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The Involvement of the Lay Faithful in *Consecratio Mundi*

Abstract

The term *consecratio mundi*, despite its introduction to theology already before the Second Vatican Council, still sparks a lot of discussion and controversy. In this article we will address the issue of the sanctification of the world by lay people in accordance with the Church teaching. First, *consecratio mundi* will be presented as a specific mission of the lay faithful, then the article will present the basic planes of their involvement.

Keywords

The Catholic Church, lay people, *consecratio mundi*.

1. Introduction

After the Second Vatican Council, the theological terminology incorporated many terms that were used already before the council, but these terms only became meaningful to theological thought and pastoral practice after the council. Such a term is *consecratio mundi* – the sanctification of the world. The term, known for long before Pope Pius XII gave it a specific meaning, referring to it as the apostolate of the laity. It was used also by Pope Paul VI but it was highlighted again by the Second Vatican Council: “The supreme and eternal Priest, Christ Jesus, since he wills to continue his witness and service also through the laity, vivifies them in this Spirit and increasingly urges them on to every good and perfect work. For besides intimately linking them to His life and His mission, He

also gives them a sharing in His priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of men. For this reason the laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvellously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavours, 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. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.”¹

In order to acknowledge the value of this phrase, we should come back to the terms “the world,” “lay people” and “sanctification.” “The world” should be understood as a complex of positive natural values belonging to the temporal order. A lay person is a faithful member belonging to the People of God, who is not a member of the hierarchy. Sanctification refers to the restoration of the relation of something to God, adequately to the requirements of its nature in accordance with God’s plan. *Consecratio mundi* means a desire to pervade the temporal sphere with Christian principles, virtues and personal life of grace. At the same time, the term *consecratio mundi* sparks a lot of discussion and controversy since, in the strict sense, it is only the person who can be sanctified and, only through him/her, any sphere connected with human activities and interpersonal relations may be sanctified. However, such understanding seems to be insufficient. We would rather strive that the whole world will consciously meet Jesus Christ and could accept Him.² Adopting the meaning of these three terms, as shown in this article, first we will present *consecratio mundi* as a specific mission of the lay faithful and then – the basic planes of their earthly involvement.

¹ *Lumen Gentium* 34.

² Cf. *World Youth Days. A Testimony to the Hope of Young People*, eds. J. Stala, A. Porębski, Kraków 2016; *Strengthening Families*, eds. J. Stala, J. Garmaz, Kraków 2016; J. Stala, *Die Werteerziehung im Lehrwerk Johannes Pauls II.*, „The Person and the Challenges“ 6 (2016) nr 1, pp. 17–27; M. Nowacki, *Teologiczne znaczenie świeckich aktywności ludzkich*, “Chrześcijanin w świecie” (1976) No. 1, p. 29; J. Nagórny, *Posłannictwo chrześcijan w świecie*. Vol. 1: *Świat i wspólnota*, Lublin 1998; *Zaangażowanie chrześcijan w życiu społecznym*, ed. A. Marcol, Opole 1993.

2. *Consecratio mundi* as a specific mission of lay people

The mission of lay people, which reflects the mission of the Church itself, involves the continuation – in time and space – of the salvific work of Jesus Christ. This means carrying the message of salvation to all people, helping those who receive it, and living it thanks to the means entrusted to the Church t by Christ Himself. *Consecratio mundi* according to Italian theologian G. De Rosa happens on two fundamental planes: on the humane, natural one – as an aspiration to the humanization of the world and its structures, and on the Christian, supernatural one – as we strive for the Christianization of the world and its structures. However, both planes are inseparable.³

2.1. Testimony given by the faithful

The first way of participation in the said mission is, predominantly for all lay people, testimony that is characterized by a particular forcefulness and power of persuasion, if given in the right manner and in the right places.

