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## EDITORIAL: "THE LAITY: SHOCK TROOPS OF THE CHURCH MILITANT"

*Timoth T. O'Donnell, S.T.D.*

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HIS TITLE OCCURS WITHIN THE LARGER THEME OF "THE CHURCH MILITANT AND the Future of America." Let us begin with some preliminaries. I offer for your consideration, first of all, the reflections of a Catholic layman, second an American archbishop, and last some recent statistical data. Let us start with an assessment of our present situation by Patrick Buchanan:

The hard truth with which conservatives must come to terms is that the resolution of America's social crisis may be beyond the realm of politics and government, in a democratic society. If men have come to believe homosexuality is a "legitimate" and even commendable "life-style," that abortion is a matter of personal choice, that "pornography" exists only in the eye of the beholder, no federal law will dissuade them. If a woman has come to believe that divorce is the answer to every difficult marriage, that career comes before children, that the day-care center is the proper place for infants and toddlers and the boarding school for the younger children, no democratic government can impose another set of values upon her. If half of America has given up "the old time religion," no political party and no national administration can reconvert that half of the country ... Much of what ails America, then, is not a "problem" that can be "solved" by political action; it is a predicament with which we must learn to live. But this necessity - that we understand and accept the limits of politics in a democratic society - is not an argument for quietism. Traditionalists and conservatives have as much right as secularists to see our values written into law, to have our beliefs serve as the basis of federal legislation ... The duty of the political conservative, then, is to do our best to make ourselves, and our government, the allies of our Judeo-Christian values, to make government again the protector and friend of the permanent things, to do the best we can in the times in which we live. And to put our trust and faith, ultimately, not in ourselves alone. (Patrick Buchanan, *Right From the Beginning*, pp. 341, 359)

For our second offering, I present an interesting dialogue which took place a few years ago between John Paul II and the Archbishop of Milwaukee, Rembert Weakland, on the subject of the laity in America:

The Archbishop began in a very upbeat way with statistics indicating the alleged growth and strength of the Catholic laity. According to Weakland's statistics, the Catholic laity make up 28% of the total population which is an increase of 8% since 1947. The Archbishop informed the Pope that the laity are "moving rapidly into the upper echelons of society, business and politics." This is a source of great pride to the Archbishop since these people are "products of the fine Catholic educational tradition of the Church in the USA."

These upwardly mobile Catholics continue to seek higher levels of education. Accordingly, it “can be assumed” that the laity will “continue to take a prominent role” in American society. The Archbishop sees this as a great improvement over the dark period before the Second World War when the Catholic laity were “mostly working class immigrants, considering themselves second class citizens at best.” Today, the Church in America “can boast of having the largest number of educated faithful in the world.”

The jubilant Archbishop again turned to sociological statistics to demonstrate the vigor of the Catholic laity. He mentioned that Sunday Mass attendance has declined from 74% in 1958 to 53% in 1985 but quickly added that 71% went to Mass at least once a month! This fact is not perceived as a serious pastoral problem by the Archbishop since the figure “has been stable” for the past decade and the defection rate today “is not much different” from the 1950’s.

Weakland continues with this insightful statistical analysis: An increased number of Catholic laity are reading the Bible and attend “other Church functions.” Another cause for the Archbishop’s optimism is that surveys “show a remarkable increase” in the numbers attending the sacrament of Reconciliation, up from 18% in 1977 to 23% in 1986.

Let us now move from the exuberant Archbishop of Milwaukee to our third offering, which is a survey of Catholics in New York conducted by the *Daily News*:

We are told that 62 percent of Catholics do not think that sexual intercourse by unmarried couples is morally wrong, 59 percent do not disapprove on moral grounds of listening to heavy metal rock music and videos, 38 percent do not see “homosexuality” as immoral, 83 percent would approve of a married woman using birth control pills, and 93 percent would approve of

using a condom to prevent the spread of AIDS.

On the abortion issue, the question posed was: “Should a woman be able to get an abortion for any reason?” To this question 63 percent of Catholics answered “Yes.”

What can we learn from all of this? Patrick Buchanan tells us the answer to the crisis afflicting America is not found in political parties or political action. Rembert Weakland reveals the inroads which secularity have made within Church leadership in this country. *The Daily News* poll doesn’t tell us much but it certainly points to widespread confusion. Perhaps the laity should not be called *shock troops* but the *shocking troops*. But we shouldn’t tamper with the title.

To conceive of the laity as *shock troops* - and the Church as an “army in battle array” is certainly most appealing. It conjures up images of St. Michael leading the hosts of God, crying out “who is like unto God” as he casts down Lucifer; Godfrey of Bouillon at the gates of Jerusalem crying out “open in the name of the Savior”; Don Juan of Austria cross and sword in hand at Lepanto; of monks chanting the Divine Office in their monastic fortresses armed with their spiritual weapons of poverty, chastity and obedience, forming the *castra Dei*.



Yet, when we stop and look around us, in many ways the picture looks bleak. It does appear as if we’re losing on all fronts. There may be some truth to this as we find ourselves surrounded and disheartened by scandals, defections and betrayals.

