

Key Note Address by His Beatitude

**THE SYNOD'S REFORM OF THE ROLE OF THE LAITY IN CHURCH AND
SOCIETY**

Friday, July 7, 2006

Maronites generally seem to think of mission as the task of the Church rather than of the individual. In a sense this is correct, for Church and mission are essentially related to each other. But all too often, I fear, this persuasion means that the individual feels no personal obligation to take any pastoral and missionary initiative. Maronites tend to wait passively for some directives to come down from on high, and when it does they are all too likely to receive it with enthusiasm. For this passivity there are historical reasons.

As we look back to the pastoral situation of the Maronite Church in recent years, we find that Maronites were a model of docility and obedience. While performing their personal religious duties with outmost care, they were not very vocal or actively involved in the evangelization ministry of the Church. Lay Maronites, in their reverence for the ordained ministers of the Church, felt unequal to the task of spreading the faith. To carry out the mission of the Church, they felt, was the task of the clergy. Hence the average lay Maronite person was likely to feel that missionary activity was not his or her responsibility.

Although missionary activity was not seen as incumbent upon every Maronite, it was intensely pursued as a special vocation. Like all Christians, Maronites saw it as imperative for salvation that others should be brought to share the faith and sacramental life of the Church. Hence lay Maronites were eager to support the ministry of the ordained priests. A relatively large number of Maronites joined seminaries, orders, and congregations, whose members were revered figures.

During the 60's and 70's increasing number of lay Maronites became involved in what was called the lay apostolate—the participation of the laity in the mission of the hierarchy. These lay people were for the most part content to play a secondary role, under the direction of the clergy. Under the leadership of ordained and lay Maronites who came to this country, the National Apostolate of Maronites was formed to carry out the mission of the Church in the world.

Building on this and similar experiences of the Maronite Church throughout the world, the Synod sought to take advantage of the growing dynamism in the Church. Never has a Synod insisted so much on the missionary responsibility of the entire People of God. In the words of the Synod document on the Pastoral and Spiritual Reform in the Maronite Church, the objectives of the Synod are definitely summed up in this single one: to make the Church even better fitted for proclaiming the gospel to the people of the modern world.

The nature of the Church's mission is further specified in the same document—namely, to proclaim and to establish among all peoples the kingdom of God. Moreover, in its decree on the apostolate of the laity the Synod sought to promote the dignity of lay witness that from the very nature of faith itself and from the sacraments of baptism and confirmation.

During my previous pastoral visits to the United States of America I have been deeply impressed by the active participation of lay Maronites in the ministry of the Church. For instance, they are running religious education programs, parish liturgy and music, youth ministry, community and social justice programs, prayer and bible study groups, marriage preparation and family support services, and a host of other pastoral activities.

In Lebanon the work of lay apostolate has been so essential to the ministry of the Church. Consider the vast network of charitable and social service, health care, and higher educational institutions that has been the genius of the Maronite Church to create.

This massive transition in Church pastoral leadership raises fundamental questions, pertaining to the theology and ecclesiology of the Church in general. It is these issues and challenges that the Synod tries to address in its document on Lay Apostolate. In what follows my remarks will be largely descriptive of the Synod's declarations.

The Synod has produced a wonderful document just on the role and vocation of the laity in the Church and the world. This document is exceedingly rich in its teachings on the laity. It incorporates and summarizes most of the major statements on the laity coming out of the Maronite experience since the turn of the last Century.

There is only so much one can do in the space of few minutes, so I will just share few basic teachings of the Synodal Document on the role of the laity with you. I highly encourage parish group discussions of the document, section by section.

The Synod's document sounds two cautions. First of all, there can be no separation between one's faith and real life, between religion and day-to-day reality in the world. The document regards this as one of the major errors of our times. Second, we are to avoid a laicization of the clergy and a clericalizing of the laity. The clergy, the religious, and the laity have different roles and callings. The Church is one body: Christ is the head, and we are all members of that body with different talents and services to perform. The clergy act in the name of the Church when they teach faith and morals, provide the sacraments, and form community. The religious are witnesses to the Beatitudes and the final times by their prayer life and by their special apostolates in the Church. The laity have a vast responsibility. Their task, their apostolate, is the transformation of the entire temporal order: the economic, political, social, and cultural orders of society.

Now I would like to give just a few examples of the mission of the laity in the Church and in the world. They are all taken from File III of the document on the role of the laity in Church and society. Many more can be found throughout the document. Simply put, their mission is to bring Christ into the world.

Promoting the Dignity of the Person

To rediscover and make others rediscover the inviolable dignity of every human person makes up an essential task, in a certain sense, the central and unifying task of the service which the Church and the lay faithful in her are called to render to the human family.

Among all other earthly beings, only a man or a woman is a "person," a conscious and free being and precisely for this reason, the "center and summit" of all that exists on earth. The dignity of the person is the most precious possession of an individual. As a result, the value of one person transcends all the material world.

The acknowledgment of the personal dignity of every human being demands the respect, the defense and the promotion of the rights of the human person. It is a question of inherent, universal and inviolable rights. No one, no individual, no group, no authority, no state, can change - let alone eliminate - them because such rights find their source in God himself.

