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# A UNIV Reader

## A Brief Selection of Fundamental Texts

▶ **Features of a “Healthy Secularism”**

*Benedict XVI*

▶ **“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”**

*Benedict XVI*

▶ **The Riches of the Faith**

*Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*

▶ **The Church in the Modern World**

*Vatican Council II*

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## Features of a “Healthy Secularism”

*Benedict XVI<sup>1</sup>*

The theme of the lay state is of great interest because it highlights how secularity in the contemporary world may be understood in various ways: there is not only one lay state but there are several or rather many ways of understanding and living secularity that are sometimes in opposition to one another and even contradictory.

In order to understand the authentic meaning of the lay state and to explain how it is understood in our day, it is essential to keep in mind the historical development of this concept. In the Middle Ages, “secularity”, a term coined to describe the condition of the ordinary lay Christian who belonged neither to the clerical nor to the religious state, inferred opposition between the civil powers and the ecclesiastical hierarchies; in modern times, it has come to mean the exclusion of religion and its symbols from public life by confining them to the private sphere and to the individual conscience. So it is that an ideological understanding has come to be attributed to the term “secularity”, which is the opposite of its original meaning.

Indeed, secularity is commonly perceived today as the exclusion of religion from social contexts and as the boundary of the individual conscience. Secularity would be expressed in the total separation between the State and the Church, since the latter is in no way entitled to intervene in areas that concern the life and conduct of citizens; secularity would even entail the exclusion of religious symbols from public places designated for the proper functions of the political community: offices, schools, courts, hospitals, prisons, etc.

On the basis of these different ways of conceiving secularity, people today speak of secular thought, secular morals, secular knowledge and secular politics. Indeed, on the basis of such concepts, an a-religious vision of life, thought and morals exists: a vision in which there is no room for God, for a Mystery that transcends pure reason, for a moral law of absolute worth, in force in every time and every situation. Only if we realize this can we assess the consequences of the problems inherent in a term such as “secularity”, which seems almost to have become the qualifying emblem of post-modernity and especially of modern democracy.

It is therefore the task of all believers, particularly believers in Christ, to help formulate a concept of secularity which, on the one hand, acknowledges the place that is due to God and his moral law, to Christ and to his Church in human life, both individual and social; and on the other, affirms and respects the “rightful autonomy of earthly affairs”, if by

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from an address given to the 56th National Congress of Italian Catholic Jurists, December 9, 2006.

this phrase, as the Second Vatican Council reaffirms, is meant man's "gradual discovery, exploitation and ordering of the laws and values of matter and society" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 36).

Such autonomy is "perfectly in order: it is at once the claim of modern man and the desire of the Creator. By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws. These man must respect as he recognizes the methods proper to every science and technique" (*ibid.*). If, instead, the words "rightful autonomy of earthly affairs" mean that "material being does not depend on God and that man can use it as if it had no relation to its Creator", then the fallacy of such a claim will be obvious to anyone who believes in God and his transcendent presence in the world he created (cf. *ibid.*).

This conciliar assertion constitutes the doctrinal basis for that "healthy secularity" which involves the effective autonomy of earthly realities, not indeed from the moral order but from the ecclesiastical sphere. Thus, the Church cannot point out the preferred political and social order; it is the people who must freely decide on the best and most suitable ways to organize political life. Any direct intervention from the Church in this area would be undue interference.

Moreover, "healthy secularism" implies that the State does not consider religion merely as an individual sentiment that may be confined to the private sphere alone. On the contrary, since religion is also organized in visible structures, as is the case with the Church, it should be recognized as a form of public community presence. This also implies that every religious denomination (provided it is neither in opposition to the moral order nor a threat to public order) be guaranteed the free exercise of the activities of worship - spiritual, cultural, educational and charitable - of the believing community.

In the light of these considerations, hostility to every important political and cultural form of religion—and especially to the presence of any religious symbol in public institutions—is certainly not an expression of secularity, but rather its degeneration into secularism.

Likewise, to refuse the Christian community and its legitimate representatives the right to speak on the moral problems that challenge all human consciences today, and especially those of legislators and jurists, is not a sign of a healthy secularity. Thus, it is not a question of undue meddling by the Church in legislative activity that is proper and exclusive to the State but, rather, of the affirmation and defence of the important values that give meaning to the person's life and safeguard his or her dignity. These values are human before being Christian, such that they cannot leave the Church silent and indifferent. It is her duty to firmly proclaim the truth about man and his destiny.

