Making Disciples
Equipping Apostles

The Parish as a House of Formation for Adult Catholics

Sherry Anne Weddell

The Catherine of Siena Institute

Equipping Parishes to Form Lay Apostles

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Abbreviations Used

CARA	Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.
CCC	*Catechism of the Catholic Church*
CL	*Christifideles Laici,* John Paul II. English editions: *The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People* Daughters of St. Paul, and *The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful,* U.S. Catholic Conference.
DAL	*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem),* Second Vatican Council
HBW	*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States*, U.S. Catholic Bishops

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Part One
The Challenge

Thirty-five years after the second Vatican Council, most Catholics would agree that we have, as yet, some way to go in implementing the conciliar vision. Our lack of progress has been particularly crippling in the critical area of lay formation—helping lay Catholics to fulfill their role in the Church's mission to the world. The following pages give an overview of the current state of affairs, outline some necessary components of lay formation, and indicate why the parish is best place to provide it. Unfortunately, so uncommon is it for lay Catholics to receive formation for their mission that one must build a case for its necessity before even speaking of how we might better deliver it.

The Laity and the Church's Mission

"There is an enormous gap between the Church's vision of the lay apostolate and the lived experience of most lay men and women."

Several fundamental teachings of the Church address the need for adult Catholic formation, teachings with which the reader may be unfamiliar. For lack of space, I will not expand upon them in great detail. Readers who wish to learn more about the magisterial and theological basis for these presuppositions may consult the essay *The Parish: Mission or Maintenance?* (Siena Institute Press)

Does the Church exist for her own sake or for the sake of something other than herself? Is the primary focus of the Church inward or outward?

The Church's answer is clear: the primary focus of the Christian community is outward. The first and primary mission of the Church lies not in taking care of its own people or maintaining its own structures, but in bringing Christ to the world.

> We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church… *Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize*, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection. (*On Evangelization in the Modern World*, 14; emphasis added)

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Evangelism consists in calling people to be disciples of Jesus Christ, both as individuals and as communities, in their personal and collective lives. In the Church's understanding, evangelism includes proposing the Gospel to every individual, especially those who are far from the Church, as well as transforming human structures, cultures, and communities so that they foster all that is truly human. If we accept that evangelism is our primary mission, an obvious question arises:

Who is responsible for the Church's outward, evangelizing mission?

Priests and religious make up a very small percentage of the entire Church, yet Catholic writers and theologians before the Second Vatican Council sometimes spoke as if this tiny group *was* the Church and the laity were simply the recipients of their saving ministry. Of course, if we tried to live that way today, our dioceses would fall apart. In the Archdiocese of Seattle, for example, all our priests, religious, deacons, and seminarians put together (1,184) currently comprise only 0.2 percent of the entire body Catholic. Obviously, 99.8 percent of the Catholics in Western Washington are lay people. What an absurdly inverted pyramid it would be if only 0.2 percent of our community were "actively" ministering to a "passive" 99.8 percent! I know that we would reject such a notion completely, yet I believe that very few of us have truly encountered the alternative vision proposed by the Church, much less fully grasped its implications.

If we, as a community of believers, are to accomplish our evangelical mission, it is crucial that we clearly recognize our true identity. Is the Catholic Church in Western Washington made up of 1,184 recognized apostles and 585,000 recipients of their ministry? Or are we a community of over half a million commissioned apostles who *together* have been called and gifted by Jesus Christ to participate in his redemption of our world?

You may, perhaps, be familiar with one answer the Council articulated to that question:

> For this the Church was founded. . . that she might bring all men [and women] to share in Christ's saving redemption. All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of this goal is called the apostolate, and the Church carried it on in various ways through all her members. (*DAL*, 2)

We have a truly global mission. Fortunately, we also have a global mission force, for one out of every six human beings on this planet is a baptized Catholic. One of three is a baptized Christian. *All Christians share in the Church's mission to bring Christ to every person, every*

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culture, every human institution on earth. In fact, 99 percent of our missioners are lay!

> Every disciple of the Lord Jesus shares in this mission. To do their part, adult Catholics must be mature in faith and well-equipped to share the Gospel, promoting it in every family circle, in every church gathering, in every place of work, and in every public forum. (*HBW*, p. 1)

The Church recognizes lay Catholics as apostles in their own right. The apostolic mandate of lay men and women—like that of bishops, priests, deacons, and religious—is received from Christ himself through the sacraments.

> The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself. (*DAL*, 3)

Baptism and Confirmation confer upon lay Catholics a fundamental identity: that of apostles, "sent ones," whom Jesus Christ has anointed for his mission. As lay Catholics, we are more than mere recipients of the clergy's ministry. We are apostles. We are not primarily parish volunteers. We are apostles!

Our apostleship, as lay people, differs in nature from that of the clerical hierarchy. We are not clerics. Our leadership, our charisms, and our apostleship are ordered primarily to the secular. "A secular quality is proper and special" to lay men and women (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 31). In Catholic theology, the word "secular" does not mean "worldly" or "irreligious"; it is a positive term encompassing all that pertains to this life and this world. The secular is the earthly rather than the heavenly, the human rather than the divine, the visible and temporal rather than the invisible and eternal.

Lay Christians are secular apostles. We are the members of the Church who have a special call and responsibility to evangelize, transform, and order for good all that pertains to this life and this world. This does not mean that we have no responsibility for the inner life of the Christian community but that we do have *primary* responsibility for the Church's mission *outward* to the world. We are the first and the foremost evangelizers of its people and structures.

> The Church's pastoral ministry exists to sustain the work of the Gospel. One way it does this is by nourishing and strengthening lay men and women in their calling and identity as people

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> of faith, as contributors to the life and work of the Church and as disciples whose mission is to the world. (*HBW*, p. 1)

These foundational truths proposed by the Church have profound implications for our parish life at the beginning of the third Christian millennium.

The Problem Today

> "Most lay Catholics have never grasped the significance of their identity and their mission in the body of Christ."

We must confront and acknowledge the realities of the situation in which we find ourselves. *There is an enormous gap between the Church's vision of the lay apostolate and the lived experience of most laymen and women*. Most lay Catholics have never grasped the significance of their identity and their mission in the body of Christ. Over and over again in our *Called and Gifted* workshops, where we talk about the apostolic call of the laity, lifelong Catholics—people who spent 12 years in Catholic schools and attended Catholic colleges—ask, "Why have I never heard this before?"

You may be thinking, if you are involved with religious education, "We've been preaching and teaching this for years. How can they say they've never heard it before?" But although lay Catholics may have heard the words, the real meaning has yet to sink in. For most lay men and women, recognizing themselves as apostles requires a significant paradigm shift. Most lay people still see themselves as essentially passive recipients of the ministry of the "real" apostles—priests, deacons, and religious.

How can we change such deeply held and partially unconscious understandings of our religious identity and our worldview? It takes more than words. In fact, in adult education circles, it is axiomatic that verbal presentation of principles provides one of the *least* effective ways of changing how people look at themselves. The most effective way of altering a deeply held paradigm is personal experience. The second is vicarious experience—that is, exposure to the experience of other people. Changing the understanding lay Catholics have of themselves, and preparing them both to discern a unique mission in life and to live it is a process that takes time and the reinforcement of repeated experience. *Effecting such a personal transformation is the central purpose of formation*.

