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# Laity and the Ethics of the Common Good

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This article is a call to action on a specific agenda: to promote the international network of Christian lay centres and academies as a strategic resource to help individuals and institutions to express the “ethics of the common good”.

Much has been written about biblical and theological bases for the vocation and ministry of the laity. While this theoretical enterprise is important work, I take a simple and direct, if impatient, approach which I hope will allow us to build on it in practical ways. I am well aware that there are significant theological differences over the vocation of the so-called laity, important church-political factors that bear on this issue, as well as cultural and national contexts which determine how the ministry of the laity has evolved and what current realities shape the priorities. Nevertheless, I take a universal approach to the laity question. I stress all the people of God, the *laos*. I do this on what I consider sound theological grounds and with a mission orientation that grows out of a social analysis.

All God’s people are called to live out their faith in the world. Within the Christian community, this includes the ordained (clergy) and the non-ordained (non-clergy). There can and should be specific roles and functions for each of these believers in their own individual or institutional “ministries”. But it is incontrovertible that we are all challenged to live out our faith — even to assist each other in our various ministries for the common ends of our faith — in the world. The larger and more important question is, what should we be about together in the world? What is the mission focus of work? No matter how we come to it, through biblical exegesis or social analysis, I would submit that a mission task for us as Christians today is to help promote the common good. It will take the full *laos* to accomplish this; so let us bury the division between clergy and laity on this one and forge alliances and mutual resources to work for the common good.

How do we know when we are working for the common good? Why is it so important to be engaged on a common good agenda? There are at least five central principles:

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1) **participation**: grounding action especially through *local* participation in debating and acting towards the common good;

2) **justice and equity**: promoting the dual emphasis *for each* and *for all*;

3) **sustainability**: recognizing that solutions must have short- and long-term economic and environmental goals without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations;

4) **interdependence**: building on the uniqueness of each to work for the good that touches all, for something counts as a common good only to the extent that it is a good to which all have access;

5) **interconnection of all these principles**: realizing that they are so fully related that we cannot practise one without the other.

These are very noble principles (some might even find them arrogant or bordering on hubris) to guide the mission focus of the *laos*. Because the task is so great and so important, let me suggest an important reminder for individuals and groups working on common good projects. To paraphrase Micah 6:8, the Lord requires us to do justice for the common good, but only if one *loves mercy* and walks *humbly* with God. Mercy or compassion, with a heavy sense of humility, must be corollary principles to these five.

If programmes, activities and organizations were designed to maximize these principles, progress for the common good would be enhanced. We say this with much fear and trembling, for it is hard work, perhaps even impossible in both the ultimate and penultimate senses.

Needless to say, when you represent yourself as helping others to achieve the common good — especially those who have been traditionally the underclass or who have reason to be suspicious because of age-old prejudices and oppressions — attention to the principle of *participation* is crucial. The common good cannot be defined *a priori*. Certainly it cannot be defined for someone who is not even represented in the defining process. Marginalized communities have so often had the experience of having the common good imposed on them that some of them find the term itself unacceptable. Common good activities should thus be grounded in the local community. One must be engaged in building a healthy community, but the health of a community must be defined and fundamentally achieved by that community. Definitions of health from the outside can never be the starting point for a community's self empowerment for its own health. The common good is that which is discovered and defined by a process of local participation, debating and acting with the common good as its goal.

What are the major impediments to achieving the common good? What is at stake if we do not have a viable practice of the common good? Speaking largely from a Western, United States perspective, I would suggest that divisive fragmentation is one of the major obstacles. Fragmentation is often the dominant social reality, fostering a mentality that fears others and "looks out for my own kind". There is thus a natural resistance to a common good philosophy, which must build on cooperation and sacrifice. But although diversity of class, race, culture, religion and other social identities make a focus on the common good difficult, the only hope is to preserve a healthy pluralism.

Our communities need a new competence, a new "literacy", in working together for the common good across lines of misunderstanding that are often seen as

insurmountable. Living and prospering with diversity is a moral imperative from South Central Los Angeles to Central America to the former Soviet Union to whatever nation's crisis is the subject of today's front-page article. What is at stake in each of these cases is whether or not a viable civil society can be built which sustains inclusion and participation of all its citizens. The world has to refine and develop institutions that truly support the goods for all to have access to. Communities that are hopeful that the common good can be a reality will be healthy. What are the specific competences that are needed to make this happen?

We need some success stories on the ability to live together under conditions of extreme diversity and suspicion. These success stories will assist in developing a sharper language to help reinforce common good behaviour and assist us in recognizing when it does not exist. A multi-cultural competence, a new political participation competence, a new conflict-resolution competence and a new interfaith competence (based on a religious competence) will be some of the competences needed to build healthy communities that support the common good. These competences will help us to redefine the civil society and institutions appropriate to the national or regional context.

How strategic is a religious competence? Who can begin to model this competence? In Tolstoy's classic novel *Anna Karenina*, a drama is acted out between those characters who focus on materialism and individualism and the hero, who is struggling with meaning at the level of obligation to self, community, land, other religions and God. It is a profoundly Christian and universal religious message. Levin says: "But now I say that I know the meaning of my life: it is to live for God, for the soul. And the meaning, in spite of its clearness, is mystical. To live not for one's needs but for God!"

A religious message is crucial if the common good ethic is to be achieved and not to be abused. But in order to be authentic, this message must come to grips with two major factors: interfaith cooperation and creation. The Christian lay centres and academies are strategically poised to work on this agenda. The World Council of Churches' emphasis on justice, peace and the integrity of creation is a firm foundation on which to build this. In addition, the laity centres have developed a learning method and philosophy (ecumenical learning) which is adaptable for interfaith learning contexts. I believe that if the lay centres focus strategically on interfaith cooperation to build healthy communities, this will be a model of behaviour, practice and the development of a new language that can help exhibit a new ethic of the common good.

The common good is first and foremost a religiously based concept. However, our current spiritual paradigms are either too anthropocentric or too imperialistic. The lay centres experimenting with an earth-centred spirituality can help to take the lead in offering a religious perspective that is compatible with the common good. This consciousness has already begun to take hold.

In the USA we have the powerful "civil religious" symbolism of the poem Maya Angelou read at the inauguration of President Clinton. The poem (more than Clinton's speech) was a clarion call for a new earth-centred spirituality that will assist us in creating an ethic that is truly for the common good, for it includes the earth and the human community in proper biblical perspective: creation is primary, not the human. Angelou's words give us the much-needed language for a diverse world which includes the earth as our sacred partner:

... There is a true yearning to respond to  
The singing River and the wise Rock.  
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,  
The African, the Native American, the Sioux,  
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,  
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,  
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,  
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.  
They hear. They all hear  
the speaking of the Tree.

... I, the Rock, I the River, I the Tree  
I am yours — your passages have been paid.  
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need  
For this bright morning dawn for you.  
History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, but if faced  
With courage, need not be lived again.

... Here on the pulse of this new day  
You may have the grace to look up and out  
And into your sister's eyes,  
And into your brother's face,  
Your country,  
And say simply  
Very simply  
With hope — Good morning.

*Ecumenical learning* worthy of its name could be the legacy of the worldwide network of lay academies. If so, the ethic of the common good will be a fitting ally for the Rock, the River and the Tree.