Given the bleakness of the landscape, the widespread confusion and scandal, where do we start? How do we as faithful and dutiful soldiers of Christ, consecrated and confirmed in His service, fight the good fight of faith?

We begin, not by pointing our finger at the Pope, nor the American Bishops, nor the parish priest. Recall when Napoleon had captured Pope Pius how he stretched out his 4 foot 6 inch frame and said to the Pope: “Lis-

ten here you, I'll destroy you and your Church." And the Pope stood up and said, "Silly little man. Me and my bishops haven't done it in 1800 years and you think you will do it!" Yes, the Church has survived in spite of the hierarchy. No, we don't start with the Pope, the American bishops or the priests ... we start with *ourselves*.

Throughout the history of the Church there have been a number of doctrinal crises which have led the Church to examine more closely her teaching. She has had to clarify certain points through a conciliar or papal definition. A fine example of this was the Council of Chalcedon which settled a number of christological disputes. Cardinal Newman, in his brilliant *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* shows how the Church can develop her teaching without any essential change. This development can occur in ecclesiology and spirituality. The Church, in living her fidelity to Christ, can come to a better understanding of herself and a clearer understanding of her doctrines. Certain aspects of her teaching can be brought into sharper focus.

The Church in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has read the signs of the times and has placed a greater emphasis on the role of the laity. The Protestant revolution and assault in the sixteenth century was met by a bastion of theological lucidity... the Council of Trent. The fundamental Catholic doctrine of mediation was attacked and so the Church wisely defended, clarified, and emphasized those truths which were under attack: the Mass, the sacramental system, and of course the priesthood and hierarchy. (One can never say enough about the glory of the Catholic priesthood.) This emphasis was right and proper at that time. In order to counteract the leading Protestant errors, the role of the priest had to be stressed with the result that little was said about the laity.

With the French Revolution and the supposed "Age of Enlightenment" we see the rise of an ever increasing secular outlook and an anti-Christian mentality spread throughout the lands of Christendom as the Church continued to lose her influence on society. This hostile secularism has continued to drive Christ and his Church out of the public arena. The Church, in response, has foreseen the solution to this problem in the apostolate of the laity. This can be seen in the teaching of the popes from Pius IX on, culminating in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council which not only referred to the laity in nearly ever major document but devoted an entire decree on the laity.

One of the first to see clearly the importance of the laity in the life of the Church and to defend their call to holiness, from which springs the apostolate, was St. Francis De Sales, who stands without peer as the theologian for the laity.

Almost all those who have hitherto written about devotion have been concerned with instructing persons wholly withdrawn from the world or have at least taught a kind of devotion that leads to such complete retirement. My purpose is to instruct those who live in town, within families and by their state of life are obliged to live an ordinary life as to outward appearances.

Frequently on the pretext of some supposed impossibility, they will not even think of undertaking a devout life. It is their opinion that ... no one should aspire to the palm of Christian piety as long as he is living under the pressure of worldly affairs.

I shall show such men that a strong, resolute soul can live in the world without being infected by any of its moods.

It is an error, or rather a heresy, to wish to banish the devout life from the regiment of soldiers, the mechanic's shop, the court of princes or the home of married people. (St. Francis De Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*)



This teaching was reechoed in the Second Vatican Council's teaching concerning the "universal call to holiness."

The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life (of which he is the author and maker) to each and everyone of his disciples without distinction. "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity (L.G. #40).

I think that oftentimes we forget that in this life we are engaged in a great war. This is why it is important to remember that the Church on earth is the Church

militant ... i.e., the Church fighting, struggling against sin and temptation. In this war we have three great enemies which seek our death. What I call “the grand alliance” and the ancient spiritual wisdom of the Church calls the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Since the laity, in fulfillment of their vocation, must in a special way live in the world, these enemies take a particular line of attack.

First let's examine “the world.”

This mundane spirit which pulls at us to an inordinate attachment to earthly things at the cost of weakening our attachment to Christ seeks to exalt the possession of things above all else. We are told: “It's not what you are but what you have that's important” - “He who dies with the most toys wins.”

Widespread consumerism, unbridled pleasure, comfort, riches, fame - all are presented so as to lure us away from a Christ-like spirit. The mall has become the cathedral of twentieth century man. That's where we go when we are depressed. All are encouraged to participate in the liturgy which is celebrated by making a purchase! To go to the mall and return empty-handed is to be a mere catechumen. Power also becomes the goal and passion of our life so that Christians speak of and long for “empowerment.” Violence has also become an end in itself. In films, how far we have come from John Wayne's reluctance to-fight in Ford's “The Quiet Man” to the slow motion gore of “Friday the 13th VII” or “Faces of Death.” Speak of faith and morality in this area and you will be both ridiculed or persecuted.

Behind the worldly spirit of course is the Prince of this world. This worldly spirit leads us to drop our spiritual weapons as does our other adversary closely related to it, the flesh.