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Formation for Lay Apostles

"Formation is a personal preparation for mission that integrates one's faith with the whole of one's relationships, work, and life"

Consider for a moment, the ordained priesthood. What if those aspiring to the priesthood received no preparation from the Church for their vocation? It is hard to imagine a Church in which a man who approaches his local vocation director is ordained on the spot, given a chalice, a sacramentary, a congratulatory handshake, and then told to get on with it.

Instant priest! What an appalling idea. Yet, in ages past, ordination sometimes did happen nearly that quickly. Universal formation for the clergy was not mandated until the sixteenth-century when the Church faced the crisis of the Reformation. Only about 1 percent of priests prior to the Council of Trent received the kind of formal theological formation that we consider normative today (cf. "Ecclesiastical Seminary," in A. Vieban, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1917). Some priests were functionally illiterate, barely capable of celebrating Mass.

A man *can* be validly ordained without receiving years of intense training. He may celebrate Mass and absolve penitents from their sins. Priesthood, however, involves much more than that. Ordination, like all the sacraments, bestows real grace, but it is not magic. *The sacraments do not automatically enable us to carry out the larger mission for which they anoint us.* Their fruitfulness "also depends on the disposition of the one who receives them" (*CCC*, 1129); "Sacramental life is impoverished and very soon turns into hollow ritualism if it is not based on serious knowledge of the meaning of the sacraments." (*Catechesis in Our Day*, 230) This "serious knowledge," which empowers us to carry out the mission the sacraments bestow upon us, arises from formation.

Formation is never generic; we must not suppose that one size fits all. Formation is a personal preparation for mission that integrates one's faith with the whole of one's relationships, work, and life; it is, therefore, *always ordered to the specific mission of the person being formed*. When Fr. Sweeney, director of the Institute, and I visited Rome recently, we spoke to some of the seminarians at the North American Pontifical College. I was struck by the fact that these young men were grappling with the meaning of their future identity as priests. Their formation gives them more than theological knowledge, liturgical competence, and pastoral skill; it also creates a whole new sense of self. These future

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priests were journeying from one conscious identity to another (a journey which seems much more complex these days than it used to be).

Although the Church did survive for sixteen centuries without any kind of universal formation for the clergy, would any of us wish to return to such a system? Today, the expectation that seminarians will receive formation for their mission is universal and unquestioned. The sacrament of Holy Orders bestows an office, but we all know that ordaining men without first providing a comprehensive formation would constitute an absolute failure in preparing them to fulfill it. Formation is both a priest's right and his duty, and it is the duty of the Church to provide it:

> Ongoing formation is a right-duty of the priest and imparting it is a right-duty of the Church. …On his part, the minister has also received, as a demand of the gift connected with Ordination, the right to have the necessary help from the Church in order to carry out his service effectively and in a holy way. (*Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests,* 72)

Sacraments of mission, by their very nature, "demand" this "necessary help from the Church" that enables the one anointed to carry out his or her office "effectively and in a holy way." We have begun to recognize this demand in the sacrament of Matrimony; consequently, couples must now receive some form of preparation.

Both Holy Orders and Matrimony are sacraments of mission given to adults who discern and prepare for them as *adults*. None of us think that children's understanding of priesthood or marriage would adequately equip them to live out these vocations as adults. Discerning and preparing for these enormously complex and demanding vocations require capacities and life experience that children simply do not have. And yet, we have still to grasp that these requirements are just as true of Baptism and Confirmation—sacraments of adult mission for which we receive little or no formation as adults.

Why should these last two be designated as sacraments of *adult* mission? Do we not baptize babies and confirm teenagers? And what about sacramental preparation; is that not formation? In our tradition, we indeed give Baptism and Confirmation to children as sacraments of *initiation*. But they also confer an apostolic commission that is life-long; they are sacraments of *adult mission*. Sacramental preparation given to children or teenagers prepares them for valid reception, but cannot adequately prepare them for exercising the lifelong office that the sacraments confer.

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> Through Baptism we are…incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission. Preparation for Confirmation should aim at…a more lively familiarity with the Holy Spirit—his actions, his gifts and his biddings—in order to be more capable of assuming the apostolic responsibilities of Christian life. (*CCC*, 1213, 1310)
>
> Thus with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation, the baptized share in the same mission of Jesus as the Christ, the Savior-Messiah. (*CL*, 13)

We must come to understand all religious education, whether offered to children or to adults, as part of an integrated process of *apostolic formation* rather than simply as sacramental preparation. As *The General Directory for Catechesis* makes clear, "Formation for the apostolate and for mission is one of the fundamental tasks of catechesis" (30). When you or I teach Sunday school or CCD, we are not just giving "religious ed." We are collaborating in the Church's mission of evangelism by bringing children to a personal faith. We are forming future apostles and we are forming ourselves. (Parish service is an important part of our preparation for our own personal vocation, which probably lies outside the parish.)

Historically, religious education has most often ceased after Confirmation. Yet to be effective, the process of formation must continue well past this age. Childhood catechesis is like learning the "3 R's"—reading, writing, and 'rithmetic. Basic literacy is the essential foundation of a complete education, but we consider it a tragedy if our children drop out of school at the age of 16; we know that they are not yet prepared for adult life. Why do we give our education as Christians less concern than we give our secular education? While continuing to honor the essential and foundational role of religious education for the young, we must come to recognize that adult apostles need much more.

Lay Catholics need an integrating formation designed for adults that prepares them to live as apostles—gifted men and women of faith who are called by God to shape the world they live in through their love and work. The vocations of the laity are different from, but every bit as demanding as those of priests, deacons, and religious. Baptism and Confirmation call us not only to receive Christ in the sacraments, but also to bring Christ to the world. And this world—the adult universe where we must discern God's purposes and stand in Christ's place—is a world of staggering complexity.

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When we offer sacraments of lifelong mission without the necessary adult formation, we run the danger of reducing Baptism and Confirmation to hollow rituals or mere rites of passage. We also seriously jeopardize the mission of lay men and women, and thereby the mission of the Church to the world. No wonder, then, that the Church uses the same language regarding the apostolic formation of the laity as she does when speaking of priestly formation: "Formation is not the privilege of a few, but a right and duty of all." (*CL*, 63).

Formation: a Right and Duty for All

"Such lifelong formation. . .must be considered the chief form of catechesis. All the other forms. . .are in some way oriented to it." *U.S. Catholics Bishops*

We have successfully developed a complex network of support for those preparing for the priesthood, the diaconate, and religious life. The Church knows that years of study and preparation are involved in such vocations and supports the candidates as they prepare. We consider all the time, energy, and money well spent because upon these men and women rests our future. But I have met with startled, even stunned reactions to the idea of regarding the formation of all Catholics with the same seriousness and significance. The U.S. Bishops, in their recent pastoral plan for adult faith formation, agree:

> Give adult faith formation the best of our pastoral resources and energies. Within the whole scope of catechetical ministry, adult catechesis "must be regarded as a preferential option" in planning and programming. (*HBW*, p. 25–26)

> To make this vision a reality, we, as the Catholic Bishops of the United States, call the Church in our country to a renewed commitment to adult faith formation, positioning it at the heart of our catechetical vision and practice. …*Such lifelong formation*…must be considered the chief form of catechesis. All the other forms, which are indeed always necessary, are in some way oriented to it. (*HBW*, p. 2–3, 26; emphasis added)

One natural objection to the proposal that we expand our catechetical efforts to encompass universal adult formation is that just now the Church must preferentially focus her scarce resources on forming leaders for parish and diocesan service. After all, aren't we in the middle of a vocation crisis? Indeed we are, but perhaps the real nature of the crisis

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lies not in a lack of vocations but in our response—many are called but only a few are discerning.

