

Laity - All are called to participate

Pope Francis pointed out that ‘Communion’ and ‘Mission’ can risk remaining somewhat abstract, unless synodality is concretely expressed at every step of the synodal journey, encouraging real involvement on the part of each and all. All the baptised are called to take part in the Church’s life and mission and enabling everyone to participate is an essential ecclesial duty! (Pope Francis at the Official launch of the Synod on Synodality (October 10, 2021).

By welcoming the laity in this manner, the Church is participating in transformation—so that the laity can respond more fully to their baptismal calling. I wish to share with you a few challenges of the Laity in relating with God and one another, that I picked up in my interactions with them and also from my own past experience as a lay person before joining the seminary.

Vertical challenges the laity face in their relationship with God:

1. No Time - This is possibly the most common excuse we have for not deepening our relationship with God. Since we all get the same 24 hours, how is it that some people achieve so much more with their time than others? The answer lies in **good time management and prioritising what is important**. Can we cut back on some time-wasters like unwanted talk and mobile usage? I know of people who stumbled into parish activities very hesitantly, even unintentionally. But today they feel so happy serving the Lord. They find that other things in their life fall into place, and managing time becomes easy.

2. Aversion to Commitment - A few days ago, I was invited to pray for a couple celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. I asked them the secret of their long and happy married life. Without hesitating, the wife replied, "It's commitment, Father." Their commitment had demanded maturity, sacrifice and a lot of love over the years. Sadly, people are averse to commitment today. This aversion to commitment is also affecting our relationship with God. There is no commitment towards personal prayer, family prayer and Bible reading.

3. Materialism - Pope Francis keeps cautioning the faithful against the danger of losing their personal identity to materialism. Whenever material things, money, worldliness, etc. become the centre of our lives, they take hold of us, they possess us, and we lose our very identity as human beings. There is no inclination then to serve the Lord, our Creator. As mindful individuals living life with purpose, we recognise that true joy arises when we learn to love people and utilise things, rather than loving things and using people. This true joy is the result of serving God by serving others.

Horizontal challenges the laity face in their relationship with one another:

1. Language - No language is “better” than others. If a language can be used by its speakers to conduct their everyday lives and communicate with one another, then it is a perfectly sufficient language. But many of us think that English or the language of the ‘majority’ is a superior language. So we will not make efforts to learn other languages that may be spoken by the minority in our communities. Not knowing these languages makes our communication with those who speak them less fruitful. We can at least give opportunities to people who do not know English and find someone to translate for them so that all can understand.

2. Gender Discrimination - Pope Francis said women are a gift to society — but the struggle for their fundamental rights is doomed to continue as long as there are places in the world where women are not valued as equals. (Pope Francis – November 6, 2022) Many may not be aware that women are suffering in Catholic homes. Economic, physical, sexual and psychological abuse are common tactics of control. In many cases, women cannot get married as the dowry demanded cannot be managed by the parents. In their wills, many Catholic men leave out their daughters, and the entire wealth and property is given to the sons. Can we put an end to this unjust practice and all patriarchal acts? In a participatory Church, no one must feel excluded, and wider participation of women must be promoted.

3. Economic Divide - Being poor hurts in many ways. The poor seem to be feeling left out in ministry. Many are bringing up their children, telling them not to mix with the poor children. In our ministry too, many poor families are humiliated at times by taking their names in public, while giving them aid. I'm reminded of an SCC leader living in a high-rise building. She had an economically backward area to tend to where 16 poor families lived. I was amazed that she knew all those families and their needs very well. In our ministry, can we concretely reach out to the poor and boost their esteem, encourage them and their children to move ahead in life? Let us work to fulfil our Archdiocesan SCC vision - **'No one should be in want'**.

Questions for Discussion:

1. From the above six challenges, pick up one that you have faced and explain with examples how you overcame the same.
2. From your life experience, share a new challenge that the laity face and show how it can be overcome.