The flesh as an enemy is downplayed today. Again, we are told “if it feels good do it” since “after all, life is to enjoy.” The flesh is an internal enemy more properly called concupiscence. Unmortified appetites lead us to seek pleasure without restraint and leads to excess in sex, drugs, etc. The inroads into the Catholic laity are found in widespread fornication, contraception (which offers sex for pleasure not children - recreation not intimacy and self-donation), abortion (unborn children offered up to the old gods of convenience, pleasure, sexual license

and lust), adultery, and divorce.

And of course behind this cacophony is the spirit of darkness, who as many spiritual authors have told us is never as strong as when his existence is denied or ignored. Mention the Devil as Paul VI did and they will laugh at you. The first letter of Peter tells us that the Devil goes about like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Well, if there was a hungry lion loose in the neighborhood we certainly would arm ourselves and seek protection for our children. To battle a spiritual power one must use spiritual weapons. We must become shock troops. Our effectiveness as troops will depend upon our holiness of life. Holiness is a sine qua non for our efforts as lay apostles.

As John Paul II said in his Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, “Holiness then must be called a fundamental presupposition and an irreplaceable condition for everyone in fulfilling the mission of salvation within the Church.” As the great Dominican, Garrigou-Lagrange, used to say in his lectures at the Angelicum, “You cannot influence others unless you first have developed your own interior life.” Christ himself has taught us this. What were his first words to his followers? Come ... “Come learn of me.”... What were his last words? ... Go ... “Go out into the world.” Today we have far too many who go out into the world without first having come to Christ to learn and imbibe His mind and His spirit. Is it any wonder that so many Christians are seduced by the world and speak incessantly of empowerment, liberation, and reproductive freedom? So we must first be holy ... grafted into Christ; and then and only then do we go out to the world.

Now all authentically Catholic spirituality must be deeply grounded in Dogma. This is why doctrinal formation is so important if the laity as apostles are going to bring Christ and his gospel to the world to transform it ... to purify it ... or as our college motto states, “to restore all things in Christ.”

The Pope emphasized this very point in his exhortation on the laity:

The situation today points to an ever increasing urgency for a doctrinal formation of the lay faithful, not simply in a better understanding which is natural to faith's dynamism but also in enabling them to “give a reason for their hope” in view of the world and its grave and complex problems.

The laity, in living the life of faith, grounded in the divine life given in baptism, strengthened in confirmation, nourished by the sacraments, prayer (especially the rosary) and by living a life of Christian virtue, can become holy and bear witness to a world intent upon suicide.

Lay spirituality is profoundly incarnational and secular in that it seeks to redeem the temporal order through involvement and interaction rather than a monastic withdrawal. It therefore is deeply apostolic and is lived in accordance with ones duties and state of life. We must remember that this does not always mean doing great things in the eyes of the world. As St. Teresa of Avila said "it's not what you do, its the love with which you do it" that determines ones growth in holiness. And so, a mother cooking a meal for her children, a father kneeling at his child's bedside to pray, a kind word or gesture for a neighbor who is suffering, all lead to sanctification and growth in holiness.

As the Second Vatican Council stated:

Gathered together in the People of God and established in the one Body of Christ, under one head, the laity - no matter who they are - have, as living members, the vocation of applying to the building up of the Church and to its continual sanctification all the powers which they have received from the goodness of the Creator and from the grace of the Redeemer.

The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church...

The laity however are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth (L.G. #33).

Thus every lay person, through those gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church itself "according to the measure of Christ's bestowal."

Such an understanding should prevent the clericalization of the laity which we are witnessing today as the laity are encouraged not to the apostolate in the wo-

ld but to ministry in the sanctuary. So that we have what have truly become "ordinary extraordinary ministers of the eucharist." What we really need are Catholic laymen on fire with the faith who bring Christ to the world as Catholic doctors, lawyers, statesmen, etc.

Of course, there can be no renewal of the social order without holy Catholic families. We need families strong in the faith who give witness to the saving truth of Christ and his Church and live as the domestic church. We need families and homes dedicated and consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, acknowledging his Lordship over their lives. We all know the impact and influence which one good family can have in a neighborhood or school. This is the key factor not only in the battle to restore the social order but also the ecclesial order. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life come from holy families. Recall when Pius X proudly showed his episcopal ring to his mother and she said in response (as only an Italian mother could) "Remember, Giuseppe you would have no ring on your finger were it not for this one on mine." Let us have the courage then to redouble our efforts in our own lives and in the lives of our families to respond to the invitation of Christ. In this dark hour, when so many have gleefully predicted the end of the Church, let us recall that we have inherited the collected wisdom of 2000 years! The world has always awaited and proclaimed the death of the Church. But death could not hold Christ our Head in the tomb nor shall it hold His divinized members. For certainly, if we apply the words of that great soldier, St. Ignatius of Loyola, to ourselves and "pray as if everything depended on God and act as if everything depended on us," the Divine Mercy will not be found wanting! So let us gird up our loins and, united to Him, prepare to do battle as shock troops of the Church Militant. The ultimate victory will be ours, for our Lord told us: "Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away."

- Timothy T O'Donnell, S. TD.

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