> The call is a concern not only of pastors, clergy, and men and women religious. The call is addressed to everyone; lay people as well are personally called by the Lord from whom they receive a mission on behalf of the Church and the world. (*CL,* 4)

Our expectations of vocations have been meager indeed—a tiny percentage called to ordained or religious life. We have become accustomed to settling for far too little. God is asking us to call forth not only the vocations of a select few; he is asking us to call forth the vocations of millions! Our problem is not that there is a vocation shortage, but rather that we do not have leadership and support systems in place to foster the vast majority of the vocations that God has given us.

The Holy Spirit is planting charisms and vocations of amazing diversity in the hearts of *all* his people. Like the graces of the sacrament, they are real but they are not magic. Consider the latent gifts and talents of children: they are God-given, yet parents must deliberately and diligently foster them if their children are to reach their full potential; they must encourage them and awaken them to their own possibilities. Likewise, the Church must foster the vocations of her lay faithful.

Formation is not something we give to those who are already clear about God's call. Rather, formation awakens Christians to God's call and clarifies it, empowering men and women to hear and respond to the call that awaits them. As Pope John Paul II has written, "The fundamental objective of the formation of the lay faithful is an ever-clearer discovery of one's vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfill one's mission." (*CL,* 58)

The many lay movements—such as the Charismatic Renewal or Cursillo—that have sprung up in the last few decades, have produced a much larger than normal proportion of priestly and religious vocations, as well as remarkable lay initiatives from among their members. Wherever lay men and women are personally challenged to follow Christ and given sustained, personal formation, there will flourish priestly, religious, and lay vocations of all kinds. The answer to our present shortage of priests, religious, and other leaders is a systematic nurturing of the vocations of all.

An example of this nurturing in action is the ministry of the remarkable Henrietta Mears, who was director of religious education at a

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Presbyterian church in Hollywood, California, for 35 years. She had a passionate conviction that through her Sunday school, which provided Christian education for all ages, she was to challenge parishioners to follow Christ and to prepare for a unique personal vocation. Over 400 young adults entered full-time Christian ministry under her influence, and many hundreds of others entered business, the arts, and education as dedicated secular apostles. Among those whose lives were redirected through Henrietta's ministry were the young Billy Graham and the founders of several global movements such as Young Life and Campus Crusade.

Henrietta would sometimes ask other teachers what they thought the purpose of their Sunday School program was. Almost inevitably someone would reply, "To lead boys and girls to Christ." "No!" Henrietta would respond emphatically, "That, of course, is part of it, but if you stop there, you will never be successful. Every man and women, every boy and girl must feel that there is a task for them to do, that there is a place marked X for every person in God's Kingdom. Here is my X, no one can stand in this place but me. I must help others to find their places." (Earl Roe, ed., *Dream Big: The Henrietta Mears Story*, 191.)

We would certainly agree that "there is a place marked X for every person in God's Kingdom," but how are we to help millions of Catholics find that place? Only *1 to 2 percent* of lay Catholics have access to the kind of sustained support and formation that awakens and empowers vocations. The vast majority of these fortunate lay men and women find that support outside their local parishes through formation opportunities offered by lay movements, third orders, secular institutes, or through certificate or degree programs sponsored by dioceses and universities.

Current State of Lay Formation

The potential impact of these formation programs is hampered by the fact that only a highly motivated minority of lay people with considerable time, mobility, and financial resources can take advantage of them. Programs that offer certificates or degrees can be very expensive. The fact that only 31,000 people (0.5 percent of the lay Catholics in this country) are involved in diocesan or university formation programs evinces the reality of these obstacles. A great preponderance of participants are older adults whose children are grown or in school.

The overwhelming majority of lay Catholics, especially young adults, still do not have genuine access to the formation the Church has declared

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"not the privilege of a few but a right and duty of all." We must recognize that *our present informal network of diocesan programs and lay movements is simply inadequate to the needs of our day.* Just as the cathedral and monastic schools of the middle ages provided often brilliant formation for a tiny minority of priests, but could not address the formation needs of all clergy, so our existing formation network is incapable of nurturing the spiritual lives and vocations of even a fraction of the 62 million lay Catholics in the United States.

We stand in much the same place today with respect to formation of the laity as the Church stood regarding the formation of the clergy at the end of the Council of Trent. In the sixteenth-century, a new approach to formation—the seminary—was created for the clergy. In the twenty-first-century, we, too, must look at the issues of formation and vocation with fresh eyes. Then, as now, a comprehensive formation has been universally mandated while existing structures are inadequate to the task. *We must consider anew the formation potential of the only truly universal Catholic institution: the local parish.*

The Parish as a House of Formation

Priests have seminaries; religious have their mother houses; but where are the houses of formation for lay Catholics, apostles in our own right? Our local parish is the only place where 98 percent of us have contact with the larger Church and, therefore, the best place in which to awaken and nurture all the vocations that God has given. We must develop the leadership and resources necessary to provide formation support for lay Catholics—support that is visible, compelling, and easily accessible. We simply have no alternative. *We must make our parishes houses of formation for lay apostles.*

The U.S. bishops are very clear about the central role of the parish in adult formation:

> We begin with reflections on the parish; it is where much adult formation takes place, and it is the chief ministerial agent of such formation within and beyond the parish…it is, 'without doubt, the most important locus in which the Christian community is formed and expressed.' (*HBW*, p. 39–40)

To make adult formation truly accessible at the parish level, the bishops have charged us to take the following concrete steps:

- Pastors and pastoral leaders are to demonstrate a clear commitment to adult formation and *be formed themselves to form adults*.

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- All parish staff must promote adult formation as a priority.
- Adult catechesis is to be placed at the center of stated parish mission and goals.
- Adult formation is to be given priority in allocating financial resources, learning space, and scheduling.
- Each parish is to designate an adult faith formation leader (who may or may not be a staff member).
- Each adult faith formation leader should build a adult faith formation team.
- All adult catechists should receive extensive training. (*HBW*, p. 44–51)

How can we respond to this challenge? If we move to implement an apostolic formation for adult Catholics in the parish, what should we include?

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Part Two
Meeting the Challenge

The documents *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity from Vatican II*, Pope John Paul II's *The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful*, and the U.S. bishops' *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* outline the content of lay formation in considerable detail.

In general, apostolic formation for adults covers three areas:

- Basic adult formation
- Discernment and personal mission skills
- Equipping leadership skills

These areas roughly correspond to the three major goals of adult formation laid out in *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* (22–24):

- On-going conversion to Jesus and holiness of life
- Active membership in the Christian community
- Mission to the world

Basic adult formation

"One cannot be a Christian leader until one has first wrestled with living a Christian life."

There is a body of knowledge and skills so fundamental to living the Christian faith that we can only call it *basic adult formation*. It builds upon the catechesis we give our children, challenging and empowering men and women to encounter God and Church teaching at an ever-deeper level. Every Christian is entitled to comprehensive formation; it is a *baptismal right* simply because Christ has redeemed and called him or her. *The discipleship and holiness of the individual must be the first and primary focus of basic adult formation.*

Prerequisite for service

Basic adult formation is a prerequisite for effective Christian service of any kind. The call of Christ must come first; it must be discerned. We must not bypass it in our rush to staff parochial or diocesan programs. Before training for any specific ministry or vocation, disciples must

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establish a foundational identity as Christians. One cannot be a Christian leader until one has first wrestled with living a Christian life. Our efforts will be fruitless, indeed, if we skip over basic formation as the first essential step of vocational discernment and leadership formation.

