, in accord with the situation and vocation of each. It could even happen that the Church might have a need for some lay people to center their principal activity, even professionally, in tasks of that time. The carrying out of functions and jobs, the providing of services and participation in internal activities of the Church (liturgy, catechesis, charity, administration, counseling, apostolic groups, prayer groups, etc.), especially in parishes (cf. CL, 26), are not only something strange for the laity, but constitute a normal and joyful facet of their full condition as members of the Church.

63) CL, 17.

64) “Only from inside the Church’s mystery of communion, explains Pope John Paul II, “is the ‘identity’ of the lay faithful made known and their fundamental dignity revealed. Only within the context of this dignity can their vocation and mission in the Church and in the world be defined” (CL, 8).

65) Among other aspects and consequences of the consideration of the Church as communion, one point that stands out and permits one to understand the full ecclesial nature of the secular life of the lay faithful is the following: “Ecclesial communion is more precisely likened to an “organic” communion, analogous to that of a living and functioning body. In fact, at one and the same time it is characterized by a diversity and a complementarity of vocations and states in life, of ministries, of charisms and responsibilities. Because of this diversity and complementarity every member of the lay faithful is seen in relation to the whole body and offers a totally unique contribution on behalf of the whole body” (CL, 20).

66) This supernatural reality does not imply, of course, that their activity in the area of public life, implies any sort of official or semi-official representation of the Church as an institution: “It is very important, especially where a pluralistic society prevails, that there be a correct notion of the relationship between the political community and the Church, and a clear distinction between the tasks which Christians undertake, individually or as a group, on their own responsibility as citizens guided by the dictates of a Christian conscience, and the activities which, in union with their pastors, they carry out in the name of the Church” (GS, 76). Later in this study, I will refer to the activity of the laity in public life.

67) “The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world’s great personages but nonetheless looked upon work in the Lord’s vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God’s grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history” (CL, 17).

69) GS, 43.

70) St. Josemaría Escrivá, Conversations, no. 114.

71) "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto" (Heautontimorumenos, l. 1).

72) Christ Is Passing By, no. 112.

73) Conversations, no. 114. The Pontifical Decree on the Heroic Virtues of the Servant of God J. Escrivá de Balaguer, points out that thanks to "his vivid perception of the mystery of the Incarnation," the Founder of Opus Dei understood "how supernatural life penetrates all human realities in the heart of a person reborn in Christ. These realities thus become the setting for holiness and the means to that goal."

74) Vocation, strictly speaking, is not a simple circumstance added to or suddenly coming upon one's personal existence. On the contrary, it constitutes the most definitive basis of a person's life and identity and, in consequence, it affects the whole person, his very being, his definition. As Pope John Paul II explained on one occasion: "The vocation of each person is fused, to a certain degree, with his own being: one can say that the vocation and the person become a single thing" (Meeting with seminarians in Porto Alegre, June 5, 1980. This implies that the vocation of every Christian to sanctity, the Christian vocation, does not constitute a partial aspect of his or her existence, but rather, by being in the order of being, it extends to all of the epochs of one's life and to all the facets of one's personality and aspires to encompass the whole work. In effect, if the life of each person is radically explained by the love emanating from God who called that person into existence (cf. Eph 1:4) and to the fullness of love, it is evident that responding to that vocation is not just one among the tasks that call for one's attention and energy. Nor is it even the most important task, in competition with all the others. It is rather one's raison d'être and one's only goal, to such an extent that all of the tasks and aspects of one's existence are, or should be, aspects and moments of that unique task. One can understand, then, that totality is the only magnitude adequate to vocation: "Christian faith and calling affect our whole existence, not just a part of it. Our relations with God necessarily demand giving ourselves, giving ourselves completely. The man of faith sees life, in all its dimensions, from a new perspective: that which is given us by God" (Christ Is Passing By, no. 46).

75) Council of Chalcedon, Symbol, DS, 301-302.

76) Cf. Second Vatican Council, GS, 36ff; Decree Apostolicam Actuositatem [AA], no. 7.

77) 1 Thess 4:13.

78) The Second Vatican Council teaches, in this respect, that "All those things which make up the temporal order, namely, the good things of life and the prosperity of the family, culture, economic matters, the arts and professions, the laws of the political community . . . not only aid in the attainment of man's ultimate goal but also possess their own intrinsic value. This value has been established in them by God, whether they are considered in themselves or as parts of the whole temporal order" (AA, 7). From this, C. Soler concludes: "... the ordination of earthly realities to the ultimate end cannot be done independent of their proper meaning; that is to say, it is not right to take them as just an opportunity to direct oneself to the ultimate end, it is not right to order them to this end from outside of themselves, extrinsically, as if their own content were a matter of indifference in itself. To say this with examples: it is not valid to take them as a mere occasion to exercise virtue, or to order them by means of offering them with a right intention, or to give testimony of Christ, independently of the proper reality or temporal activity with which we are dealing. It is its proper content, its material significance, its proper dynamic, in short its proper value which has to be ordained intrinsically to the final end. That is to say, it is a matter of finding in each reality its proper meaning and to discover the immanent ordination of that meaning itself to the final end" (Iglesia y Estado. La incidencia del Concilio Vaticano II sobre el derecho público externo, Pamplona 1993, p. 151). This is the reason that is hidden, for example, in these words of the Founder of Opus Dei in regard to work: "It is no good offering to God something that is less perfect than our poor human limitations permit. The work that we offer must be without blemish and it must be done as carefully as possible, even in its smallest details, for God will not accept shoddy workmanship" (Friends of God, no. 55).

