Empowering the Lay Faithful: From a Passive Participation to a Prophetic Mission

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Abstract

This paper examines the limited involvement of lay faithful in the Church's prophetic mission, despite their baptismal inclusion and Church teachings advocating for their participation The problem appear to be a lack of awareness among lay faithful regarding their rights and responsibilities. The aim of this study is to analyzes Church documents, discussions, and examples of lay involvement to identify barriers and propose solutions. The methodology includes both qualitative and comparative approaches. The paper suggests that the solution to fix the problem is to give lay faithful's the tools they need to participate. This means providing them with good training and education about their faith and encouraging Catholic leaders to actively support them in their role of sharing the Church's message. By doing this, the Church can become more energetic and involve everyone in its mission of evangelization.

Keywords: Prophetic, Mission, Lay Faithful, Baptism, Participation, Catholic Church.

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council's ecclesiology strongly emphasizes mission and communion, two interconnected aspects. This is because the people of God gathered in communion are tasked with evangelizing and making disciples of all nations, having transitioned from darkness to His remarkable light (1 Pet. 2:9; Matt 5:16). In this community, all members of Christ's faithful enjoy equal dignity due to their baptism (can. 208).[1] Through baptism, the lay faithful powerfully participate in Christ's magnificent mission and triple role, just like all Christ's faithful (can. 225 §1). [2]The "*triamunera Christi*," the threefold office of Christ, are as follows: i) *Munus Docendi:* the duty to teach, based on Christ's role as prophet. ii) *Munus Sanctificandi:* the duty to sanctify, based on Christ's role as priest. iii) *Munus Regendi:* the duty to shepherd, based on Christ's role as king. The *Munus Docendi* the duty to carry out prophetic mission, by which the lay faithful are deputed to the apostolate by their baptism, is our concern in this paper.

The lay faithful's participation in the Church's prophetic mission has been largely overlooked. The Second Vatican Council's teachings, the new Code of Canon Law's provisions, and the various documents from the magisterium, conferences, and seminars have all underscored the importance of lay participation, but its impact remains surprisingly limited. Many lay faithful remain ignorant of their faith's core teachings. Observations suggest that many lay faithful have strayed from practicing and witnessing to their faith. This is evident in the increasing number of lay faithful, particularly youths, who are reverting to traditional religions and idolatry.

Furthermore, while some lay faithful remain in the Church, their involvement is often superficial. Additionally, there are many non-Catholics and thousands of unevangelized individuals who require exposure to the Good News of Salvation. Notably, the universal Church recently had the synod on synodality, which aimed to foster a unified approach to Church governance and mission in the 21st century. To this end, the lay faithful must be convinced of their beliefs, teach these beliefs, and embody them in their daily lives, both now and in the future.

This paper aims to educate and motivate lay members of Christ's faithful to fulfill their obligations and exercise their rights regarding the Church's prophetic mission and remind the

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[1] CIC, c. 208, §1.

[2]Code of Canon Law, c. 225, §1, in *The Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983).

clergy of their responsibility to provide the laity the necessary training and expertise. The significance of this paper lies in its ability to enlighten and empower the lay faithful in the Church, encouraging them to participate more actively in spreading the Good News rather than leave this responsibility solely to the clergy. This, in turn, will lead to a more vibrant Church and a more extensive and inclusive evangelization efforts. Moreover, the Church's fundamental law, "*Salus animarum*" - Salvation of Souls (can. 1752), will be achieved by committing to the prophetic mission.[3]

2. Nature of the Prophetic Mission of the Church

The fundamental objective of commitment to the prophetic mission is the attainment of "*Salus Animarum*" - Salvation of Souls. As a result, fulfilling the prophetic mission is one of the most critical concerns of the Church. This concern emanates from the Church's inherent nature, which is essentially missionary.

Etymologically, the term "prophetic" is an adjective derived from the Greek word "προφήτης" denoting "prophet" or "prophecy". Generally, a prophet is an individual who interprets the divine will or is appointed to interpret the commands of a deity. As Harper's Bible Dictionary states, a prophet is "a person who serves as a channel of communication between the human and divine worlds." Thus, a prophet is the bearer of revelation, serving as God's envoy. The message the prophet conveys is not solely for personal edification but is intended for those to whom he is sent with a mandate.