This fact has been widely recognized: almost all diocesan lay formation programs in the United States dedicate the first half of their program to basic education in the faith. Even seminaries are taking steps to ensure that prospective priests receive the basics before they begin their formal studies. The Archdiocese of Denver, for instance, requires seminarians to spend an entire "Spirituality Year" of preparation prior to formal study. In addition to retreats, apostolic activity, and liturgical and private prayer, the seminarians receive instruction in the Christian life by studying the Scriptures, the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* and classic works on the spiritual life.

The Redemptoris Mater seminary in Newark, New Jersey notes on its website, "Experience has shown that the combining of a way of initiation to the Christian life…with the formation of the presbyter is a great help for the psychological, affective and human development of the candidates. (Before being presbyters they are Christians, and in the way of faith, they learn prayer, obedience, the sense of the Cross, to be in communion, etc.)"

Unfortunately, such an introduction to adult Christian life remains unavailable to the overwhelming majority of Catholics. Unless we move this most basic level of formation out of seminaries and schools of ministry and into parishes where it is available to all, we will continue to experience a serious shortage of effective leaders. Christian leadership requires more than mastering a set of skills or principles of pastoring—it requires a Christian life.

Personal and intentional faith

This requirement necessitates that basic adult formation begin with challenging the baptized to make their practice of the faith *personal* and *intentional*.

> *Adult faith is clearly and explicitly rooted in a personal relationship with Jesus lived in the Christian community. "The Christian faith is, above all, conversion to Jesus Christ, full and sincere adherence to his person and the decision to walk in his footsteps."* As its first goal, faith formation helps adults "to acquire an attitude of *conversion to the Lord.*" This attitude fosters a baptismal spirituality for adults. It leads them

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> to recognize and repent of sin in their hearts and lives, to seek reconciliation through the sacraments, and embrace the invitation and challenge of an ever-deepening faith in Jesus. (*HBW*, 18, 23; emphasis added)

What happens in the lives of individuals and the life of a parish when adults are challenged to personally follow the risen Christ? In Boise, Idaho, we have been working for two years with a parish that has been transformed by a series of evangelization retreats. These retreats focus upon the renewal of the sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. Over the past six years, 400 adults have experienced these retreats, which are facilitated by lay people. Countless individuals have told how their lives were dramatically changed by that experience. Many had been away from the Church for years and are now passionate in their desire to follow Christ.

Their passion has also changed the life of their community. Personal tithing and attendance at Mass have risen significantly. Two hundred adults now meet weekly to share their faith in the small Christian communities that have arisen from the retreats. Parishioners are hungry to learn more about their faith, filling every adult formation class that is offered by the diocese. So many volunteers want to help organize the evangelization retreats that staff struggle to find places for everyone. Such changes are typical of what happens when adults respond to Jesus' invitation, "Come, follow me."

Eager to discern what God might be asking of them, 350 lay Catholics to date have attended our *Called and Gifted* workshops in Boise with exciting results. Executives have left high-powered careers to commit themselves to ministering to the poor. At least three people set out to discern missionary vocations. Others have explored calls to music, artistic, or healing ministries. One woman began working with the homeless and intends to open the first daytime shelter in Boise. A parish group meets every week to pray for the Holy Spirit's work in the community. Several volunteer teachers are preparing to help lay Catholics in Idaho discern the gifts and call of the Holy Spirit. Word of what is happening has spread around the state, and parishioners have carried the evangelization retreats to other communities.

Discipleship as normative

All these happenings, as remarkable as they may seem, are entirely normal for a community of intentional disciples. It is normal for disciples to pray and worship, to give and serve. It is normal for disciples to want to share with others their experiences of following Christ. It is normal for

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disciples to hunger for instruction in the faith, to discern God's call, and to risk bringing Christ to the world. All of this is the work of the Holy Spirit and follows naturally from a living encounter with the risen Christ and the decision to follow him.

I love visiting Boise because there I can soak up the atmosphere of a Catholic parish that is fast becoming a community of intentional adult disciples. The warmth, relationships, and sharing characteristic of an evangelizing parish are evident there. Robert Aubrey, a Swiss Catholic missionary to Bolivia, has observed,

> The atmosphere of a community of converted people which praise the Lord and find religious and human warmth in the midst of a faceless society and of almost anonymous parishes, is something essential for human life. Only within a community can the new convert persevere, and experience the riches of faith and its implications for life. (Samuel Escobar, "A New Reformation," *Christianity Today*, April 6, 1992: 33-34)

We must admit that many of us have yet to experience this atmosphere as a normal part of parish life. We may know many Catholics who, as individuals, are committed disciples of Jesus; we may even be part of a small group of them within or without our parish. But few of us are part of parish communities where intentional adult discipleship is the norm. In the course of my work, I have witnessed the inner life of parishes all over North America and can testify that what is happening in Boise is unusual. So would the U.S. bishops:

> Many Catholics seem "lukewarm" in faith (cf. Rev 3:14ff) or have a limited understanding of what the Church believes, teaches, and lives. Others may know about the Gospel message but have not personally experienced the risen Christ. Still others are indifferent to the Church's guidance or see the Church's teaching in a negative light. For a variety of reasons, people leave the Church. They may seek out or be recruited into nondenominational, evangelical, or fundamentalist churches, or into New Age or other religious movements. Far too often they simply abandon the Christian faith altogether. (*HBW*, p. 12)

As Thomas Kelly, the great Quaker mystic, observed, "In some, religion exists as a dull habit, in others as an acute fever. Religion as a dull habit is not that for which Christ lived and died." (*A Testament of Devotion*, 53) So many present concerns that we face as a community—dwindling Mass attendance, huge numbers of lapsed Catholics, low

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levels of giving, shortages of vocations and leadership—stem from one shortcoming: *our failure to evangelize and form our own people at the parish level*. Intentional adult discipleship will not become the norm until our parishes became places where adults are both regularly confronted with the call of Christ to follow him and where they are consistently supported in their attempts to answer that call.

Empowering worship

Evangelization is fundamental, but it is only a beginning. Basic adult formation must build upon it by empowering conscientious and intentional participation in the worship of the Church, the sacraments, and prayer; it must encourage and nourish a truly Christian worldview and life-style. (This is the same basic formation that we need to offer adults joining the Church through the Right of Christian Initiation for Adults [RCIA].)

I am sure we all heartily agree on the necessity of educating Catholics to fruitfully participate in the Mass and the sacraments. But have we further considered what enabling them to worship as adults means, to worship as men and women who are both members of the common priesthood and apostles to the world? Adults bring a very different sense of self, relationship with God, and engagement with others to the act of worship than do children. They must bring to the altar their apostolic concerns, their relationships, and their work if they are to integrate their mission to the world with their worship. The Eucharist is properly the "source and summit" of Catholic faith and life. But how shall adult Catholics come to experience this as true unless sacramental formation for worship, prayer, and participation continues beyond childhood?