79) On this point of special importance is the personal discovery of the value of one's own work as a daily
realities which are sanctifiable and sanctifying: “Your ordinary professional work will provide the true, solid, noble material out of which you will build a truly Christ-like life. You will use your work to make fruitful the grace which comes to us from Christ. Faith, hope and charity will come into play in your professional work done for God. The incidents, the problems, the friendships which your work brings with it, will give you food for prayer. The effort to improve your own daily occupation will give you the chance to experience the cross which is essential for a Christian. When you feel your weakness, the failures which arise even in human undertakings, you will gain in objectivity, in humility and in understanding for others. Successes and joys will prompt you to thanksgiving and to realize that you do not live for yourself, but for the service of others and of God” (Christ Is Passing By, no. 49).

80) P. O’Callaghan, La virtud de la esperanza y la ascetica cristiana en algunos escritos del Beato Fundador del Opus Dei, in Romana 23 (1996/2), PP. 262-279, (The expression cited is on page 268).

81) 1 Cor 10:31.

82) Cf. Hier. 2:5. And we make ourselves one with him in order to offer all things, with him, to the Father. Our calling to be children of God, in the midst of the world, requires us not only to seek our own personal holiness, but also to go out onto all the ways of the earth, to convert them into roads that will carry souls over all obstacles and lead them to the Lord. As we take part in all temporal activities, as ordinary citizens, we are to become leaven (cf. Mt 13:33) acting on the mass (cf. 1 Cor 5:6) (Christ Is Passing By, no. 120).

83) “And in a pagan or in a worldly atmosphere, when my life clashes with its surroundings, won’t my naturalness seem artificial?” you ask me. —And I reply: Undoubtedly your life will clash with theirs; and that contrast—faith confirmed by works!— is exactly the naturalness I ask of you” (St. Josemaría Escrivá, The Way, no. 380).

84) CCC, 900

85) Each one of us has to be ipse Christus: Christ himself. He is the one mediator between God and man (cf. 1 Tim 2:5). And we make ourselves one with him in order to offer all things, with him, to the Father. Our calling to be children of God, in the midst of the world, requires us not only to seek our own personal holiness, but also to go out onto all the ways of the earth, to convert them into roads that will carry souls over all obstacles and lead them to the Lord. As we take part in all temporal activities, as ordinary citizens, we are to become leaven (cf. Mt 13:33) acting on the mass (cf. 1 Cor 5:6) (Christ Is Passing By, no. 120).

86) “The Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate” (AA, no. 2).

87) Christ Is Passing By, no. 122.

88) Lumen Gentium, no. 31

89) Cf. Lumen Gentium, no. 33

90) Instruction Ecclesiae de Mysterio, cit. Premise; cf. also CL, 36 ff.


92) Cf. Gaudium et Spes, 43; Code of Canon Law, canons 227, 272.

93) Conversations, nos. 116-117.

94) Christ Is Passing By, no. 8.

95) “Our Lord . . . has given us the world for our inheritance. It is up to us to keep our souls and our minds wide awake. We have to be realistic, without being defeatist. Only a person with a callous conscience, made insensitive by routine or dulled by a frivolous attitude, can allow himself to think that evil—offense to God and harm, at times irreparable harm, to souls—does not exist in the world he sees. We have to be optimistic, but our optimism should come from our faith in the power of God who does not lose battles, and not from any human sense of satisfaction, from a stupid and presumptuous complacency.” (Christ Is Passing By, no. 123).

96) Rom 8:19-22

97) Cf. Eph 5:10; Rom 12:2

98) In the encyclical Ventitatis Splendor, of August 6, 1993, John Paul II made this reflection: “In a widely de-Christianized culture, the criteria employed by believers themselves in making judgments and decisions often appear extraneous or even contrary to those of the Gospel. It is urgent then that Christians should rediscover the newness of the faith and its power to judge a prevalent and all-intrusive culture. As the Apostle Paul admonishes us “Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of the light (for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead, expose them.. Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time because the days are evil” (Eph 5:8-11, 15-16; cf. 1 Thess 5:4-8) (no. 88).

99) Christ Is Passing By, no. 125.


101) Cf. on the characteristics of this formation, R. Lanzetti, L’unità di vita e la missione del fedeli laici..., cit. (Section B: “La formazione dei laici all’unità di vita,” pp. 304 and ff.)

102) Cf. For one of the relevant aspects of the activity of the laity in temporal affairs, Congregation for the doctrine of the Faith, Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life, Nov. 24, 2002; and among other studies, A. Rodríguez Luño, La formación de la conciencia en materia social y política según las enseñanzas del Beato Josemaría Escrivá, in Romana (1997/1) pp.
162-181.
103) Cf. 1 Pet. 3:15
104) Mt 7: 26-27
105) Cf. Lumen Gentium, no. 11.
106) Christ Is Passing By, no. 87
107) Cf. Lumen Gentium, no. 10
108) Lumen Gentium, no. 34; cf. LG 10.
109) John Paul II, Encyclical Ecclesia de Eucharistia, April 17, 2003, no. 5.
110) Ibid., no. 8.
111) Christ Is Passing By, nos. 87-88.
112) In the Apostolic letter Novo Millennio Ineunte, of January 6, 2001, John Paul II expressed it thus: “But it would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today’s world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but ‘Christians at risk.’ They would run the insidious risk of seeing their faith progressively undermined, and would perhaps end up succumbing to the allure of ‘substitutes’. (no. 34)
113) Christ Is Passing By, no. 134.
114) Gal 4:19
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