

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement and the Laity

by Reginald Alva, SVD

The laity had a passive role in the activities of the Catholic Church prior to the Second Vatican Council. The church assumed that mission work was the primarily the responsibility of the clergy. However, the Second Vatican Council encouraged all Christians to participate in the church's activities. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement (CCRM) is one of the ecclesial movements that has put into action the intentions of the conciliar documents about the laity. In this paper, we shall examine the role of the CCRM in helping the laity to play a proactive role in the life and mission of the church. We shall examine the church documents and the documents on the CCRM for our study purpose.

The Second Vatican Council and the Laity

The early Christians did not make an artificial divide between the clergy and the laity. All the disciples of Jesus had the same dignity and status. The ecclesiology of the later times promoted the institutionalization of the church.¹

Clericalism and bureaucratization shunted aside the laity's active participation in the day-to-day affairs of the church. The hierarchy wielded an unflinching authority over the church. The hierarchy assumed that it was privy to spiritual, moral, and temporal powers. Some of the clergy and monks looked upon themselves as the spiritually elite. They considered the laity as part of the secular world as opposed to them. The church hierarchy expected complete submission on the part of the laity. Since medieval times the laity became completely passive and could not do the functions that the early Christians did in the church.²

The Second Vatican Council set to reform the subordinate role assigned to the laity. The Council Fathers declared that all are people of God, irrespective of their status in the church.³ Further, the Council Fathers noted that all baptized share in the common priesthood, the prophetic and kingly office of Christ.⁴ As all the faithful shared in

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1 See Leonard Doohan, "Laity, Theology of the," in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter Fink (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 636–44.

2 Dohan, "Theology of the Laity," 638.

3 Paul VI, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964*, no. 9, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

4 See Paul VI, nos. 10, 11, 12, 13, 31, 34, 35, 36.

the priesthood of the church, all had a role to play in the life and mission of the church.⁵ The Council documents noted that the beauty of the church lies in the communion of all the faithful, where God invites all to be the “new people of God” in Christ.⁶ The Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Presbyterorum Ordinis*, called on all the priests to be at the service of the people of God and never live in isolation.⁷ It stressed the collaboration between the priests and the people of God.⁸ Sometimes, it may happen that priests who are not qualified to hold positions of power claim for the same by the virtue of their ordination. Priests should not consider ordination as a means to cling to power but a call to be at the service of the community.⁹

The Second Vatican Council asserted that God calls not only the clergy and the religious but also all to share in holiness of life.¹⁰ It also recognized the charisms of each individual member and urged all to use their gifts for the good of the church.¹¹ On the liturgical front, the Council Fathers held that the whole community celebrates the various sacraments and rituals.¹² However, the Council did not respond adequately on all the gray areas regarding the distinction between the hierarchical priesthood and the priesthood of all the baptized. The church since the Second Vatican Council has done a tremendous job by initiating the process of restoring the dignity and status of the laity. It continues to explore means and ways for the laity to join in the various activities of the parish.¹³ Pope John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* noted the importance of upholding the threefold mission of the people of God as recommended by the various conciliar documents. He noted that

in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, at the beginning of my pastoral ministry, my aim was to emphasize forcefully the priestly, prophetic and kingly dignity of the entire People of God. . . . The Second Vatican Council has reminded us of the mystery of Christ, priest, prophet-teacher, king, continues in the Church. Everyone, the whole People of God, shares in this threefold mission.¹⁴

Thus, the Second Vatican Council emphasized the important role of the laity in the life of the church. The various conciliar documents tried to set right the notion that the laity should not be mere passive receivers. It encouraged a more proactive role of the laity as collaborators in the mission of the church.

The Role of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement in Promoting the Laity

The Second Vatican Council endorsed the importance of a proactive role for the laity in the mission of the church. The CCRM is one of the ecclesial movements that imbued the vision of the conciliar documents regarding the laity. The CCRM is primarily a lay-centered movement. It bridged the gap between the hierarchy and the laity by evolving a distinguishing charismatic spirituality, one that welcomed and appreciated all the members of the church.