Dear jurists, we are living in an exalted historical period because of the breakthroughs that humanity has achieved in many areas of law, culture, communications, science and technology. In this same period, however, there are attempts by some people to exclude God from every sphere of life and present him as man's enemy. It is up to us as Christians to show, on the contrary, that God is love and wants the good and happiness of all human beings. It is our task to make people understand that the moral law given to us by him and manifested to us by the voice of our conscience does not aim to oppress us but rather to set us free from evil and make us happy.

It is a matter of showing that without God man is lost, and that the exclusion of religion from social life - and the marginalization of Christianity in particular - undermines the very foundations of human coexistence. Indeed, before being social and political, these foundations are of a moral order.

## “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

*Benedict XVI<sup>2</sup>*

*Dear Friends,*

This year we observe the 25th anniversary of the institution of World Youth Day, desired by the Venerable John Paul II as an annual meeting of believing young people of the whole world. It was a prophetic initiative that has borne abundant fruits, enabling new generations of Christians to come together, to listen to the Word of God, to discover the beauty of the Church and to live experiences of faith that have led many to give themselves totally to Christ.

The present 25th Youth Day represents a stage toward the next World Youth meeting, which will take place in August 2011 in Madrid, where I hope a great number of you will live this event of grace.

To prepare ourselves for such a celebration, I would like to propose to you some reflections on this year’s theme: “*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (Mark 10:17), treating the evangelical episode of Jesus’ meeting with the rich young man, a topic already addressed in 1985 by Pope John Paul II in a most beautiful Letter, addressed for the first time to young people.

### 1. Jesus Meets a Young Man

*“And as he [Jesus] was setting out on his journey,”* recounts the Gospel of St. Mark, *“a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’ ” And he said to him, “Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth.” And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions”* (Mark 10:17-22).

This account expresses effectively Jesus’ great attention to youth, to you, to your expectations, your hopes, and shows how great his desire is to meet with you personally and open a dialogue with each one of you. In fact, Christ interrupts his journey to respond to his interlocutor’s question, manifesting full availability to that young man, who was moved by an

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<sup>2</sup> From Benedict XVI’s Message for the 25th World Youth Day, Palm Sunday, March 28, 2010.

ardent desire to speak with the “*good Teacher*”, to learn from him how to follow the way of life. With this evangelical passage, my Predecessor wished to exhort each one of you to “develop your own conversation with Christ -- a conversation that is of fundamental and essential importance for a young man” (*Letter to Young People*, No. 2).

## **2. Jesus Looking Upon Him Loved Him**

In the evangelical account, St. Mark stresses how “*Jesus looking upon him loved him*” (cf. Mark 10-21). In the Lord’s look is the heart of the very special encounter and of all the Christian experience. In fact, Christianity is not primarily a morality, but experience of Jesus Christ, who loves us personally, young and old, poor and rich; he loves us even when we turn our back to him.

Commenting on the scene, Pope John Paul II added, turning to young people: “I hope you will experience such a look! I hope you will experience the truth that he, the Christ, keeps for you with love!” (*Letter to Young People*, No. 7). A love, manifested on the cross in such a full and total way, that it made St. Paul write with amazement: “who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). “The awareness that the Father has always loved us in his Son, that Christ loves every one and always,” writes, again, Pope John Paul II, “becomes a firm point of support for the whole of our human existence” (*Letter to Young People*, No. 7), and enables us to overcome all trials: the discovery of our sins, suffering, discouragement.

In this love is found the source of the whole of Christian life and the fundamental reason of evangelization: If we have truly encountered Jesus, we cannot do other than witness him to those who have not yet crossed his look!

## **3. The Discovery of the Plan of Life**

In the young man of the Gospel, we can perceive a very similar condition to that of each one of you. You are also rich in qualities, energies, dreams, hopes: Resources that you possess in abundance! Your very age constitutes a great richness, not only for you, but also for others, for the Church and for the world.

The rich young man asks Jesus: “*What must I do?*” The stage of life in which you are immersed is a time of discovery: of the gifts that God has lavished on you and of your responsibilities. It is, moreover, a time of fundamental choices to build your plan of life. It is the moment, therefore, to ask yourselves about the authentic meaning of existence and to ask yourselves: “Am I satisfied with my life? Is there something lacking?”

As the young man of the Gospel, perhaps you also live situations of instability, of disturbance or of suffering, which lead you to aspire to a life that is not mediocre, and to ask yourselves: In what does a successful life consist? What must I do? What might be my plan of life? “What must I do, for my life to have full value and full meaning?” (*Ibid.*, No. 3).