Documents of the Second Vatican Council, in matters pertaining to lay people, clearly underline the role of testimony in the participation in the mission of the Church: “The lay apostolate, however, is a participation in the salvific mission of the Church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself (...). Now the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth.”⁴

They also point to earthly involvement as the first task of a lay faithful: “Just as the sacraments of the New Law, by which the life and the apostolate of the faithful are nourished, prefigure a new heaven and a new earth, so too the laity go forth as powerful proclaimers of a faith... when they courageously join to their profession of faith a life springing from faith. This evangelization, that is, this announcing of Christ by a living testimony as well as by the spoken word, takes on a specific quality and a special force in that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world.”⁵

³ Cf. G. De Rosa, *La consecratio mundi: significatio theologico*, “La civiltà cattolica” vol. 3 (1963), pp. 521–532; R. Goldie, *Świeccy, laikat, świeckość*, Warszawa-Poznań 1991, p. 12.

⁴ *Lumen gentium* 33.

⁵ *Lumen gentium* 35.

“Because of the very economy of salvation the faithful should learn how to distinguish carefully between those rights and duties which are theirs as members of the Church, and those which they have as members of human society. Let them strive to reconcile the two, remembering that in every temporal affair they must be guided by a Christian conscience, since even in secular business there is no human activity which can be withdrawn from God’s dominion. In our own time, however, it is most urgent that this distinction and also this harmony should shine forth more clearly than ever in the lives of the faithful, so that the mission of the Church may correspond more fully to the special conditions of the world today. For it must be admitted that the temporal sphere is governed by its own principles, since it is rightly concerned with the interests of this world.”⁶

Testimony is the first way of a lay person’s participation in the evangelization mission of the Church, the way that turns out to be dominant, taking the daily content of a lay person’s life (family, work, social relations, participation in public and political institutions, civic involvement, etc.).

2.2. Different ways of serving

Apart from testimony, there are many other forms of lay people’s participation in the mission of the Church. Lay people may – directly, under the tutorship of priests, or in activities undertaken by themselves – strive to widen the area of proclaiming the Gospel message to bring to faith those who, for any reason, are far away from it, as well as to help them to endeavour – in the atmosphere of community – to become faithful to their baptismal vows.

Pope John Paul II reminded: “In order to achieve their task directed to the Christian animation of the temporal order, in the sense of serving persons and society, the lay faithful *are never to relinquish their participation in ‘public life,’* that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the *common good*. The Synod Fathers have repeatedly affirmed that every person has a right and duty to participate in public life, albeit in a diversity and complementarity of forms, levels, tasks and responsibilities.”⁷

⁶ *Lumen gentium* 36.

⁷ *Christifideles Laici* 42.

The faithful have many opportunities to select the field in which they can participate in the mission of the Church. It is true that every choice should conform to inner inspirations of the Spirit, charisms and personal judgements. A lay faithful is to search for the Kingdom of God, dealing with lay matters and managing them in line with God's intention. To live this commitment as a lay faithful means to live it in fidelity to one's condition of a Christian for whom "life to me – is Christ,"⁸ but also in fidelity to the condition of a conscious lay person who commits oneself to ordering temporal affairs in accordance with God's intention, that is, in respect for their autonomy and in care for the brethren. Lay commitment to temporal affairs, in cooperation with all other people, without any difference to cultural origin, ideology or faith, leads to a discovery of truth and good. This way, a lay faithful acts in accordance with the nature of one's existence.

3. Planes of lay people's earthly involvement

Strong with faith, wise and responsible Christians change the world and put eschatological perspectives on it.⁹ Their public involvement belongs to *sequela Christi* (following Jesus) and is accomplished through specific life situations. However, on the other hand, their human activity in this field should be regarded as a reliable way to achieve holiness, to which everybody is called. *Consecratio mundi* does not mean a rejection of the natural purpose of the world nor clerical institutionalization of lay people, but the sanctification of those who – living in the world – through fulfilment of their marital, family and occupational roles – contribute to the transformation of the whole contemporaneity.

A lay faithful's personal development, being the determinant of their behaviour, must be expanded by the social dimension since it always takes place in interpersonal relations. Animation of the temporal order by the Christian spirit happens on different planes, including family, work, economy and politics.¹⁰

⁸ Phil 1:21.