The American bishops have recognized this need and have requested that lay Catholics "acquire the spirituality, skills, and habits of full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy," and that they learn to "value the dignity of the baptismal priesthood and of the ordained priesthood and their respective roles in liturgical celebration and Christian mission." (*HBW*, p. 31) At the Catherine of Siena Institute, we believe this need urgent enough that we have begun work on a new workshop to help lay Catholics consciously integrate their apostolic mission and concerns with their participation in the Mass.

A Christian worldview

Another essential aspect of adult formation requiring our attention is the task of helping lay men and women develop *a truly Christian worldview.* All of us operate with a set of assumptions about life and

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reality, whether we are conscious of them or not. These assumptions make up a worldview that determines how we understand the meaning of our daily lives and how we relate to each other; they form the basis upon which we make those daily decisions that affect the world around us. Adult Catholics are regularly exposed to worldviews destructive of the dignity and happiness of human beings and contrary to the faith. Adult formation allows the teaching of the Church to reveal and challenge many of the assumptions that we have picked up just by living in contemporary American culture.

Unfortunately, in recent years we have tended to look upon wrestling with the content of the faith as an optional form of self-enrichment for those few lay people so inclined. That which is intuitive, heartfelt, and experiential has been regarded as a sufficient foundation for the laity, while deliberation, thought, and doctrine are assumed to be the province of bishops and theologians. We have confused understanding and discerning the real-life implications of fundamental truths with intellectualism.

Few Catholics are gifted intellectuals; nevertheless, all of us need to be familiar with the essentials of Church teaching, through which we have *access to Revelation*. Revelation contains truths that God must reveal to us because we could not discover them on our own. These truths are beyond the grasp of our reason, intuition, and experience, and yet they are critical to our happiness and destiny as human beings. Most of us will never read St. Thomas Aquinas for fun, but we can still ponder the significance of his insistence that our ultimate destiny is perfect, eternal happiness. You don't need an Ivy League education to ask if such a statement is true and if so, what it means for you and those you love.

> Adult faith is confident because it is founded on the word of God and confirmed by the whole Church's supernatural sense of the faith. The adult disciple seeks the clarity and knowledge of faith, so as to find and accept it "with all joy and peace in believing." (Rom 15:13) Out of this conviction come the willingness and ability to witness to the Christian faith whenever possible, to explain it whenever necessary, and to be confidently guided by it always. (*HBW*, p. 19)

The very richness of the Church's teaching complicates the process of forming a Christian worldview. Grasping one level of concepts assumes and builds upon the prior grasp of another. For instance, if we are to understand Catholic social teaching, it is important that we start with a Catholic view of the human person. Certain unexamined assumptions about the purpose of life, human nature, or happiness can make it very

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difficult for lay Catholics to perceive "Gospel values" as more than outdated, irrelevant abstractions or life-killing rules. To be life-changing, therefore, our intellectual formation must be comprehensive.

The Power of Revelation

The lives of many remarkable Catholics testify to the liberating power of Christian revelation. A wonderful example is Henriette DeLille, born in antebellum New Orleans to a free family of mixed race. The women of her family were expected to become the elegant mistresses of wealthy white men who were usually already married. When 14-year-old Henrietta began helping a religious sister teach catechism to slaves, she recognized for the first time that a very different life was possible for a woman. Before the Civil War, in the face of strong family opposition and repressive racial laws, Henrietta founded an order of African American sisters that identified with and ministered to slaves and the poorest of the poor in the Black community.

Encountering the truths of revelation often enlightens individuals to crucial issues that, on a communal level, we have yet to recognize. Such was the case of Bartholomew De Las Casas, a young grandee who was perfectly comfortable with the sixteenth-century Spanish practice of enslaving the native peoples of the New World—until he heard a Dominican preach against the whole system of slavery. This sermon was the initial spark that enabled De Las Casas to see the cruelty of slavery and it changed the course of his life. He became a Dominican himself and spent the rest of his long adult life advocating ceaselessly for the recognition and protection of the human rights of native peoples.

As cradle Catholics, both Bartholomew and Henrietta long had access to the sacraments, but it was exposure to Church teaching that enabled them to recognize and live truths which were at odds with the assumptions and values of the society in which they lived. Exposure to Christian revelation liberates us from the particular blindness of our own culture, time, and place, and opens up huge, new vistas: Who are we as human beings? What is our destiny? What purpose can our lives fulfill? Formation steeped in Christian revelation equips us with a trustworthy standard by which to evaluate the torrent of half-baked assumptions, complex ideas, and contradictory choices presented to us every day.

Making the essentials of the Church's teaching available to lay men and women at the parish level will require a great effort, but it is worth the price for it provides a remedy that will clear our minds and open our hearts to realities that we could not have guessed. The ability to critically

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evaluate the truth and implications of a proposed idea or action is particularly important for Western Catholics because of the power that each of us has to influence the world around us. We elect our own leaders, form our government, determine our social policy, and shape the future of our nation and the world. We are the apostles to this world. We stand in Christ's place. We must see our world as he does. As C. S. Lewis observed, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." ("Is Theology Poetry?" in *The Weight of Glory* [New York: Macmillan, 1980], 92)

Our experience at the Institute has never borne out the nagging fear that matters of doctrine will bore lay Catholics to tears. Over the past 3 years, in live workshops across North America and Australia, we have taught 6,000 adult Catholics how to discern the gifts and call of the Holy Spirit. When we first offered the *Called and Gifted* workshop, we, too, were afraid that participants would find the theology of the lay office and mission in the Church dull. Priests were puzzled as to why we would try to convey to lay people concepts normally wrestled with in seminary. Parish leaders warned us that such solid content was asking too much of those who attended. To our constant delight and surprise, many attendees have told us that the theological portion of the workshop is the best part, and even that the full six hours of content is not enough.

If we present the essential truths of the faith with clarity and conviction, people find the Church's teaching not mystifying but compelling. The central doctrines of our faith are not abstractions for would-be scholastics longing for a return to the middle ages. *The truths of revelation are alive and they speak profoundly to the hunger of twenty-first-century minds and hearts.*

I remember an adult study group focusing on Josef Pieper's wonderful book on the three theological virtues, *Faith, Hope, Love*. Normally impassive men wept, so moved were they by the Church's teaching on the virtue of love. Such heartfelt reactions occur regularly in our workshops. When Catholics first realize that they are apostles in their own right, that they are "sent ones" who literally stand in the place of Christ in the world, they are not completely bored; they are absolutely electrified. One participant, whom I love to quote, put it so beautifully, "I used to think that I was not worthy to kiss the sandals of Jesus. Now you're telling me that I'm to put them on and walk like they fit—that I stand in His place with my daughter, at work, with my friends. This is revolutionary!"

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Essentials of the Faith

What are the fundamental teachings that every adult Catholic should know? Although certainly not exhaustive, a brief list of essentials for a Christian worldview would include:

- *Revelation:* how God's word uniquely reaches us through Scripture and Tradition
- *Christian anthropology*: our dignity as absolutely unique, immortal beings created and delighted in by God, redeemed by Christ, called to share in the very life of God, and intended for perfect happiness; the roles of relationships, family and sexuality
- *The nature of God:* God is a personal being, of infinite love, whose own inner life is self-giving community of love, the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- *The drama of Redemption:* Jesus' redeeming life, death, and resurrection on behalf of each person; the power of sin and its consequences in our personal and corporate lives; the power of God's grace to overcome sin
- *Christian values:* appraising the world through Christian eyes; the Ten Commandments, the Great Commandment, the Beatitudes, the Virtues
- *The Church:* her identity, destiny, authority, and structures
- *The mission of the laity*: the rights, responsibilities involved; an understanding of secular apostle as one anointed by Christ to bring his love to all individuals, human communities, cultures and structures
- *The significance of the creation* and the secular in God's purposes.