Do not be afraid to address these questions! Far from overwhelming you, they express great aspirations, which are present in your heart. Hence, they are to be listened to. They await answers that are not superficial, but able to satisfy your authentic expectations of life and happiness.

To discover the plan of life that could render you fully happy, listen to God, who has a plan of love for each one of you. With trust, ask him: “Lord, what is your plan of Creator and

Father for my life? What is your will? I want to fulfill it.” Be sure that he will respond. Do not be afraid of his answer! “*God is greater than our heart and knows everything!*” (1 John 3:20).

#### **4. Come and follow me!**

Jesus invited the rich young man to go far beyond the satisfaction of his aspirations and of his plans, he says to him: “*Come and follow me!*” The Christian vocation springs from a proposal of love of the Lord and can be realized only thanks to a response of love: “Jesus invites his disciples to the total gift of their life, without human calculation or benefit, with a trust without reservations in God. The saints accepted this exacting invitation, and with humble docility followed the crucified and risen Christ. Their perfection, in the logic of faith at times humanly incomprehensible, consists in no longer putting oneself at the center, but in choosing to go against the current living according to the Gospel” (Benedict XVI, *Homily at Canonization Mass*, L’Osservatore Romano, October 12-13, 2009, p. 6).

On the example of so many disciples of Christ, you also, dear friends, accept with joy the invitation to follow, to live intensely and fruitfully in this world. With Baptism, in fact, he calls each one to follow him with concrete actions, to love him above all things and to serve him in brothers. The rich young man, unfortunately, did not accept Jesus’ invitation and left saddened. He did not find the courage to detach himself from his material goods to find the greatest good proposed by Jesus.

The sadness of the rich young man of the Gospel is that which is born in the heart of each one when one does not have the courage to follow Christ, to make the right choice. However, it is never too late to respond to him!

Jesus never tires of turning his look of love and of calling to be his disciples, but He proposes to some a more radical choice. In this Year for Priests, I would like to exhort boys and girls to be attentive if the Lord invites to a great gift, in the way of the Ministerial Priesthood, and to make oneself available to accept with generosity and enthusiasm this sign of special predilection, undertaking with a priest or spiritual director the necessary path of discernment. Do not be afraid, then, dear boys and girls, if the Lord calls you to the religious, monastic, missionary life or one of special consecration: He is able to give profound joy to one who responds with courage!

Moreover, I invite all those who feel the vocation to marriage to accept it with faith, committing themselves to lay the solid base to live a great love, faithful and open to the gift of life, which is richness and grace for society and for the Church.

#### **5. Oriented to Eternal Life**

“*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” This question of the young man of the Gospel seems far from the concerns of many contemporary young people, because, as my predecessor observed, “are we not the generation, whose horizon of existence the world and temporal progress fill completely?” (*Letter to Young People*, No. 5). But the question on “eternal life” flowers in particularly painful moments of existence, when we suffer the loss of a close person or when we live the experience of failure.

But what is the “eternal life” to which the young man refers? It is illustrated by Jesus when, turning to his disciples, he affirms: “*I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one*

*will take your joy from you*” (John 16:22). They are words that indicate an exalted proposal of endless happiness, of joy of being filled with divine love forever.

To ask oneself about the definitive future that awaits each one of us gives full meaning to existence, because it orients the plan of life toward horizons that are not limited and passing, but ample and profound, which lead to loving the world, so loved by God himself, to dedicate oneself to its development, but always with the liberty and joy born from faith and hope. They are horizons that help not to absolutize earthly realities, seeing that God prepares a greater prospect for us, and to repeat with St. Augustine: “We desire together the heavenly homeland, we sigh for the heavenly homeland, we feel ourselves pilgrims down here” (*Commentary on St. John’s Gospel*, Homily 35, 9). Keeping his gaze fixed on eternal life, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, who died in 1925 at the age of 24, said: “I want to live and not just get along!” and on the photo of an ascent sent to a friend, he wrote: “Toward on high,” alluding to Christian perfection, but also to eternal life.

Dear young people, I exhort you not to forget this prospect of your plan of life: We are called to eternity. God has created us to be with Him, forever. This will help you to give full meaning to your choices and to give quality to your existence.

## **6. The Commandments, the Way of Authentic Love**

Jesus reminds the rich young man of the Ten Commandments, as necessary conditions to “*inherit eternal life*.” They are essential points of reference to live in love, to clearly distinguish good from evil and build a solid and lasting plan of life. Jesus also asks you if you know the commandments, if you are concerned to form your conscience according to the divine law and if you will put it into practice.