⁹ Cf. A. L. Szafrński, *Kariologia. Zarys nauki o Kościele w świecie współczesnym*, Lublin 1990, p. 247.

¹⁰ Cf. E. Colm, *Świętość i nauka społeczna Kościoła*, "Społeczeństwo" 8 (1998) No. 2, pp. 241–256.

3.1. Family and society

“The first and basic expression of the social dimension of the person, then, is the married couple and the family: “But God did not create man a solitary being. From the beginning ‘male and female he created them’ (Gen 1:27). This partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons.” Jesus is concerned to restore integral dignity to the married couple and solidity to the family (Mt 19:3-9). Saint Paul shows the deep rapport between marriage and the mystery of Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:22-6:4; Col 3:18-21; 1 Pt 3:1-7. The lay faithful’s duty to society primarily begins in marriage and in the family. This duty can only be fulfilled adequately with the conviction of the unique and irreplaceable value that the family has in the development of society and the Church herself. The family is the basic cell of society. It is the cradle of life and love, the place in which the individual “is born” and “grows.” Therefore, a primary concern is reserved for this community, especially, in those times when human egoism, the anti-birth campaign, totalitarian politics, situations of poverty, material, cultural and moral misery, threaten to make these very springs of life dry up. Furthermore, ideologies and various systems, together with forms of disinterest and indifference, dare to take over the role in education proper to the family.”¹¹

Marriage and family are, for the lay faithful, the first sphere of public involvement and should themselves, to an ever higher degree, seek their own growth and participation in public life responsibly. The priority of the family means that all members of society should take – in their undertakings – family matters into consideration. Yet, this also applies to families’ own commitment. Families themselves – through their own associations – should participate in solving issues pertaining to the family to influence decisions of institutions and the legislation. If Christians want to aim at genuinely human and Christian society, they should disseminate the foundations of anthropology and of family sciences. The role of the family in this area can be captured in three points: support for comprehensive (material, cultural, moral and spiritual) good of its members; facilitation of involvement in public life; being a vital cell of the (civil and ecclesial) community. This reveals the priority of the family over public institutions, including a state itself, since the family functions are a priority, not only in the sense of time, but also in the terms of importance.

¹¹ *Christifideles Laici* 40.

Documents of the Second Vatican Council present the family as a community of life and love because it is entrusted with newborn life so that it can achieve the fullness of human existence. Serving the development of life, family members should always maintain the attitude of sacrificial love. It is worth remembering that care for love in a family should take precedence over occupational, material matters that – while being important – should be subjected to care about personal bonds. As true love constitutes the very core of sanctity, therefore we can easily say that there is a close connection between family life marked with love and the path of holiness. This shows an indispensable role of the family in building genuinely human and Christian society.¹² Therefore, individual persons, families, civil and Church authorities, each of them appropriately to their functions, should ensure that the family can ever better fulfil its role.

The family is connected with society with vital and organic bonds. The family is, after all, its foundation and continuously feeds it through a constantly accomplished task of serving life. The public role of the family refers not only to procreation. Already by the sole fact of interpersonal relations existing in it, the family becomes the first school of public life, that is, the place in which a child absorbs most easily the basic patterns of behaviours and attitudes. Owing to the creation of a personal community of the family, such reference points as the spousal character, fatherhood-motherhood, sonship, brotherhood, each person enters “humankind family” and “God’s family.”¹³ For it is difficult to imagine preparation for various roles, which every person fulfils in their life, outside the family. Its impact is often not only desirable but simply indispensable.¹⁴

3.2. Human work

The Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar documents of the Catholic social teaching,¹⁵ in particular Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter *Laborem exercens*, confirmed the role of work as a tool of man’s personal sanctification and their co-redemptive transformation.

¹² Cf. K. Jeżyna, *Moralne przesłanie nowej ewangelizacji. Wezwanie do odnowy Kościoła i świata*, Lublin 2002, pp. 200–201.

¹³ Cf. *Familiaris Consortio* 15; *Familiaris Consortio* 42–44; J. Wilk, *Pedagogika rodziny*, Lublin 2002, p. 74.