Any prophet who falsely claims to have received a message from God will face God's wrath and punishment, a powerful reminder of the importance of authenticity and truthfulness in our spiritual journeys.[4]As Udosen so eloquently pointed out, the term 'prophetic' denotes the divine message from God conveyed by a prophet or God's messenger, aiming to inspire and guide the

people's moral, religious, and social conduct. This encompasses various activities, including preaching, catechesis, witnessing to the faith, promoting social justice, and advocating for the poor, empowering people to live out their faith with purpose and passion. With baptism, all Christ's faithful are called to participate in His prophetic office, tasked with proclaiming the message of salvation to all. This is, a truly noble and inspiring calling.[5]

Furthermore, "mission" originates from the Latin,*Mitto -Mittere*, signifying "to send." It embodies sending a person with a profound purpose to communicate a life-changing message. Mission' connotes sending a person with divine authority to preach, as underscored by the biblical text, "but how shall they preach unless they are sent" (Rom. 10:15). Illuminated by this understanding, Bishop Adesina, the Catholic Bishop of Ijebu-Ode Diocese, emphatically asserted that it is imperative, therefore, that the Church of Christ be a missionary Church.[6] The pivotal point here is that this mission is fundamentally a "mission to all and for all; excluding no one, it beckons the active participation of all in proclamation and witness. Integrating these two terms, "prophetic" and "mission," the concept, "prophetic mission," thus refers to the sacred mandate or

[3] CIC, c. 1752, §1.

[4] cf. Jer 14:14-15; Ezek 13:1-10

[5]Dominic Udosen, *Lay Persons in the Prophetic Mission of the Church,* (Owerri: Edu-Edy, 2013), 15.

[6]Francis Adesina, "Keynote Address on Communion in the Church: Theological Perspective on the Synod on Synodality," in R. Aina, M. J Obiorah, C. Obanure, F. Adelabu, & I. Out (Eds.), *Communion and Mission in the Church: Theological Perspectives on the Synod on Synodality* (Cathan Publication, 2023), 24.

task entrusted to the Apostles and, by extension, to all Christ's faithful by Christ himself to go out to the whole world and preach the gospel to all creation[7].

Since this mission was entrusted to her, the Church has unwaveringly persevered in her pursuit to fulfill it. It is a testament to this unwavering dedication that the Good News has continued to radiate to the world's farthest reaches. Reflecting on this, Ojemen insightfully remarks that through this steadfast effort by the Church, particularly as embodied in her teachings, the Church intensifies within her members and extends to the entire world the extraordinary mission of Christ on earth.[8] Because of the intrinsic nature of this mission, the Church views her commitment to it as both a sacred obligation and an inherent right independent of any human authority. This implies that the Church can confidently assert that her right to proclaim the Gospel is rooted in the Lord's command. This profound mandate of Christ to the Church was not entrusted to a select few but to all clergy and lay faithful alike.

In his profoundly inspiring Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiand,* Pope Paul VI beautifully described this mission of evangelization as "the boundless grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity, the very essence of her being.[9]

Thus, the Church exists to announce the Good News to all creation and to spread love, hope, and salvation. On his part, Pope Benedict XVI in his Post Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, profoundly states that in this community where Jesus Christ, "the first-born among many brethren" [10]reconciled all people with God the Father [11]and bestowed the Holy Spirit [12]the Church for her part becomes the radiant bearer of the Good News that every human person is a cherished child of God. She is called to transmit this uplifting message to all humanity by proclaiming the salvation won for us by Christ, celebrating our communion with God, and living in fraternal solidarity.[13]

From the foregoing, it is clear that as part of the Church, the lay faithful are not excluded from its prophetic mission, the mandate for which they received through baptism from the Lord Jesus himself.