This last area is vitally important. The vast majority of lay people are called to become holy and live God's call through engagement in secular affairs. As we have noted previously, formation is never generic but guided by the uniqueness of one's vocation. Clergy are formed primarily to minister within the Christian community, but lay apostles need primarily to relate to and evangelize people, cultures, and structures outside the Christian community.

> Since the laity share in their own way in the mission of the Church, their apostolic formation is specially characterized by the distinctively secular and particular quality of the lay state and by its own form of the spiritual life. (*DAL,* 29)

Our proper field of operation as lay apostles is the secular. We need to meditate long and hard on our world's beauty and eternal significance,

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how the Gospel speaks to its brokenness. Formation in the Church's social teaching becomes especially important for lay men and women.

When community becomes therapy

Another important part of basic adult formation is a living experience of Christian community. Communities form spontaneously when people share something in common. Over the last 30 years, one experience that has drawn us together in the United States has been that of loss, pain, or personal struggle; this has profoundly affected parish life. Our parishes are filled with support groups of all kinds—for addiction recovery, divorce survival, or grief support—that provide important lifelines. Many of our parish staff and lay leaders have training in active listening and facilitating small groups. This focus is very much in keeping with America's current therapeutic culture, which encourages us to share our needs and woundedness.

While it has brought us much-needed healing, however, this therapeutic focus has unfortunately encouraged us to look upon our faith communities as places devoted to meeting emotional and psychological needs. In such an atmosphere, pastors and parish staff often see their task as one of "caring"—nurturing parishioners who are wounded or needy. A therapeutic orientation can foster the assumption that one's Christian identity is that of "recipient of ministry." The parish can seem to exist primarily to meet the felt needs of the Catholic community. As one frustrated U.S. pastor recently observed, our parishes are more like nursing homes than centers for evangelization. (*The Parish: Mission or Maintenance?,* 23)

Indeed we are wounded, but, in Christ, our wounds are not our identity. We are first and foremost redeemed sons and daughters of God, and then apostles to the world, anointed by Christ himself. Even our losses, sins, and sufferings take on a new significance in light of this extraordinary call. As Saint Paul wrote, after a long struggle with his own wounds in the midst of an exceptional apostolate, "But he [the Lord] has said, 'My grace is enough for you; my power is at its best in weakness.'" (II Corinthians 12:9) To be fully Christian, we must integrate building of community and nurturing of people with the unfolding of their gifts and their mission in the Body of Christ.

Limiting horizons to the faith community

In our work at the Institute, we have noticed that certain unintended effects follow when people limit the horizon of their endeavors to the needs of active Catholics and the internal concerns of the Catholic

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community. First, and most surprising, is the number of Catholics who literally cannot imagine their faith having anything to do with their jobs or their favorite community activities. Numerous people have told us that they see no connection between their involvements outside of the parish and their faith! They view religion as something entirely private and personal, practiced in Church or perhaps at home with their family. That a lay Catholic would involve their faith in running a hardware store or designing computer software or performing in community theatre lies beyond their comprehension. For men and women whose sense of being Catholic is so privatized, the Church's social teaching will appear completely extraneous.

A second consequence results from this narrow view of lay Catholic activity: people look upon their secular accomplishments as irrelevant to the Church and, therefore, leave their competence at the parish door. A large number of able lay men and women have no opportunity to use their gifts within the Catholic community at present. We discourage them by envisioning parish service in terms of a few well-defined roles that meet some predetermined need: usher, eucharistic minister, religious education teacher, parish council member.

George is an aerospace engineer, but since the development of new technology seems irrelevant to the needs of the Christian community, at church he is known primarily as the husband of Laura, father of three, and usher at the 9:30 Mass. Maria is CEO of a nonprofit that fosters young entrepreneurs, but that belongs to her "other" life of which only her family and close friends are aware. In the parish, her identity is a single woman who teaches third-grade CCD. One young Canadian lawyer, when she offered her time and talent to the parish, was told that there was some paper filing to be done. The creative leadership that these lay people could bring to the Christian community never develops because their competence does not "fit" within the traditional boundaries of parish activity.

A third consequence of the inward focus of our parishes is that many lay Catholics feel completely isolated as they try to live their faith outside the Christian community. Since the average Catholic parish in U.S. has over 3,000 parishioners, lay people already struggle with feeling anonymous in our huge communities. But they feel even more isolated as practicing Catholics living in a culture that is often uncomprehending and even hostile to their faith. One young woman described her situation this way, "I come to church to receive the sacraments so that I can find the strength to be alone in the world." Catholics talk a great deal about

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community and ecclesiology while looking askance at "me and Jesus" forms of Christianity, but until our parishes start supporting the faith of lay people in their secular lives in a tangible way, "me and Jesus" will remain the only living alternative for many.

Community and mission

All of these consequences follow if we assume that parish life is about maintaining the Christian community. But if the principle mission of the Church is bringing Christ to the world, and if lay Christians are anointed collaborators in that work, then *their work in the world must become central to the mission and concerns of the parish*. The local Christian community is corporately responsible for the Church's evangelical mission; it is more than an undertaking of individuals.

> The parish offers an outstanding example of the apostolate on the community level inasmuch as it brings together the many human differences found within its boundaries, and draws them into the universality of the Church. The lay faithful should accustom themselves to working in the parish in close union with their priests, bringing to the Church community their own and the world's problems as well as questions concerning human salvation—all of which need to be examined together and solved through general discussion. (*DAL*, 10)

If the parish regards itself as responsible for the Church's secular mission, then a man's marketing expertise will no longer be irrelevant, and a woman's leadership experience will be of interest even if there is no vacancy on the parish council. The purpose of the parish will be inextricably tied up with the secular vocation of its members. Parish outreach will include the lay men and women who are striving to bring Christ to the board room of Microsoft, the sales counter at Macy's, the floor of Joe's Garage, or the emergency room of the local hospital.

Are parishes apostolic communities as well as worshipping communities? In our parishes, are lay people not only formed for their secular mission but also supported as they live it? Can lay men and women bring the dilemmas they face in their workplaces and their neighborhoods to their parish and receive real help in their discernment? If we are going to bring Christ to our world, these are the questions we must someday answer in the affirmative.

Small Christian communities can help foster a sense of mission and recognition of the gifts and leadership of lay people in a number of ways:

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Study communities: Groups that gather for *apostolic* study of the Scriptures or Church teaching differ from faith-sharing groups, which emphasize sharing of personal experience. Apostolic study seeks to grasp the fundamental truths proposed to us by the Church and their *practical implications* for our lives and our world. The ancient Dominican mottos say it well: "Conversion by the means of the truth," and "Hand on to others the fruit of your contemplation." Apostles seek to understand the truth in order to live the truth and share the truth with others.