5 See Mario Marazziti and Austen Ivereigh, “A Church that Is and Works to be a Church for Everyone but Particularly the Poor,” in *New Religious Movements in the Catholic Church*, ed. Michael Hayes (London: Burns and Oates, 2005), 33.

6 See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13.

7 See Paul VI, *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Promulgated by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, no. 3, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_presbyterorum-ordinis_en.html.

8 See Robert McClory, “Holy Orders Surrounded by Controversy,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 20, 1995.

9 See Thomas Lucking, “Ideal Up Against Reality in Lay Ministry Career,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 17, 2004.

10 See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 40.

11 See *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 12, 13. See also Paul VI, *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965, no. 3, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html.

12 See Paul VI, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963, nos. 26, 27, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

13 See Maureen Sullivan, *The Road to Vatican II: Key Changes in Theology* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2007), 60–82.

14 John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christifideles Laici of His Holiness John Paul II on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*, December 30, 1988, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html.

The CCRM was instrumental in reconciling the institutional and charismatic dimension of the church by urging obedience to ecclesial authorities on the one hand, and on the other, by encouraging all the people of God to use their charisms for the good of the community.¹⁵ It allowed flexibility to accommodate the diverse ministries and activities of all the people.¹⁶ Pope John Paul II affirmed the role of the movements in harmonizing the relationship between the institutional and charismatic dimensions of the church. He noted that

I have often had occasion to stress that there is no conflict or opposition in the Church between the institutional dimension and the charismatic dimension, of which movements are a significant expression. Both are co-essential to the divine constitution of the Church founded by Jesus, because they both help to make the mystery of Christ and his saving work present in the world. Together they aim at renewing in their own ways the self-awareness of the Church, which in a certain sense can be called a movement herself, since she is the realization in time and space of the Father's sending of his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

The CCRM is implementing the Second Vatican Council's vision of an inclusive church, where all the baptized feel that they belong to the church and are a part of it.¹⁸ Following are some of the concrete ways through which the CCRM has fostered the role of the laity in the mission of the church.

Universal Call to Holiness

Pre-Second Vatican Council, the church reserved the call to holiness only for the clergy and the religious. The church looked on laypeople as a part of the secular world. However, since the Second Vatican Council, the church changed its view about the laity. The church understands the call to holiness is a universal call that includes all the people of God.¹⁹ Even though the conciliar documents characterize the laity as possessing a secular nature, it does not interpret a secular world as an unholy world.²⁰ By the secular nature of the laity, it refers to their work, profession, and occupation in the world. The church upholds the importance of the secular world because Jesus became human to save the world.²¹

The CCRM focuses on the phenomenon of baptism in the Holy Spirit.²² Conversion of heart is one of the essential steps to have an experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit.²³ Thus, the CCRM emphasizes a thorough introspection of one's life. It organizes retreats and seminars to teach people about the importance of turning back from the sinful ways in their lives and returning to God. Further, the baptism in the Holy Spirit renews the spiritual life of a person. It transforms a person's whole life. The common effects of baptism in the Holy Spirit are a profound awareness of the presence of the God in one's life. This experience leads a person to spend more time in personal as well as communitarian prayers. The tremendous experience of the baptism in the Holy Spirit increases

15 See Charles Whitehead, "The Role of the Ecclesial Movements and the New Communities in the Life of the Church," in *New Religious Movements in the Catholic Church*, 19–23. See also Veli-Matti Karkkainen, "The Calling of the Whole People of God into Ministry," *Studia Theologia* 53 (1999): 144–62.

16 See Reginald Alva, "Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement and Secularization," *PentecoStudies* 14, no.1 (2015): 129–30.

17 John Paul II, *Message of Pope John Paul II for the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*, May 27, 1998, [Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, no. 2, 21.1 \(1998\): 1062. Also available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980527_movimenti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980527_movimenti.html).

18 See Luis Fernando Figari, "The Lay Faithful and Christian Life," in *New Religious Movements in the Catholic Church*, 150–51.