¹⁴ Cf. *Familiaris Consortio* 18; W. Danilewicz, J. Izdebska, B. Krzesińska-Żach, *Pomoc dziecku i rodzinie w środowisku lokalnym*, Białystok 1995, p. 43.

¹⁵ Cf. Cz. Strzeszewski, *Katolicka Nauka Społeczna*, Warszawa 1985.

“Work is a good thing for man – a good thing for his humanity – because through work man (...) *achieves fulfilment* as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’”¹⁶ For work to exist, man must exist since human *agere* always follows human *esse*.¹⁷ The rationale for the dignity of man, their priority over capital stems from the fact that work is an activity of a person and directed to their good. A Christian who, in the world, answers to God’s call, has a duty to perform – in the best possible way – their work which will effectively contribute to building the earthly reality (which requires competence and the spirit of service) and sanctification of the world (sanctifying and sanctified work).¹⁸

Civilization, progress and culture come into being as a result of man’s daily work, work blessed and sanctified by God’s original command, and redeemed by personal work of Jesus of Nazareth. From this point of view, there are two huge challenges connected with work on which the social question focuses. These include the organization of work such that it will be done in truly human conditions, and the internal transformation of work which gives work a full meaning in connection with the ultimate goal.¹⁹ Nowadays, a positive combination of work and family life is particularly important.

However, neither work itself nor its even most perfect organization will grant dignity to a worker. It can be only done by morality, that is, man’s self-fulfilment in the unity with Jesus Christ, with the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

With the personalist principle of disinterestedness and respect for any other person, human work takes shape of readiness of serving and deep solidarity.²⁰ The Church magisterium pointed to multiple meanings and objectives of work that can be narrowed down to four inter-related aspects included in the description of *Genesis*: self-control and complementation of the world; service to other people (starting from one’s own family); the integral development of the working person; and God’s glory in the identification with Jesus Christ. Therefore, to give a deeper sense to one’s work, a lay faithful needs to translate these four aspects into daily practice, while maintaining their organic unity, to make, from even seemingly the simplest and least significant work, a truly

¹⁶ *Laborem exercens* 9.

¹⁷ Cf. K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn*, Kraków 2000, pp. 113–114.

¹⁸ Cf. *Laborem exercens* 25–26.

¹⁹ Cf. *Laborem exercens* 26; *Gaudium et Spes* 35.

²⁰ Cf. *Laborem exercens* 9; *Redemptoris custos* 27; *Familiaris Consortio* 43.

human activity to be in service of man. Thus, we need to live every task of work so that it is technically correct, morally fair but first of all penetrated by love of God and brethren.

4. Economy

Economy loses its sense if it does not contribute to the improvement of man whom it should serve. And persons are truly human only insofar as they, having control over their acts and judging their value, themselves author of their own progress. Consequently any social-economic system, devoid of an anthropologic foundation, becomes a dehumanizing system.

Economic activity must therefore be placed in appropriate frameworks, not only from the point of the entrepreneurship rules and technique but also with regard to each person's needs. It must correspond to a person's integral good, serves their self-fulfilment and maturity that exceeds the material and time dimension. In economic activity, we should not only think about an opportunity of maximizing profit but look for solutions of the moral and sanctifying nature that favour man. There is a need of obeying, also in the economic sphere, the true hierarchy of values, preferring morality over effectiveness as only a person's integral perfection ensures the true efficiency of technique. Economic activity in violation of moral law is something harmful to man.

This is why Pope Francis warns: "One cause of this situation is found in our relationship with money, since we calmly accept its dominion over ourselves and our societies. The current financial crisis can make us overlook the fact that it originated in a profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person! We have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Ex 32:1-35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose. The worldwide crisis affecting finance and the economy lays bare their imbalances and, above all, their lack of real concern for human beings; man is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption."²¹

All this crystallizes in some attitudes necessary to sanctify oneself in economic activity. These are competences and professional experience; integrity; orientation for specific development of people, care about truthfulness of

²¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* 55.

