

The National Center for the Laity's Principles for Lay Initiative

Principle #1: Encountering God

People are constantly sought out and confronted by God in the midst of life's hustle and bustle--not away from it. Correspondingly, it is a religious duty for Christians to attend to the signs of God's presence in everyday life, for--in the words of Vatican II-- "nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in the hearts of the followers of Christ."

Implications

* All preaching, catechesis, social action ministry, worship, acts of citizenship, work, leisure and neighborliness must take into account the sacred potential in what appears to be mundane human experience. For embedded in the ordinary lies the extraordinary, the miraculous, the salvific, the holy. Pastoral practice must come to recognize that the exchange of love between God and God's people is mediated through our grace-filled, created world--just as it is through the Sunday Eucharist.

* Contemplation is indeed a prerequisite for thoughtful action. Lay spirituality, however, eventually turns toward the world. Spiritual direction or spiritual programs that tend to steer people away from the world are not helpful to most Christians because the path of salvation and the life of the church courses through the experience of parents, students, workers, neighbors, friends and spouses.

The truth is that God so loved the world that God became a baby in a trough, a carpenter, a common criminal on a cross, a human being--a coworker in an office, a neighbor, a machinist, a customer, a middle-manager, a nurse, an accountant, a spouse. Through the redemptive love of Christ we are called to make our lives a little sacrament... raised up, broken and blessed... bread of and for the people we meet on the job, around the home and in the neighborhood.

Principle #2: Role of the Laity

The best apostles in a given situation are most often those Christians closest to the situation. Their proper and important roles should be respected, their gifts acknowledged and their competency cultivated and utilized.

Implications

* The initiative to gather with like-minded Christians and to transform the world should be taken up without hesitation by each baptized person. Christian women and men should not wait for programs emanating from a rectory or diocesan agency in order to shoulder their responsibility in the world. Today's laity gladly cooperate with priests, religious and other Church employees who support and challenge them to live their faith in the home, the neighborhood and the marketplace.

* The potential of the laity is best used when they are challenged and supported to live the gospel in their everyday lives. Too much attention to lay ministry inside the Church has, it seems, preempted attention to the laity's vocation in the world. It is a blessing to the church that so many lay people are acquiring ministerial degrees and are volunteering for pastoral ministries. This burst of lay ministry is not, however, to be understood as dependent upon a relative shortage of the

ordained nor is it to be seen by anyone as superior to ordinary lay activity in the world nor should it come at the expense of the laity's vocation in the world.

Principle #3: Concerted Action

Whenever possible, lay initiative should be interfaith.

Implication

* Catholic parishes and movements should support their members in the Catholic tradition while at the same time encouraging those members to join with their neighbors, coworkers and colleagues to humanize social, political and cultural institutions.

Principle #4: Wisdom from America

Positive spiritual impulses have always moved across and through the North American continent.

Implications

* The North American experience with its history of immigration, its praxis of mediating institutions, its respect for diversity within unity, its freedom of religious expression, and its arts of negotiation and conflict resolution is consistent with Catholic social teaching and, as such, affords an opportunity for reflection in order to deepen Christian wisdom. Preaching, catechesis, and church programs can develop lessons from the strengths of North American culture.

* At the same time, North American culture tends to be too individualistic, materialistic and relativistic. Wherever the culture falls short of the City of God, Christians have a duty to raise human consciousness and direct the culture toward the common good.

* Theology developed in Germany, France, England, Poland, Latin America and elsewhere is a blessing to the universal church. But the universal church could greatly benefit from more reflection on the North American experience. In particular, North American Catholic spirituality (a la Orestes Brownson, Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Fr. Isaac Hecker, Archbishop John Ireland and others) needs to be reclaimed.

Principle #5: Social Change

A critical virtue for the laity is social justice. The intended outcome of social justice is a better policy or an improved institution. To practice social justice requires an organized initiative. Christians do not normally effect change as lone rangers.

Implications

* The laity need forums in which they can learn more about social virtues and their application to daily life on the job, around the home and in the neighborhood. In particular, people need more tools for understanding how they are often manipulated by culture and institutions. Likewise, people need tools for countering the mediocre and the evil in their own institutions.

* People who take collective action on the job, in their professions or in their communities need support and deserve respect from the whole church.