They certainly are questions that go against the current of the present-day mentality, which proposes a liberty disconnected from values, rules, objective norms and invites to reject every limitation to desires of the moment. But this type of proposal instead of leading to true liberty, leads man to become a slave of himself, of his immediate desires, of idols such as power, money, unbridled pleasure and the seductions of the world, rendering him incapable of following his original vocation to love.

God gives us the commandments because he wants to educate us to true liberty, because he wants to build with us a Kingdom of love, justice and peace. To listen to them and to put them into practice does not mean to be alienated, but to find the path of authentic liberty and love, because the commandments do not limit happiness, but indicate how to find it. At the beginning of his dialogue with the rich young man, Jesus reminds him that the law given by God is good because “*God is good*.”

In this Year for Priests, I invite you to know the life of the saints, in particular that of holy priests. You will see that God guided them and that they found their way day after day, precisely in faith, in hope and in love. Christ calls each one of you to be committed with him and to assume your responsibilities to build a civilization of love. If you follow his Word, your path will also be illumined and will lead you to lofty goals, which give joy and full meaning to life.

May the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, accompany you with her protection. I assure you of my remembrance in prayer and bless you with great affection.

## The Riches of the Faith

*Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer<sup>3</sup>*

In his letter to the Galatians—a hymn to the riches of the faith—St. Paul tells us that Christians should live with the freedom Christ has won for us (Cf. *Gal* 5:1). This was the message of Jesus to the first Christians, and it will continue being the same throughout the centuries: an announcement of liberation from misery and anguish. History is not subject to blind forces nor is it the result of chance; it is the expression of the mercies of God the Father. The thoughts of God are far above our thoughts, says Scripture (Cf. *Is* 55:8; *Rom* 11:33). Thus to trust in God means to have faith in spite of everything, going beyond the appearances of things. The charity of God, who loves us eternally, lies behind each event, even though at times it may be difficult for us to appreciate it.

When a Christian lives by faith—a faith that is not merely words, but that is grounded on personal prayer—the sureness of divine love shows itself in joy, in interior freedom. The knots that sometimes tie up one's heart, the heavy weights that oppress one's soul, are broken and removed. *If God is for us, who can be against us* (*Rom* 8:31). A son of God, a Christian who lives by faith, can suffer and weep; he can have motives for sorrow, but none for dejection.

Christian freedom comes from within, from the heart, from faith. But it is not something merely personal; it expresses itself externally. One of the clearest marks of the life of the first Christians was fraternity. Faith, which brings with it the immense gift of God's love, has reduced and overcome all differences, all barriers: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (*Gal* 3:28). Knowing that we are truly brothers, and loving one another as such, over and above any differences of race, social condition, culture or ideology, belongs to the essence of Christianity.

It is not my mission to speak about politics. Neither is it the mission of Opus Dei, since its only purpose is a spiritual one. Opus Dei has never been nor will it ever be involved in group or party politics, nor is it bound to any person or ideology. This way of acting is not an apostolic tactic, nor just praiseworthy conduct. It is an intrinsic necessity for Opus Dei to proceed in this way. Its very nature demands it, as shown by an unmistakable seal: love for freedom, confidence in the Christian who acts in the world with complete independence and personal responsibility.

There are no dogmas in temporal affairs. It is not in accord with human dignity to try and fix absolute truths in questions where necessarily each one will look at things from his own point of view, according to one's particular interests, cultural preferences and personal

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<sup>3</sup> An article published in *ABC*, Madrid, November 2, 1969.

experience. Trying to impose dogmas in temporal affairs leads inevitably to the forcing of other people's consciences, to a lack of respect for one's neighbor.

I do not mean to say that a Christian should be indifferent or apathetic to temporal affairs. Certainly not. But he needs to make his eagerness for civic and social progress compatible with an awareness of the limitations of his own opinions, and therefore respect the opinions of others and love genuine pluralism. A person who does not know how to live in this way has not reached the full depth of the Christian message. It is not easy to reach this point, and in a certain sense one never gets there, because the tendency to selfishness and pride never dies in us. That is why we are all obliged to constantly examine our own conduct, seeing our actions in Christ's light, acknowledging that we are sinners and being ready to make a fresh start. It isn't easy, but we must keep striving to do so.

God in creating us has run the risk and the adventure of our freedom. He wanted a history that would be a true one, the product of genuine decisions, and not a fiction or some sort of game. Each one has to experience his own personal autonomy with all that it entails of trial and error, guesswork and sometimes uncertainty. We cannot forget that God, who has given us the security of faith, has not revealed to us the meaning of all human events. Along with things that for a Christian are absolutely clear and sure, there are other matters, very many in fact, in which only opinion is possible. In these areas, a Christian can reach a partial knowledge of what is true and opportune, but he cannot affirm it to be so in a completely certain way. For not only is it possible that I might be wrong, but even if I am right, others can be right also. An object that for some people looks concave seems convex to those who have a different perspective.