information; watchfulness about setting up one's own and others' activities so that not to make any harm to family life; refraining from looking, at any cost, for profit, success, becoming rich or gaining power; striving, in general, for an integral promotion of people. "In the context of the transformations taking place in the world of economy and work which are a cause of concern, the lay faithful have the responsibility of being in the forefront in working out a solution to the very serious problems of growing unemployment; to fight for the most opportune overcoming of numerous injustices that come from organizations of work which lack a proper goal; to make the workplace become a community of persons respected in their uniqueness and in their right to participation; to develop new solidarity among those that participate in a common work; to raise up new forms of entrepreneurship and to look again at systems of commerce, finance and exchange of technology."²²

5. Politics

Recognizing the importance of the lay faithful's dedication to the political sphere, Pope John Paul reminded: "Public life on behalf of the person and society finds its basic standard in the pursuit of the common good, as the good of everyone and as the good of each person taken as a whole, which is guaranteed and offered in a fitting manner to people, both as individuals and in groups, for their free and responsible acceptance. 'The political community' – we read in the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* – 'exists for that common good in which the community finds its full justification and meaning, and from which it derives its basic, proper and lawful arrangement. The common good embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life by which individuals, families, and organizations can achieve more thoroughly their own fulfilment.' Furthermore, public life on behalf of the person and society finds its continuous line of action in the defence and the promotion of justice, understood to be a "virtue," an understanding which requires education, as well as a moral "force" that sustains the obligation to foster the rights and duties of each and everyone, based on the personal dignity of each human being."²³

²² *Christifideles Laici* 43.

²³ *Christifideles Laici* 42.

Contemporary man is at times insensitive to requirements arising from society. Regardless of bigger or lesser de-politicization of contemporary society, a responsible Christian cannot give up their political commitment. Participation in political life is a right and obligation that should be fulfilled in accordance with opportunities existing in one's own given situation. The fairly widespread opinion, that political activity is necessarily tainted with immorality, is for the faithful a new incentive to act in this domain in order to heal it.

It is worth remembering that already in the very life of Master of Nazareth one can notice a political dimension of love. If a responsible Christian loves God and man, he/she should do everything in an appropriate manner, also in political life. The deterioration of the quality of political practice reveals a decline of love. Therefore, a spiritual effort is needed, whose source lies in love, so that people become better and along with them also rights and institutions. Love of God includes specific and active love of brethren, whilst faith should be linked to acts of love since the identification with Christ does not cause passivity but is the source of powerful energy, also necessary for politics. Its main expression is a close connection between social love and the common good. The task of social justice involves the accomplishment of the common good while social-political love has in mind precisely the common good. Politics, as any earthly reality, has its own nature, law and objective, its own tools of thoughts and activities, its own value. It cannot, however, be separated from faith, from which it should take inspiration and which it should help become culture.

As love is the very core of the life of the Church, a special reflection on Christian love in social and political life is needed. It should avoid two contradicting errors: spiritualism – an escape from the world – and philanthropic reductionism. For the Christian experience of political commitment, we need, along with occupational competences, also the spirit of service. Love, understood as service, is an essential category of political activity. The lay faithful must adopt an attitude of courageous and unflagging commitment; an integral permanent formation; practising Christian love in each situation of their life; giving love to the needy; fight for removal of structures of sin; concern about establishing personalist and solidary society. It must be also stressed that love cannot just settle for material assistance, even if offered from the heart. Social love includes also people's spiritual and moral dimension that should be given priority. In this way political activity becomes the milieu for the growth of Christian life, thereby for the development of one's own and others' holiness.

The Church teaching, particularly since the Second Vatican Council, reminds us that the lay faithful are not only to strive for their own holiness, or for the sanctification of some acts of human life, but also endeavour to relate their whole life to God through an internal act of love. As a consequence, the term *consecratio mundi*, disseminated after the Council, means pervading the whole earthly reality – while maintaining its nature – with Christian principles, virtues and personal life of grace. Therefore, the lay faithful may not focus only on individual holiness but supported with the strength of Jesus Christ, should be His witnesses on different planes, including primarily family, work, economy and politics.

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