

Homily to the Secular Order Carmelites

on the occasion of THE SECOND CONGRESS OF THE DISCALCED CARMELITE SECULAR ORDER, November 5 - 7, 1999

by Bishop John Michael Sherlock

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

With St. Paul in the first reading, I can say "I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another." (Rom. 15.14) My confidence arises both from my personal knowledge of many of you, your striving in prayer for nearness to Jesus and openness to His Holy Spirit, but also from my knowledge of your teachers who are schooling you in the way of Carmel. But like St. Paul, I can also say that "nevertheless, I speak to you boldly because of the grace given to me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus in the priestly service of the gospel so that your offering may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." The gospel of today's Mass invites us to reflect profoundly on the quality of our stewardship. God, in His generous love, has entrusted us with Divine treasures and He is asking whether we have been as wise and prudent in using His spiritual treasures as have the worldly people of today in using material ones. All of this leads me to the topic which Father Dominic invited me to address as you begin these days of spiritual inspiration - the role of the laity in the Church. I was privileged to be in Rome in 1987 for the Synod called by John Paul II "on the vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world", and much of what I say comes from his post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation.

Let me begin with a true story. I received a letter recently from a young man named Kevin who is about 20 years of age. Kevin was born autistic. He has never walked and never talked. He spends his life in a wheelchair. By the miracles of computers, Kevin can communicate and he writes to me occasionally - always in connection with some spiritual concern. In his latest letter, he told me that his parents, who have a deep devotion to St. Francis of Assisi and his close collaborator St. Clare, took him on a pilgrimage to Assisi. While there he was alone one day in the Convent of St. Clare and he was filled with hope that St. Clare might pray for him to be healed. Instead, she spoke to him clearly in the depth of his heart - he could even sense her nearness and holiness through his sense of smell. She said, "God has asked me to spend my life in a cloister, and He is asking you to spend your life in your cloister. You must become better."

Kevin now knows that it is in his handicap, in his weakness, and in his limitation, that God is present in all His love, inviting him to surrender to his love and to accept the gift of holiness God has in mind for him.

So the first thing I want to say to you is that your cloister, your meeting place with God must be your daily life as husband, wife, child, teacher, student, manual labourer, business executive, professional person, housewife, handicapped person. Wherever God's providence has placed you is the place of your encounter with God, the place of your vocation and your mission. So the first question must be, "Where is my cloister, my meeting place with God, my holy place?"

Such thoughts as these can only arise from a life of faith but the crisis in the world and in the Church is the separation between life and faith as though we have two compartments in our lives - one, our life of prayer, worship and spiritual activities; the other our everyday workday lives. The Synod on the Laity challenged this false idea over and over again. Your vocation and mission in the Church and in the world is to unite a single offering of your life to God. And it is the Holy Spirit present in your heart who empowers you to do this.

The Holy Father, in his summary of the Synod uses two striking passages from the scriptures. The first from Matthew's gospel: "For the Kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard and after agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard." (Matthew: 20.1-2) The lay faithful are like those labourers sent into that vineyard, which according to the Holy Father is vast and is indeed the entire world. It must be transformed according to the plan of God in view of the final coming of the Kingdom. And as the gospel goes on to tell us, the householder went out at the third, the sixth, the ninth, and even the eleventh hour and found others standing idle. "You must go into my vineyard too." "From that distant day, the call of the Lord Jesus 'You go into my vineyard too' never fails to resound in the course of history: it is addressed to every person who comes into the world." (Christifideles Laici, #21)

So every lay person has a vocation and a mission. You are called by Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit and sent by Jesus before Him to every town and place where He is to come.

"Why do you stand here all the day idle?" is the cry of the gospel householder. John Paul II writes "a new state of affairs today both in the Church and in social, economic, political and cultural life, calls with a particular urgency for the action of the lay faithful. If lack of commitment is always unacceptable, the present time renders it more so. It is not permissible for anyone to remain idle. (Christifideles Laici, #3)

The second passage from the gospel which provides a foundation for the vocation of lay people is the beautiful passage, "I am the vine, you are the branches." (John 15.5) So lay people are not just labourers in the vineyard of the world, you are yourselves part of the vineyard, grafted into the true vine Jesus Christ, through Him in communion with the Father, receiving from the Father the Holy Spirit whose coming Jesus purchased by His blood and promised as His first gift to those who believe. In deep communion with the Holy Trinity in Jesus the vine, we also share intimate communion with all our brothers and sisters who too are branches grafted into Jesus through Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion.

What then is your ministry and vocation in the Church? It is to be the Church, the body of Christ in the world. It is to be a sign, a sacrament of union with God and with your brothers and sisters everywhere. You reveal and make present a new humanity - united with God and with one another - all races, languages, ages, aptitudes, gifts, needs, Jew and Greek, slave and free men, male and female, all one in Christ Jesus.

Many people are easily misled into thinking that lay people's principal ministry in the Church is to help the priest by reading, distributing Holy Communion as an extraordinary minister, being an usher, a cantor, a choir member, a member of the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic Women's League, etcetera. Far be it from me to minimize such important services which lay people generously supply and which are particularly needed because of the shortage of clergy. But the real role of the laity is secular; that is, in the world. Without you the vineyard of the world will not be prepared for the coming of God's Kingdom. You are the Church living in the world where everyday violence, murder, racism, ethnic, religious and national conflicts violate human dignity and abuse human rights. The secular sphere where Jesus calls you to work for the kingdom is your family, your neighbourhood, your community, your country, your world. It is your work place, your school, your business, your profession. Do you not think there is a Christian way of being a doctor, a lawyer, a legislator, a teacher, a father, a mother, a child? St. Benedict Laboure taught us that there is even a Christian way of being poor, of being a street person, of being Christ the poor man, and of being Christ to the poor. If you have any doubts about your

vocation and mission in the Church and in the world, I urge you to study the post-Synodal exhortation of John Paul II on the "Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful" in the Church and in the world.

Now there are three concluding thoughts that I share with you. First, the call from Christ is personal and individual. Each of you is unique and only you, and you alone, can make the contribution, however modest, to changing the world which Jesus calls you to do. Second, you need support, the support of prayer and of the sacraments but also the support of friends and family who are working with you in the Lord's vineyard. That is why your membership in the Secular Order is a powerful sustaining force for your mission in the world. All your efforts to enter into contemplative prayer, all your desire to surrender your life entirely to Christ will fuel that mission provided you do not allow it to become a running away from the mission God has given you. "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord shall enter the Kingdom, but he who does the will of my Father."

Finally, the supreme support for your mission is Jesus Himself. When you come to Mass, you exercise the priesthood of the faithful when in union with the ordained priest you offer yourself in union with Jesus to the Father. It is your entire life you offer, not just your prayers and meditations, but your entire world of home, of work, of play. It is God's world which you offer back - your eating and drinking, and whatever else you do as St. Paul said. Your faithful offering of your life means that the tiny part of the world in which you live and work has been molded by the Holy Spirit in you to be more like the new heavens and the new earth which will be inaugurated when Jesus comes again. You will, by your vocation and mission in the Church and in the world, have advanced the day when Jesus will come again in glory.