* The urge for inner peace is a healthy one. However, a genuine Catholic lay spirituality would not neglect the virtue of social justice, the exercise of which may be emotionally disturbing. Collective inaction cannot be excused. It is an error to wait until each person has inner peace and integrity before one gets involved. People who, for example, marched in Selma in the cause of civil rights did not wait to change their imperfections. In part, their souls were changed simply by marching.

Principle #6: Holiness of Work

Work is participation in God's on-going creation and participation in Christ's redemption. Good work is a way women and men, individually and collectively, offer their best to the earthly city and to the City of God. Work itself is capable of contributing to the spiritual life.

Implications

* Major ethical issues abound in the everyday world of work. Inhumane working conditions, unethical practices and unresponsive social structures blemish the plan of God. There is, however, a Christian optimism about what is developing in technology, science, industry, construction, commerce, the arts and other areas of human endeavor. There is a strong affinity between openness to the future and Christian hope.

* Courses, publications and associations dedicated to business, legal or medical ethics are needed. More crucial still are forums which help the laity grapple--not simply with ethics--but, in the words of Vatican II, with "the meaning of all this feverish activity."

Principle #7: Blessing the Ordinary

People do God's will in their jobs, in their families and in neighborhoods when they act with love, justice, integrity and care. This should be recognized and celebrated by the whole church.

Implications

* To dismiss, in broad strokes, the legal profession, electoral politics, or business as immoral enterprises is offensive. It's easy to feel a sense of superiority by echoing moral slogans. Christian insiders, on the other hand, are not always certain they are right, but they are seasoned enough in the real world to resist simplicities.

* People who teach the untutored, who care for the sick, or who preach the gospel are to be admired. But service to God's world is not confined to those who, as the expression goes, work for the good of humanity. How well one works, how one seeks just relationships at work and what one does with one's work generally defines the value of work.

* God's kingdom advances incrementally. Workaday Christians need not apologize for the small steps they take toward advancing peace, alleviating poverty and enhancing human dignity. Peace Corps volunteers and the like certainly promote the kingdom of God, but so do conscientious carpenters, homemakers, artists, executives, janitors and editors.

* Full-time work on behalf of social justice, for example as a Church employee, contributes to the transformation of society. Even more important and necessary, however, is the role of committed women and men giving flesh to gospel values from inside their workplaces, businesses, schools and communities.

Principle #8: On the Seventh Day

More than ever before, the people of God must live by the injunction "Keep holy the Sabbath."

Implications

* An economy which encourages workaholics is no friend to lay spirituality. Our economy and culture need to recognize that holiness (wholeness) for everyday Christians and others in a post-industrial society should include a Sabbath day each week, some Sabbath minutes each day and, optimally, a Sabbath retreat once a year.

* Involvement in parish and neighborhood organizations is commendable, but the most responsible activity for a busy Christian on a given evening or Saturday morning may well be to nourish his or her family life, intellectual life or cultural life.

* A living wage is every person's birthright, but so too is music, literature and beauty. Christians must, as Vatican II says, "become conscious that they are the artisans and authors of the culture in their community" and thus strive to nurture the best in the arts and society.

Principle #9: The Laity's Mission

The mission to bring about God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven belongs to every baptized person. Pastoral activity should support that primary mission.

Implications

* The laity are the church in the heart of the world and bring the heart of the church to the world. Bishops and priests represent Christ in their pastoral ministry which supports and challenges all Christians to represent Christ in their work in the world.

* The word vocation and attention to the vocation crisis should not be restricted by anyone in the church to the ordained priesthood, the permanent diaconate or vowed religious life. There is a shortage of committed citizens, of responsible fathers and others. There are crises in parenting, in nursing and elsewhere.

* Parishes, Newman Centers, and Church agencies need to evaluate all their programs in the context of how well those programs train and support the laity to live their baptism on the job, around the home and in the neighborhood. All of the courses and programs used to train the laity for ministry--either as volunteers or as professional lay ministers--need to be evaluated against their effectiveness in focusing the lay ministers on the crucial task of inspiring people for their work in the world.

Send your comments on these Principles to the National Center for the Laity, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; 773 776 9036 (fax); wdroel@cs.com