

## Laity on a mission

Pope Benedict has told us we should be fostering a culture not just of lay collaboration but of authentic coresponsibility in the Church and her evangelising mission in the world where the laity take their place as the leaven. This is the basis behind the instruction of the Congregation for Catholic Education on the reform of formation programmes for the lay faithful.

### TO DO

**Ask** yourself whether the lay people in your parish are collaborators with the clergy or if they are truly recognized as co-responsible

**Consider** what you are doing for the formation of the laity in your parish

**Identify** people in your parish who would benefit themselves and the parish from further formation

Twenty years ago, we were looking through the telescope searching for lay people to cooperate more actively in the Church's mission. The telescope has now swivelled round and we see hosts of laity, many theologically literate, keen to get involved. The problem is that they don't always know how to go about it.

Monika is a good example. As she came to the end of her working life, she wanted to be more involved in the Church. She did not feel she had the knowledge; but she wanted to share her faith with people. She felt a little like a round plug in a square hole; she was already preparing the teenagers for their confirmation – but now she wanted to know more, to do more. She was retiring from a demanding job as practice director in a busy surgery and thought she must have skills that can be used in the parish.

Monika heard about the pastoral mission programme at Heythrop College, a new course of formation for the lay apostolate jointly run by Heythrop College and the Diocese of Westminster. The first two years of this threeyear programme lead to the new government qualification of foundation degree.

Foundation degrees are built on a contractual mentoring relationship between employer and student.

In this case, the employer is the diocese and the mentor is the parish priest. The student commits to “work-based learning” through the development of a portfolio of theological reflection and guided

surveys on the life and mission of the parish.

Like many of the other students on this programme, Monika needed guidance on how her mission in the parish fits with what the Church understands of mission. The course is helping her to understand that the laity have a vocation and a responsibility to live that out. The programme is helping to build her confidence; it is opening up for her what the parish and the Church are about.

The programme aims to provide an integrated theological, spiritual and pastoral formation for laity which is ecclesially rooted in the life of the student's parish. There are three main dimensions.

First, there are regular Saturday study days, which provide a solid foundation in Catholic theology. This theological formation is in the context of parish-based learning bringing together theory and practice, so that the theology studied can have direct practical benefits for evangelisation. Complementing the classes, given by a mix of academics, parish priests and diocesan officials, the student is assisted through regular meetings with a personal tutor. This is especially for the students who have never done studies at degree level.

The programme also has an important spiritual dimension. Since the students are being prepared to be more actively involved in their parishes, they learn from one another during the faith-sharing that takes place in peer conversations. We come together for regular retreat days and begin each Saturday with Morning Prayer and Mass – and the students are offered an option of regular spiritual direction or prayer guidance.

The third dimension is the pastoral work itself and guided reflection on it. This is done through the mentoring process but there are also specific modules dedicated to the skills and resources necessary for the lay pastoral assistant, catechetical coordinator or parish secretary, covering the use of canon law, parish administration, safeguarding, pastoral planning, working with volunteers, fund-raising and employment issues.

Monika's context for joining the programme is typical but not universal. Many lay people are looking to extend and deepen their love and service of the Church and find that a programme of work-based learning enables them to do this. Some will already be pastoral assistants, catechists, teachers and administrators in the diocese; others will be active volunteers. Still others are using the programme to discern their vocation to the religious life, the permanent diaconate or priesthood.

In his opening speech to the pastoral convention of the Diocese of Rome in 2009, the Pope said we need to renew our efforts for a formation which is more attentive and focused on the vision of the Church, that we must improve pastoral structures in such a way that we gradually promote the co-responsibility of all the members of the people of God in their entirety. Lay people must no longer be viewed as collaborators of the clergy but truly recognised as co-responsible – thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity.

There is a very real need for lay formation in the Church today – a need to make the necessary link between theological learning and the actual needs and mission of our parish communities (and, in particular, our parish priests). We cannot simply provide theology courses to fulfil an academic interest.

We have to be aware of the need for the kind of formation the laity requires to help them to participate fully in the new evangelisation.

In a few months' time, we will have the option of ending the Mass with a beautiful phrase which finds its way into the new English translation: "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord with your life." For the clergy, it will surely serve as a reminder that the celebration of Mass in the parish invites us all to be missionaries, to engage in the new evangelisation. The vocation of the lay Catholic is in the world, and from the parish community each of us is sent out to bring the Lord to others. The more the parish community is the root and the catalyst of a robust formation in faith and mission, the more the Holy Father's vision of a mature and committed laity will flower in our Church.



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*For further information, visit: [www.heythrop.ac.uk](http://www.heythrop.ac.uk)*

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