
Teachings and decrees emerging from the Second Vatican Council “demand,” according to the following decree of the 31st General Congregation, “that the Society of Jesus “examine the relationship it has to laymen and their apostolate,” hoping to “bring this relationship into greater harmony with the norms and spirits” of the council. Of the lay people, the congregation’s delegates urge their fellow Jesuits to “make efforts to understand better their life, their ways of thinking and feeling, their aspirations and their religious mentality, by means of fraternal dialogue.” The decree concludes that “in all things we should promote an apostolic brotherhood with the laity, based on the unity of the Church’s mission.”

1. In its teaching and decrees the Second Vatican Council stressed the just autonomy of earthly affairs, the secular character which is proper and peculiar to the laity, the active part they ought to take in the entire life of the Church, and their duty and right to the exercise of the apostolate. These demand that our Society examine the relationship it has to laymen and their apostolate and that it bring this relationship into greater harmony with the norms and spirit of the Council itself.

2. Jesuits should be more keenly aware of the importance of the state and vocation of laymen and their apostolate since in many areas of human activity and in many places the Church can be present to the world only through laymen. Let them strive not only to recognize the place which the laity have in the mission of the Church but also to promote it, and to hold in high esteem their just liberty.

The laity help us to understand more fully the world and Christian truth itself, and give us a more vivid sense of our mission “for the defense and propagation of the faith.” At the same time they are a stimulus to our own continual conversion.

3. Therefore we should make efforts to understand better their life, their ways of thinking and feeling, their aspirations and their religious mentality, by means of fraternal dialogue. Jesuits can be present to and serve all men, including unbelievers, by taking an appropriate part in various associations and organizations even on the national and international scale.

4. Whenever and wherever we are associated with laymen, whether they are young people or adults, we must give an example of lively faith, charity, and a genuine fidelity to the Church, always testifying to the high value of religious life.

5. There are many ways in which we can be of assistance to the laity. It is especially necessary that we bend all our efforts to forming both youth and adults for the Christian life and apostolate so that they may be able to fulfill their mission and assume their proper responsibility according to the Church’s expectations.
By means of special instruction and spiritual direction we should communicate to those who can profit by it a fuller understanding of the evangelical life according to the Exercises of St. Ignatius, which are also very well suited to the lay state. Thus they may be able to direct all the acts of their daily professional, familial, and social life with a sincere mind and increased liberty to the greater glory of God, and may be able to discover and fulfill the divine will in all things and in this way devote themselves entirely to the service of their brothers as well. This direction is expected of us especially by the rejuvenated sodalities and the various other associations of laymen who are trying to cultivate an intense Christian and apostolic life according to this spirit.

6. On the other hand, we ought to help the laity in their apostolate. Jesuits should be prepared to offer their cooperation as counselors, assistants, or helpers in the works which the laity themselves promote and direct.

We should also foster the collaboration of the laity in our own apostolic works. We must not only fully observe the demands of justice toward those who work with us but also establish a cordial cooperation based on love. We must open up to them in various ways a wide participation in as well as responsibility for the direction, administration, and even government of our works, keeping of course the power of ultimate decision in the hands of the Society where it has the ultimate responsibility.

In the same spirit, in order that a greater respect may be had for the responsibility of laymen in the Church, let the Society examine whether some works begun by us might be turned over to competent laymen for the greater good of the Church. In all things we should promote an apostolic brotherhood with the laity, based on the unity of the Church’s mission.

7. Since a closer communion and association exists between us and those laymen who have shared more intimately our spirituality and way of feeling and acting, Jesuits, while maintaining our apostolic freedom, should show their close relationship by carefully preserving our loyalty to them and cultivating a sincere friendship with them, and also by actively showing fraternal hospitality toward them.