19 See *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 39, 40, 41.

20 See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 31.

21 See *Christifideles Laici*, no. 415–16.

22 See ICCRS Doctrinal Commission, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Vatican: ICCRS, 2012), 15.

23 See Matteo Calisi, "The Future of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal," in *Spirit-Empowered Christianity in the 21st Century*, ed. Vinson Synan (Lake Mary: Charisma House, 2011), 85.

the thirst for spiritual growth in a person's life. He or she finds a new interest in meditating on the Word of God and participates actively in the liturgy and sacraments of the church.²⁴ Due to the efforts of the Charismatics, lay Catholics have also started to take interest in biblical scholarship, which previously they thought to be the domain of the clergy and the religious.²⁵

Charismatics give importance to holiness in every aspect of their life. They bear witness to Jesus through their life in the place where they live and work.²⁶ In the contemporary world, the virtue of holiness does not have much relevance. People consider holiness as a myth and a hurdle in enjoying the pleasures of life. In such a trying situation, the CCRM has successfully appealed to children, youth, and the elderly to consider seriously the biblical call of holiness. Pope John Paul II commended the Charismatics for their work in helping the youth to know the importance of holiness in marriage and society. He noted that

your witness can be particularly important for young people, upon whom the ideal of holiness exerts a great fascination. I especially encourage you . . . to proclaim the sanctity of marriage and the family in accordance with God's plan, and to work to ensure respect for God's gift of life at every level of society.²⁷

Thus, Charismatic spirituality has helped the church to spread the importance of holiness, prayer, and fraternal communion among the laity.

Use of Charisms

The early Christian community used the charisms of the Holy Spirit in their missionary work.²⁸ However, as time passed by, the church gave more importance to its institutional dimension and neglected its charismatic structure.²⁹ During the debates of the Second Vatican Council, a group of Council Fathers held that God gave the early Christians charisms to do the mission work. The manifestations of these charisms do not continue since the times of the apostles. In contrast to this view, Cardinal Suenens and his supporters argued that charisms do exist even in the present times. The Council Fathers voted in favor of Cardinal Suenens's resolution and accepted the importance of using the charisms for the common good.³⁰ The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, noted that the Holy Spirit distributes charisms to all Christians and each person must use these charisms for the good of the community. It noted that

it is not only through the sacraments and the ministries of the Church that the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the people of God and enriches it with virtues, but, allotting his gifts to everyone according as He wills, He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church. . . . These charisms, whether they be the more outstanding or the more

24 See Reginald Alva, *The Spirituality of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2012), 61–90.

25 See Thomas Csordas, *Language, Charisma & Creativity: Ritual Life in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 43–44.

26 See Paul Josef Cordes, *Call to Holiness* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 8–9.

27 John Paul II, *Address of His Holiness John Paul II to the Members of the Catholic Fraternity of Charismatic Covenant Communities*, November 14, 1994, [Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, 17.2 \(1994\): 775-777. Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1994/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19941114_rinnovamento-carismatico.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1994/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19941114_rinnovamento-carismatico.html).

28 See Ronal Kydd, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984), 5–14.

29 See Kydd, 86–87.

30 See Léon Joseph Suenens, *Co-Responsibility in the Church*, trans. Francis Martin (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 216–17. See also Francis Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1982), 10–11. Please refer *Acta Synodalia Vaticani II*, 2.3 (1972), 175–78 and *Acta Synodalia Vaticani II*, 2.2 (1972), 629–30, for a detailed description of the debates of the Council.

simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation for they are perfectly suited to and useful for the needs of the Church.³¹

The CCRM has contributed to the growth of the diverse ministries in the church by encouraging all the faithful to open themselves up to receive the charisms of the Holy Spirit and use them for the good of the community.³² St. Paul refers to the list of charisms in 1 Cor 12, Rom 12 and Eph 4. During the CCRM prayer meetings and retreats, people use the various charisms of the Holy Spirit. People blessed with the gift of healing, pray over others.³³ Apart from exercising the charisms of healing, the leaders of the CCRM encourage people to use other charisms such as prophecy, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues, etc. In addition, they also encourage people to use their gifts and skills for the good of the community. CCRM leaders emphasize the proper discernment and use of the charisms. The CCRM encourages use of gifts and charisms for the edification of the church.