The inviolability of the person which is a reflection of the absolute inviolability of God, finds its primary and fundamental expression in the inviolability of human life. Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights - for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture - is false and illusory

if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination.

Respect for the dignity of the person, which implies the defense and promotion of human rights, demands the recognition of the religious dimension of the individual. This requirement is inextricably bound up with the very reality of the individual. In fact, the individual's relation to God is a constitutive element of the very "being" and "existence" of an individual: it is in God that we "live, move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

This is the right of freedom of conscience and religious freedom, the effective acknowledgment of which is among the highest goods and the most serious duties of every people that truly wishes to assure the good of the person and society. Many people have died in the past to preserve this right, and there are many contemporary martyrs for the same right.

The Family: Where the Duty to Society Begins

The first and basic expression of the social dimension of the person 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). St. Paul shows the deep rapport between marriage and the mystery of Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:22-6:4).

It is above all the lay faithful's duty in the apostolate to make the family aware of its identity as the primary social nucleus, and its basic role in society, so that it might itself become always a more active and responsible place for proper growth and proper participation in social life. In such a way the family can and must require from all, beginning with public authority, the respect for those rights which in saving the family will save itself.

Charity: The Soul and Sustenance of Solidarity

Through charity towards one's neighbor, the lay faithful exercise and manifest their participation in the kingship of Christ, that is, in the power of the Son of man who "came not to be served by to serve" (Mk 10:45). They live and manifest such a kingship in a most simple yet exalted manner, possible for everyone at all times because charity is the highest gift offered by the Spirit for building up the Church (I Corinthians 13:13) and for

the good of humanity. In fact, charity gives life and sustains the works of solidarity that look to the total needs of the human being.

The same charity, realized not only by individuals but also in a joint way by groups and communities, is and will always be necessary. Nothing and no one will be able to substitute for it, not even the multiplicity of institutions and public initiatives forced to give a response to the needs of entire populations.

Public Life: for Everyone and by Everyone

A charity that loves and serves the person is never able to be separated from justice. Both charity and justice, in their own way, demand the full, effective acknowledgment of the rights of the individual to which society is ordered in all its structures and institutions.

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.

This requires that the lay faithful always be more animated by a real participation in the life of the Church and enlightened by her social doctrine.

The manner and means for achieving a public life which has true human development as its goal is solidarity. Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.

Placing the Individual at the Center of Socio-Economic Life

Service to society on the part of the lay faithful finds its essence in the socioeconomic question which depends on the organization of economics.

The basis for the social doctrine of the Church is the principle of the universal destination of goods. According to the plan of God the goods of the earth are offered to all people and to each individual as a means towards the development of a truly human

life. At the service of this destination of goods is private property which possesses an intrinsic social function.

The lay faithful have the responsibility of being in the forefront in working out a solution to the very serious problems of growing economic disparity between rich nations and poor nations; to fight for the most opportune overcoming of numerous injustices that come from organizations of work which exploit the poor; and to make the market place become a community of persons respected in their uniqueness and in their right to participation.

Evangelizing Culture and the Cultures of Humanity

Service to the individual and to human society is expressed and finds its fulfillment through the creation and the transmission of culture, which especially in our time constitutes one of the more serious tasks of living together as a human family and of social evolution. In light of the Synod, we mean by "culture" all those factors which go to the refining and developing of humanity's diverse spiritual and physical endowments. It means the efforts of the human family to bring the world under its control through its knowledge and its labor; to humanize social life both in the family and in the whole civic community through the improvement of customs and institutions; to express through its works the great spiritual experiences and aspirations of all peoples throughout the ages; finally, to communicate and to preserve them to be an inspiration for the progress of many, indeed of the whole human race. In this sense, culture must be held as the common good of every people, the expression of its dignity, liberty and creativity, and the testimony of its course through history. In particular, only from within and through culture does the Christian faith become a part of history and the creator of history.

The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore, every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures.

CONCLUSION

The world is a vast vineyard. The owner of the vineyard is the Lord and He invites every man, woman, and child to come into the vineyard and work it so as to make it produce the fruits of many good works. The special role of the laity, stemming from the special lay character that is theirs, and nourished by their own sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, and Marriage) is to make this world all that God meant it to be. This means

working with the moral order in all its implications for our homes, nations, and businesses. God's moral order extends to everyone, and every human activity. It does not stop at our nation's borders, but reaches out to embrace all God's sons and daughters

Heaven will never be found on earth. Planet earth is planet earth. It is a very good place, but it is not Heaven. We will look for it here in vain, but we are all called to make this world reflect more and more of the moral order of God. The Kingdom of God begins here, but only if we all want it, choose in behalf of it, work towards it, promote what advances it, and resist whatever destroys, injures or limits it.

The Maronite laity in the world has been referred to as a "sleeping giant waiting to be awakened". No group of Maronites throughout the world has been given so many advantages as Maronites in this great nation. Will they measure up to the needs of the age by drawing upon the special strengths of their Church, in what has been called "the Maronite moment"? The choice, my brothers and sisters, is yours, and mine.