Discernment communities: Bringing people together around mutual discernment of God's call can also be life-changing, as we have discovered in our extended discernment program. As part of the spiritual gifts discernment process, we ask participants to experiment with one particular spiritual gift, such as teaching or administration, for two hours a week during the course of the program. After two weeks of active experimentation, they share their experience with others who are exploring the same or a similar gift in small groups of six to eight. Most participants have never spoken with other lay people about how God is calling and using them. In fact, the thought of talking about their gifts with others fills many with great anxiety. It is an odd consequence of our therapeutic culture that American Catholics consider talking about their struggles as "being real," but when it comes to their discussing their giftedness and God's call, they think they are "showing off." Nevertheless, taking action and hearing the stories of others has proven to be a potent combination. Few things nurture faith in God's love like witnessing God's provision and goodness reach others through the charisms of an ordinary person. It transforms how we look upon ourselves and how we see the potential of others.

Mission communities: A third kind of small parish community is one that we are already familiar with: the group that engages in mission together. The Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Marriage Encounter, and Cursillo are wonderful examples that come to mind. Mission communities can also include groups engaged in the same profession or who share particular concerns such as public education or prison ministry.

Discernment and Personal Mission Skills

"The single most critical personal and spiritual skill for a lay apostle is discernment"

Parish-based preparation for the apostolate cannot stop with basic adult formation. The disciplines of discernment and personal witness are critical for mission in the secular arena. When we speak of bringing

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Christ to the world of the twenty-first-century, *the single most critical personal and spiritual skill for a lay apostle is discernment*. Discernment is a complex, multifaceted skill. In Catholic understanding, it includes the ability to discern:

- the talents and spiritual gifts (charisms) given by God
- personal call or vocation
- the leading of the Holy Spirit
- the meaning and value of temporal things
- creative application of Church teaching in specific situations (*CL*, 28, 58–60; *DAL*, 28–32)

Unfortunately, at present, the resources and training available to form adults in discernment are few and far between. I created the *Spiritual Gifts Discernment Program* in 1993 because I could not find any discernment programs that reflected Catholic theology and that drew upon the lived experience of Catholics. Only later did I come to realize that I could not find such resources because, in the Catholic world, they did not exist! Much to my astonishment, it dawned on me that I had created something unique. (A glance at the resources of our Protestant brothers and sisters is telling. Currently one may find at least fifty gift discernment inventories available to Protestants in this country. The *Catholic Spiritual Gifts Inventory* that I wrote in 1995 is still one-of-a-kind.)

This same scarcity exists in other critically important areas of discernment. Take, for example, the ability to discern complex situations in the marketplace in light of the Church's social teaching. As crucial an area as this is for lay formation, it is very difficult to find good resources for adults. I attended a national symposium last fall on forming adults in the Church's social teaching, expecting and hoping to bring back a wealth of materials. I was disappointed—I was told by leaders in the field that there weren't any!

We must not allow these shortcomings to discourage us. Rather let us recognize that we are at the beginning and that we must mine the riches of our tradition. We *can* answer the challenge to form lay Catholics if we turn to this wealth while keeping the secular mission of lay adults firmly in mind. We have abundant opportunities for creating new resources to make available the age-old wisdom of the Church to twenty-first-century minds and hearts. At the Catherine of Siena Institute, we have adopted this task as our central mission, but it is far too large a job for any one organization or movement. *We must join forces and collaborate broadly if we are going to set the stage for real change*.

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Discernment, the individual, and community

What is possible in the area of discernment? Although not necessarily the most important, and certainly not the only area needing attention, discernment of charisms can serve as an example of results that we have actually witnessed. "Charism" is simply the Greek word used in the New Testament for "favor" or "gratuitous gift." In the Catholic tradition, charisms, or spiritual gifts, are supernatural "abilities" given Christians by the Holy Spirit, enabling them to powerfully channel God's love and redeeming presence to the world. All baptized Christians are given at least one charism according to both the New Testament (Ephesians 4) and Church teaching (*CCC*, 951).

What difference does the discernment of charisms make in a Christian's life?

- It gives one a new sense of personal direction and purpose as a lay Christian. Our apostolic anointing comes alive when we see God use ordinary people in specific, concrete ways that make a real difference.
- It can serve as a powerful catalyst for spiritual growth.
- It can free one from the need to compare oneself with others or to judge others because they are different.
- Since every charism represents a call from God to use it, discerning charisms can greatly clarify decision-making.
- Focusing efforts on where one is gifted can prevent unnecessary failure and burnout from inappropriately focused efforts.
- It can help individuals understand and give a name to ways of serving God and others that they have already experienced.

The discernment process can have many positive effects on the parish as a whole. We have trained hundreds of parish leaders to facilitate the discernment of charisms in their communities. Positive changes occur when discernment becomes a "normal" part of parish life:

- Individuals cease to be anonymous; they gain a positive identity in the eyes of their leadership and one other.
- The discernment of their gifts draws people from the periphery of the community to the center.
- Individuals who are not already in leadership initiate new ministries in the community.

We've seen these benefits time and again. Our "alumni" have taken initiative in many ways. One retired naval office volunteered to donate his time as a full-time parish administrator. Others have started new

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ministries of welcoming hospitality, adult education, and hospital visitation. Another has taken leadership of entire parish religious education programs, as a direct result of going through the gifts discernment process. A young writer spent four months volunteering her time helping to write our new discerner's workbook.

The potential import of gifts discernment was made clear by an amusing incident. A parish that we had worked with previously had a change of pastors. In order to create some room on the calendar, he cancelled the gifts discernment workshop we had scheduled. A few weeks later, the new pastor met with the leaders of a major parish ministry and happened to mention that there would be no *Called and Gifted* workshop that year. The room suddenly became very quiet. Being a sensitive man, he quickly realized that something was amiss and asked the members of the group to tell him what they were thinking. One by one, they told him, "The *Called & Gifted* workshop is the reason I'm here!" Within days the workshop was rescheduled.

Some other ways that gifts discernment can impact a parish:

- It makes it possible to move recruitment for parish ministries from a "vacuum-driven" mode to one that is "charism-driven".
- Recognizing the charisms of parishioners makes it much easier to identify potential effective volunteers.
- Recognizing the charisms of all fosters a sense of coresponsibility and collaboration between the clergy, religious, and laity for the Church's mission to the world.
- Recognizing the charisms of the community makes it much easier to focus efforts, channel volunteers, and allocate parish resources.

But most important, how does the exercise of our charisms affect those *outside* the Christian community? God does not enter our world unilaterally. Rather, he comes through the assent and cooperation of his sons and his daughters. *We have an unspeakable and unmerited privilege as human beings: to collaborate with God in the healing and transformation of the world.* "Christ has no body now on earth but yours," as the indomitable Teresa of Avila summed it up. When human beings encounter God's love through the members of Christ's mystical body, they also encounter the risen Christ who has redeemed them and who calls them to follow him. The charisms given to us form the channels through which God's love, mercy, wisdom, vision, healing, and provision reach others.

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In the course of our work, people have recounted hundreds of stories about God's love entering and changing situations in remarkable ways through the charisms of quite unremarkable Catholics. For this reason, I always tell those whom I train as interviewers that helping others discern their charisms is the most fun you can have legally. No wonder the *Catechism* tells us, "Charisms are to be accepted with gratitude by the person who receives them and by all members of the Church as well." (*CCC*, 800) (A personal interview is the next step for those who have attended a *Called and Gifted* workshop and taken the *Catholic Spiritual Gifts Inventory*, an Institute publication.)