3. Mission: Obligations and Prophetic Rights of the Lay Faithful

The Obligations and rights of the lay faithful with regards to the prophetic mission of the Church are clearly stated in Canon 225 §1: that as baptized and confirmed individuals, laypeople are commissioned to the apostolate, thereby assuming a general obligation and right to disseminate the divine message of salvation worldwide, whether individually or collectively[14]. This obligation is particularly pressing when laypeople serve as the sole conduit for others to encounter the Gospel and come to know Christ. By explicitly addressing the laity, this canon highlights their indispensable role in the apostolate, aligning with the revised ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.

[7] (Matt. 28: 19; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8)
[8] Cosmas Ojemen, Canon Law and the Catholic Church in Nigeria: *A Reflective Exposition* (University of Port Harcourt Press, 2010).
[9] Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*(Apostolic Exhortation), *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 41 (1976), 51.
[10] (Rom 8:29)
[11] (Eph 2:14-18)
[12] (Jn. 20:22)
[13] Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*
[14]CIC 225 §1

Canon 225 §1 addresses the misguided notion that the apostolate is solely the domain of the clergy, with the lay faithful relegated to a passive role.[15] The phrase "like all Christ's faithful" underscores the conciliar emphasis on the fundamental equality of all Christ's faithful.[16]With baptism and confirmation, the faithful establish a personal relationship with Christ and become integral members of the community of believers. Moreover, they participate in Christ's triple functions (munera) and contribute to the Church's mission. Consequently, all of Christ's faithful share fundamental equality in dignity and activity, collaborating to build up the body of Christ.

This foundational equality is rooted in baptism, signaling a substantial shift from the Church's understanding of herself as reflected in the 1917 Code. Previously, the Church was viewed as a *societasinaequalis*– (, with distinction based on ordination. Nonetheless, participation in Christ's triple functions varies according to individual circumstances and specific vocations within the Church. The assertion that 'Lay persons are deputed to the apostolate by baptism and confirmation'[17] highlights that the lay faithful's mission is grounded in their reception of the baptismal sacrament.[18] Thus, God is the ultimate source of their mandate to participate in the Church's mission, eliminating the need for formal permission or deputation by Church authorities. It is an organic outgrowth of the mission emanating from the sacraments' grace.

Moreover, the phrase "general obligation" in the Canon 225, §1[19]signifies that the responsibility to disseminate the message of salvation is a moral obligation shared by all members of the people of God. However, this obligation is ethical rather than juridical, meaning that a member of the faithful cannot be compelled to fulfill it, although they also cannot be prevented from doing so. The canon further stipulates that the obligation to engage in this apostolate is a "right" inherent to the lay faithful, individually or collectively, in associations. This implies that this right is perpetual and inalienable and, therefore, must be safeguarded and promoted by all. Nonetheless, the canon emphasizes that the increased emphasis on the role of the lay faithful does not entail assuming responsibilities traditionally undertaken by the clergy for instance, the cleric specifically serves the people of God, by attending tot the teaching of faith and morals, the administration of Sacraments, and the governance of ecclesial communities entrusted to them. Instead, it relates the lay faithful's participation in the common apostolate to their positions in the secular realm. They must promote the Gospel message and the knowledge of Christ in their daily lives and vocations.

3.1 Participation of the Lay Faithful in the Prophetic Mission of the Church: Contemporary Experience

Events have shown that the lay faithful remain dedicated to advancing the Church's prophetic mission. Many engage in fruitful collaborations with their pastors, making substantial strides and contributions to the advancement of evangelization. They undertake these efforts individually or collectively, leveraging their resources, time, and talents. In various dioceses and provinces, institutions such as schools of evangelization, catechetical training centers, and other entities have been established to train and empower the lay faithful for this mission. Many lay faithful have exhibited a deep commitment to the prophetic mission within their respective parish

[15]*CIC, c.* 225, §1.
[16] Lumen Gentium, 32, in Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, ed. Austin Flannery (Dublin: Dominican, 1990). CIC 208
[17]*CIC, c.* 225, §1.
[18]*CIC, cc. 96, 204,* 208, §1.
[19]*CIC, c.* 225, §1.