Lay Leadership

The laity has found prominent roles of leadership in the CCRM. Unlike the parishes, where the parish priest is the de facto leader of the community, the Charismatics' prayer groups offer leadership to anyone who is capable of leading the group. Charismatics often choose leaders by having wider consultations within the group or by conducting elections. Therefore, some talented laypersons find Charismatic prayer groups very attractive. They feel their gift of leadership is recognized and accepted within the group.³⁴

Lay leaders not only animate their groups but also help the local parish to grow. Thanks to the lay leaders who organize prayer meetings in Latin America, the Catholic Church has been able to hold its faithful. If not there would be a mass exodus to Pentecostal denominations.³⁵ In the United States and Europe, too, a considerable number of Catholics actively involve themselves with church activities through various ecclesial movements like the CCRM. In an article published on November 12, 2004, in the *National Catholic Reporter*, Barbara Fraser and Paul Jeffrey noted that the CCRM has helped the laity to be contributors rather than being mere passive receivers. Allan Deck noted that at times, some parish priests could feel lay leaders as a threat to their leadership.³⁶ However, such fears are untenable. Instead of being suspicious about the lay leaders, the priests should encourage them to develop fully their skills and potentials. This in turn can help the lay leaders to contribute concretely toward the growth of the parish community.

A distinct feature of the lay leadership of the CCRM is the development of women's leadership. Unlike the clergy, which is male centered, the Charismatic prayer groups accept women as leaders. Charismatics generally do not discriminate. This openness on the part of the Charismatics has helped women to take part actively in the various programs and contribute for the growth of the Church. Charis-marie Alexis noted in an article published by *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* that the Charismatic prayer groups were instrumental in promoting women leadership in Trinidad.³⁷ One can observe similar trends in other parts of the world. Thus, the Charismatics have given laypeople, both men and women, a chance to be leaders and animators of groups, a position that the church formerly reserved only for the clergy. The development of lay leadership is projecting a very positive image of

31 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 12.

32 See Tomas Zatel, "Towards a Theology of the Laity: A Proposal for Understanding the Laity," *Asian Journal of Theology* 27, no. 1 (April 2013): 131–43.

33 See Thomas Csordas, *The Sacred Self* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 26–29.

34 See Allan Figueroa Deck, "Where the Laity Flourish," *America* 195, no. 4 (2006): 15.

35 See Andrew Chestnut, "A Preferential Option for the Spirit: The Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Latin America's New Religious Economy," *Latin American Politics and Society* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 55–85.

36 See Deck, "Where the Laity Flourish," 15.

37 See Charisa-marie Alexis, "A Pathway to Spirit Led Leadership: Exploring Spiritual Experience as a Determinant for Women's Leadership Roles within the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement in Trinidad 1970–2010," *International Journal of Arts & Sciences* 4, no. 17 (2011): 1–16.

the church as inclusive and accepting of the various gifts of the community members. The active participation of the laity in the various activities of the church enriches the Christian faith.³⁸

Various Programs Organized by Laity

The emergence of dynamic lay leadership within Charismatic prayer groups has led to an increase in various outreach programs for the community. Lay leaders, who have a good understanding of the needs and problems of the laity, offer various services to people who are in need of help.

Charismatics have organized programs such as Couples for Christ,³⁹ youth apostolates, special services for the ill and disabled, healing services, retreats, intercessory prayer groups, and social action groups. Some of these programs aim directly at the spiritual renewal of a person, whereas some programs aim at the social well-being of the people involved.⁴⁰ These efforts taken by the Charismatic lay leaders have borne rich fruits in the church. Many people have returned to the church after long spells of spiritual dryness and isolation. Some others, who were finding it difficult to adjust to the rigid structures of the church bureaucracy, have found a new freedom in worship and have become active members of the parish through the medium of prayer groups. Thus, the Charismatics are actively involved in organizing programs to reach out to the people.