The awareness of the limitations of our human judgment leads us to recognize freedom as a condition for living together with others. But it is not everything; it is not even the most important consideration. The root of respect for freedom lies in love. If other people think differently from me, is that a reason to regard them as enemies? The only real reason for doing so would be selfishness or the intellectual blindness of those who think that politics and material progress are the only real values. A Christian knows that this is not so, because each person has an infinite value, an eternal destiny in God: Jesus Christ has died for each one.

We are Christians when we are capable not only of loving humanity in the abstract, but also each person who comes our way. It is a sign of maturity to feel responsible for the welfare of future generations; but this cannot lead us to be careless about the dedication and service we render to others in our daily tasks: being kind in a practical way towards those who work alongside us, trying to be a true friend to our colleagues, being concerned about someone's specific need, even though it may seem unimportant in comparison with the grand ideals we are seeking.

To speak of freedom, of love for freedom, is to place before us a difficult ideal. It is to speak of one of the greatest riches of the faith. For—let us not fool ourselves—life is not like a romantic novel. Christian fraternity is not something that comes down from heaven once and for all for everyone, but rather a reality that has to be built up each day, amid all the hardships life presents, with its conflicts of interest, tensions and struggles, in daily contact with people who seem narrow-minded to us, and with our own narrow-mindedness.

But if this panorama discourages us, if we allow ourselves to be conquered by our selfishness, or we fall into the skeptical attitude of one who shrugs his shoulders, it means that we need to deepen our faith, to contemplate Christ more closely. This is the only school in which a Christian learns to know himself, and to know others, and to live in such a way that he is Christ present among men.

## The Church in the Modern World

*Vatican Council II<sup>4</sup>*

### 34. The value of human activity

Throughout the course of the centuries, men have labored to better the circumstances of their lives through a monumental amount of individual and collective effort. To believers, this point is settled: considered in itself, this human activity accords with God's will. For man, created to God's image, received a mandate to subject to himself the earth and all it contains, and to govern the world with justice and holiness; a mandate to relate himself and the totality of things to Him Who was to be acknowledged as the Lord and Creator of all. Thus, by the subjection of all things to man, the name of God would be wonderful in all the earth.

This mandate concerns the whole of everyday activity as well. For while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator's work, consulting the advantages of their brother men, and are contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan.

Thus, far from thinking that works produced by man's own talent and energy are in opposition to God's power, and that the rational creature exists as a kind of rival to the Creator, Christians are convinced that the triumphs of the human race are a sign of God's grace and the flowering of His own mysterious design.

For the greater man's power becomes, the farther his individual and community responsibility extends. Hence it is clear that men are not deterred by the Christian message from building up the world, or impelled to neglect the welfare of their fellows, but that they are rather more stringently bound to do these very things.

### 43. The Church's contribution to human affairs by means of individual Christians

This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit. They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they

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<sup>4</sup> Selections from the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes: On the Church in the Contemporary World*, Vatican Council II, 1965.

may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation. Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age. Long since, the Prophets of the Old Testament fought vehemently against this scandal and even more so did Jesus Christ Himself in the New Testament threaten it with grave punishments. Therefore, let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other. The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation. Christians should rather rejoice that, following the example of Christ Who worked as an artisan, they are free to give proper exercise to all their earthly activities and to their humane, domestic, professional, social and technical enterprises by gathering them into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory.

Secular duties and activities belong properly although not exclusively to laymen. Therefore acting as citizens in the world, whether individually or socially, they will keep the laws proper to each discipline, and labor to equip themselves with a genuine expertise in their various fields. They will gladly work with men seeking the same goals. Acknowledging the demands of faith and endowed with its force, they will unhesitatingly devise new enterprises, where they are appropriate, and put them into action. Laymen should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city; from priests they may look for spiritual light and nourishment. Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather, enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role.

Often enough the Christian view of things will itself suggest some specific solution in certain circumstances. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter. Even against the intentions of their proponents, however, solutions proposed on one side or another may be easily confused by many people with the Gospel message. Hence it is necessary for people to remember that no one is allowed in the aforementioned situations to appropriate the Church's authority for his opinion. They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good.

Since they have an active role to play in the whole life of the Church, laymen are not only bound to penetrate the world with a Christian spirit, but are also called to be witnesses to Christ in all things in the midst of human society.