communities. The initiatives of lay groups and organizations, including the Catholic Men Organization (CMO), Catholic Women Organization (CWO), Catholic Youth Organization (CYON), and other lay organizations operating under the Catholic Laity Council of Nigeria (CLCN), have been instrumental in providing opportunities for lay participation in the Church's prophetic mission. These organizations regularly develop and implement spiritual and religious, social justice formation programs, enriching and strengthening their members' faith. Moreover, individuals and groups contribute to catechetical instruction and sacramental preparation. These experiences demonstrate the significance of lay involvement in the Church's prophetic mission in Nigeria and highlight the endeavours of various groups and individuals to disseminate the faith and promote the Church's mission.

Despite the observations mentioned above, certain areas exhibit a dearth of courage, enthusiasm, love, and good disposition that characterized the early days of the Church among the present-day lay faithful. In the past, individuals and communities freely extended invitations to the Church to establish and manage institutions such as schools, hospitals, and other churches within their communities. Communities, individuals, and families freely donated land to construct the Church and other ecclesiastical institutions. Nevertheless, in some areas today, the descendants of those faithful individuals and communities want to repossess the properties. Indeed, in some places, lawsuits regarding the Church's land are currently pending in courts. Many Church communities continue to face persistent harassment, encroachment, threats, and other forms of intimidation regarding the Church's temporal goods, institutions, and personnel yet fail to give witness to what they believe.

Moreover, recent experiences have demonstrated that numerous lay faithful in diverse strata and positions within civil society have failed to exhibit sufficient courage and boldness in serving as Christ's ambassadors and making the Church's presence felt in various circumstances and locations. Furthermore, while the lay faithful must become actively involved in restructuring and transforming society. The Church, and by extension, the lay faithful, must adopt a more grassroots approach, permeating society with gospel values through words and actions. By doing so, they will fulfill their divine calling to permeate and improve the temporal order with the spirit of the gospel, thereby becoming the salt of the earth and the world's light.[20]

4. Lay Faithful in the Prophetic Mission: Challenges and Problems

The involvement of the lay faithful in the Church's prophetic mission is fraught with challenges and problems. In various ways, these issues negatively impact their commitment to this mission. The primary challenge is ignorance. Regarding this unfavorable situation, Ojemen lamented that numerous ignorant individuals are in the Church due to a lack of necessary knowledge. He goes further to say that this deficiency can cause problems for the community to which they belong. For him, such persons will be unable to fulfill their roles as community members properly because they are unaware of their rights, duties, or obligations. Consequently, they cannot participate in the community's affairs.[21]Udosen reinforced this notion by observing that "one of the obstacles to a more active participation of the lay faithful in the Church's prophetic mission is insufficient awareness of their rights and obligations in this regard, especially as enunciated in the teachings of Vatican II."[22] Therefore, much work remains to be done in this regard, as most

[20] Matt 5:13,14

[21]Cosmas Ojemen, Canon Law and the Catholic Church in Nigeria: A Reflective Exposition. (University of Port Harcourt Press, 2010) 69.

[22]Udosen 34

lay faithful remain indifferent and ignorant of their obligations and rights in the Church's prophetic mission.

Udosen highlighted another challenge that impedes the lay faithful's practical involvement in the Church's prophetic mission: some lay faithful's passive and nonchalant attitude towards this mission. Some lay faithful members display a passive and nonchalant attitude towards the affairs related to the Church's mission. According to Udosen, this attitude arises from the long-standing tradition of equating the Church with the hierarchy. As a result, they continue to view the Church and its mission as the sole responsibility of the clergy[23]. The main objective of committing to the prophetic mission—the salvation of souls, or "*salus animarum*"—is thwarted by the lay faithful's attitude toward evangelism.