Formation of the Laity

Successive popes since the Second Vatican Council have highlighted the importance of formation of the laity. Formation of the laity is becoming the need of the hour as secularization is gaining strength and the number of priests, religious, and seminarians is significantly reducing. In present times, the laity has the important task of training future leaders among themselves who can lead the community. Pope John Paul II noted the importance of sound spiritual formation of the laity so that they are well equipped to face the various situations of the life. He noted that

the situation today points to an ever-increasing urgency for a doctrinal formation of the lay faithful, not simply in a better understanding which is natural to faith's dynamism, but also in enabling them to give a reason for their hope in view of the world and its grave and complex problems.⁴¹

Pope John Paul II encouraged the various ecclesial movements to contribute to the work of the formation of the laity using their unique spiritualities and methods. He noted that

groups, associations and movements also have their place in the formation of the lay faithful. In fact they have the possibility, each with its own method, of offering a formation through a deeply shared experience in the apostolic life, as well as having the opportunity to integrate, to make concrete and specific the formation that their members receive from other persons and communities.⁴²

In his address to the leaders of the Catholic Fraternity of Charismatic Covenant Communities and Fellowships, Pope Francis noted that the aim of the Charismatics to promote a greater understanding of the Holy Spirit to form mature disciples of Christ is the need of the church.

38 See Chestnut, "A Preferential Option for the Spirit," 57.

39 In 1981, the Charismatic community *Ang Ligaya Panginoon* (Joy of the Lord) started the Couples for Christ ministry to serve married couples. It aims at the renewal of faith in Christian families. Since 1993, members of Couples for Christ started Kids for Christ, Youth for Christ, Singles for Christ, Handmaids of the Lord, and Servants of the Lord to reach out to specific groups.

40 See Wonsuk Ma, "Philippines," in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. Van Der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 206–7.

41 *Christifideles Laici*, no. 510–11.

42 *Christifideles Laici*, no. 516–17.

I can see from the programme, where the names of the Communities are mentioned, that at the introduction you have inserted the phrase, "...to share the Baptism in the Holy Spirit with the whole Church". The Church needs the Holy Spirit, how could it be otherwise! Every Christian in his or her life requires a heart open to the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit.⁴³

Charismatics have taken the task of forming the laity to work as leaders, instructors of faith, and do communitarian pastoral work. The leaders of the International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services (ICCRS) and the Catholic Fraternity of Charismatic Covenant Communities and Fellowships (CFCCF) organize formation programs for the laity, the leaders of the prayer groups, and the future generation of leaders. ICCRS organizes a Leadership Training Course in various countries to cater to the local needs of the community.⁴⁴ It is a one-week course. It also organizes a three-week course at the Leadership Formation Institute in Rome. This is a much more comprehensive course, and it aims to bring together leaders of the various prayer groups around the globe to have a rich exchange of ideas and learn from each other mutually. The CFCCF also organizes formation programs to train the people in biblical studies and mission work.⁴⁵ Thus, the Charismatics have greatly contributed to the formation of the laity by making them earnest disciples of Christ and effective evangelizers.

Conclusion

Various conciliar documents noted the importance of involving the laity in the mission work of the church. However, in spite of the best intentions, the bishops and priests could not fully implement this vision of the Council. It is in this context that ecclesial movements such as the CCRM have done wonderful work in promoting the role of the laity in the day-to-day church activities. Charismatics have put into action the call of the Second Vatican Council to form Christ-centered disciples who value the importance of holiness and use the charisms for the good of the community. The various formation programs by Charismatics have helped the church to get leaders who have sound biblical and doctrinal teaching. Such leaders are an asset to the church, as they reach out to the people and are actively involved in pastoral work. They work in collaboration with their pastors for the growth of the community. Thus, the CCRM has been successful to a certain extent in promoting the laity to actively participate and contribute to the life of the church.

43 Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Members of the "Catholic Fraternity of Charismatic Covenant Communities and Fellowships,"* October 31, 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141031_catholic-fraternity.html.

44 See the ICCRS website, http://www.iccrs.org/Dettaglio.php?id_liv3=988&WEB=Formation_Project.

45 See the CFCCF website, <http://www.catholicfraternity.net/wordpress/about-us/works/>.