The excessive pursuit of material goods and an over-preoccupation with secular affairs and demands pose a significant challenge to the effective participation of the lay faithful in the Church's prophetic mission. Udosen pointed out that many Christians have become so engrossed in their busy lives that they often neglect to allocate time for studying the word of God, prayers, or engaging in spiritual activities and participating in worship and other religious activities, which are crucial for building up and equipping individuals for the task of promoting the Church's prophetic mission.[24]

Lastly, the risk of persecution presents a significant challenge to the Church's prophetic mission in society. Lay faithful engaged in this mission are vulnerable to persecution from various quarters. Udosen highlighted numerous instances of persecution against lay faithful who uphold truth, justice, and righteousness. He noted: In different parts of the world, including our present time, many Christians face attacks, torture, and murder due to their commitment to spreading the Gospel. Some have lost their jobs and have been denied admission to educational institutions, employment in public service, promotions, and social benefits. Others have suffered rejection, abandonment by friends and acquaintances, and inhuman treatment while defending Christian values and principles in the public sphere[25]. Regrettably, this risk of persecution has led some lay faithful to hesitate in participating in the Church's prophetic mission.

5. Way Forward: Empowerment of the Lay Faithful through Integral Formation and Education

For the lay faithful to fulfill their prophetic mission in the Church, they require a profound and lasting empowerment. It is a well-established truth that many lay faithful are not adequately enlightened about their roles and responsibilities in the mission entrusted to the Church by Christ. As Ojo aptly puts it, “a great number of the laity is not yet aware of their vocation and mission in the Church and the society.”[26] Therefore, the most effective way to empower the lay faithful to fulfill their mission in the Church and the world is through comprehensive and integral training and formation. As Pope St. John Paul II so emphatically stressed, “the spiritual, moral and theological formation of lay men and women is one of the most urgent priorities in the Church, if we are to put the teaching of the Second Vatican Council into effect.”[27]

Consequently, the need to emphasize the formation of the lay faithful is further reinforced by the fact that, unlike the clergy and religious, they often lack opportunities for a well-structured and

[23]Udosen 35
[24]Udosen 37
[25]Udosen 39
[26]Ojo, G., Catholic Laity in Nigeria: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow (Daily Graphics).
[27]Pope John Paul II, *Letter to the Assembly of Asian Laity*, (November 24, 1983).

consistent formation program. Nevertheless, Udosen pointed out multiple channels through which the lay faithful can be formed. These include various forms of catechesis, such as pre-baptismal instruction for parents and godparents, formation through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (R.C.I.A.), establishment of training institutions and organized programs of formation, participation in various forms of religious and theological training, and regular and consistent nourishment and assistance by the clergy from the spiritual riches of the Church, primarily through the word of God and the sacraments.[28]

Pope Benedict XVI, in *Africae Munus*, advised professionals to leverage their careers as avenues of spreading the Gospel. He urged them to express their faith boldly, "similar to leaven in dough, consistently demonstrating the constructive contributions of Christ's teachings and the Church to society."[29]

As Catholic professionals and leaders, we are called to leverage our positions and professions as catalysts for the Church's prophetic mission, fostering a culture of hope and renewal. Catholic lawmakers can champion bills reflecting Christian principles while opposing those undermining them. Likewise, professionals from diverse backgrounds can utilize their skills to propagate the Good News, creating a ripple effect of kindness and compassion. Whether through pro-bono medical services, engineering expertise, media promotion, or educational sponsorships, we can collectively embody the Church's values, illuminating the path for others.

6. Conclusion

The great commission to spread Christ's message is a collective responsibility that empowers all clergy and lay faithful to work together. The Second Vatican Council's teachings have revitalized the role of the lay faithful, affirming their vital contributions and inherent rights and obligations to share the Gospel[30]. The active engagement of the lay faithful in the Church's prophetic mission is crucial and indispensable for the triumph of the Church's salvific mission worldwide. Pope St. John Paul II reiterated this notion in his 1987 address to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, stating that "the mission of the laity is integral to the salvific mission of the entire people of God." This paper seeks to empower the lay faithful to carry out their divine mandate entrusted by Jesus Christ. As they assume this responsibility, they become increasingly energized and dedicated to Christ's cause, leading to a thriving evangelization within the Church and society.

[28]Udosen 146-147.
[29] Benedict XVI, *Post Apostolic Exhortation, "Africae Munus"* (19 November, 2011) 145.
[30] (LG 32, can. 208)