Discernment and Vocation

A direct connection exists between the discernment of charisms and the discernment of vocation. Our charisms are, at the same time, apparent clues to the life work God intends for us and supernatural tools for fulfilling that call. Many parishioners come to the gifts program because they have reached a point of transition in their lives. A number also come in order to discern calls to priestly and religious life, as well as the wide range of secular vocations. Through it all, we have noticed an emerging pattern: *when a parish begins discerning the charisms of its people, the people of the parish begin discerning vocations.*

As I have said, regarding our declining numbers of priests in America, our predicament is not that there is a shortage of vocations, but that we lack the support systems and leadership to foster the vast array of vocations that God has given us. Our current practice of conducting the entire process of vocational discernment outside the parish community only reinforces the problematic beliefs of many Catholics that

- vocations are the exception, given only to a few
- only those called to ordination or religious life have a vocation
- lay Catholics have nothing to discern

On the contrary, the Church teaches the necessity of forming every Catholic for his or her apostolic mission. If we take this teaching seriously, offering vocational discernment to a select few is no longer enough; it must become readily visible and easily accessible. We need to move initial efforts of vocational discernment out of the chancery or monastery and into the parish. *Discernment of personal vocation must become a natural and routine part of life for Catholic adults.* Whatever their direction, they can and should experience the first stages of vocational discernment together. Nothing will communicate the Church's recognition and support of the apostolic call of every member more clearly.

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We have seen the difference that even simple initiatives at the parish level can make. For instance, when he was pastor of Blessed Sacrament parish in Seattle, Fr. Michael Sweeney facilitated an informal discernment group in the parish. Single men and women would gather to study Church documents on religious life and the priesthood and to talk about their questions together. In a single two-year period, six members of that group entered various religious orders. Imagine what might happen to our "vocation crisis" if all our parishes were providing that kind of immediate discernment support! If we had the teachers and resources necessary to pass on the skills and disciplines of discernment, encouraging stories about the power of discernment to change lives would be common.

One young man who eventually joined a religious order commented, "It's hard to discern. You make being a lay apostle sound so interesting." His dilemma should be more common. Determining whether one's passion to serve our Lord should lead to religious life or to the lay apostolate should necessitate real discernment; it should require a choice between compelling alternate vocations. For too long have we regarded ordination and religious life as the only calls that needed discerning. (For a more in-depth look at vocation, see the October 2000 issue of the *Siena Scribe*, the Institute's quarterly newsletter, which is devoted to vocation discernment.)

Sharing the faith

Another important ministry skill for lay Catholics is the ability to share one's faith effectively with others, especially with those who have left the Church or had no living contact with Christianity. Since verbal witnessing is a skill with which lay Catholics are usually unfamiliar and often uncomfortable, providing training, experience, and support at the parish level is especially important.

> However, an apostolate…does not consist only in the witness of one's way of life; a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith, or to the faithful with a view to instructing, strengthening and encouraging them to a more fervent life. "For the charity of Christ impels us" (2 Cor 5:14). The words of the Apostle should echo in all hearts, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel." (1 Cor 9:16; *DAL*, 6)

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Forming Leaders Who Form Others

"Equipping leaders do not simply *care* for others. They *form* others to lead and minister in the unique arena to which God has called them."

Equipping-Leaders

Along with ensuring adequate content and providing discernment and mission skills, a third aspect of formation concerns the issue of leadership. If an effort to provide adequate formation for lay Catholic adults at the parish level is to succeed, we must develop what I call "equipping leaders"—leaders who are committed to raising up other apostles. We all know the axiom "Give a man a piece of fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." Equipping leaders do not simply *care* for others. They *form* others to lead and minister in the unique arena to which God has called them.

Of course, we lay Catholics must not be passive in the matter of our own formation, as though we were unable to begin our preparation for mission because we lack leaders. Rather, the first responsibility for our own formation belongs to us.

> Indeed, everyone should diligently prepare himself for the apostolate, this preparation being the more urgent in adulthood. For the advance of age brings with it a more open mind, enabling each person to detect more readily the talents with which God has enriched his soul and to exercise more effectively those charisms which the Holy Spirit has bestowed on him for the good of his brethren. (*DAL*, 30)

Nonetheless, personal initiative by itself remains insufficient. Just as those preparing for ordination need the teaching and fostering of highly trained formators, so lay Catholics need the help of others if they are to answer their own call to be apostles. The mission of the Church and the needs of our world demand a new generation of pastoral leaders who not only care for lay men and women, but equip them for their mission.

The Priest as an equipping leader

When we consider where to turn for formation leadership, we naturally think first of the ordained priesthood. Although Catholics commonly think of priests in terms of their liturgical and sacramental ministry, their mission is actually three fold: to teach, to sanctify, and to govern. Forming the laity for their mission is central to the priestly office. The Church has made it very clear: the priestly office exists for

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the sake of the unfolding of baptismal grace in and the development of the vocation of each and every baptized member.

> It is the priests' part as educators of the people in the faith to see to it either personally or through others, that each member of the faithful shall be led in the Holy Spirit to the full development of his own vocation through the Gospel teaching. (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests,* 6)

> This diversity exists at the mode of participation in the priesthood of Christ and is essential in the sense that "while the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace,—a life of faith, hope and charity, a life according to the Spirit—*the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood*…and directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians." Consequently, the ministerial priesthood "differs in essence from the common priesthood of the faithful because it confers a sacred power for the service of the faithful." (*Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests,* Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2; emphasis added)

> Indeed, pastors know how much the lay faithful contribute to the welfare of the entire Church. They also know that they themselves were not established by Christ to undertake alone the entire saving mission of the Church towards the world, but they understand that it is their exalted office to be shepherds of the lay faithful and also to recognize the latter's services and charisms that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart. (*CL,* 32)

The whole ministry of priests is to serve the mission of the laity as well as their salvation. Realizing this can be revelatory, opening our eyes to unexpected vistas. Seeing the priesthood in light of lay formation highlights the life-changing potential of priestly teaching and governance—including calling forth the charisms of the community—in a remarkable way.

What formation of the laity can entail for a priest's parish ministry is treated by Fr. Michael Sweeney in considerable detail in *The Parish: Mission or Maintenance* (available from the Institute). But what it means for a priest's formation is also significant. At present, few priests have been trained to form lay Catholics for their secular mission. A rare instance is the instruction in the discernment of charisms that the

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Dominicans of the Western Province have begun giving their students, which is part of an effort to incorporate into their formation a more comprehensive treatment of the theology of the laity.

If we would transform our parishes into houses of formation, however, we must also turn our attention to existing parish leaders, including our priests. Training them for the ministry of "equipping" is both essential and decisive.

> It is thus that the lay faithful are formed by the Church and in the Church in a mutual communion and collaboration of all her members: clergy, religious and lay faithful. …Priests and religious ought to assist the lay faithful in their formation. In this regard the Synod Fathers have invited priests and candidates for Orders to be prepared carefully so that they are ready to foster the vocation and mission of the lay faithful. (*CL,* 61)

Developing lay leadership

The work of forming twenty-first-century apostles falls upon the whole Church, including religious, deacons, and lay leaders of every kind. Priests are simply too few, and too often stretched by the liturgical and administrative demands of their job. We need only consider the sheer size of our faith communities to drive this point home. Most Catholic parishes would be considered "mega-churches" in Protestant circles. They are communities of such size and complexity that only with secondary and tertiary levels of equipping leadership can every member receive adequate pastoral attention. Priests—especially pastors—have a special responsibility in this area, but simply cannot fulfill it alone. No pastor, no matter how hard-working and gifted, can nurture and significantly relate to more than about two hundred people. *Without deliberately developing secondary leadership, we will never create evangelizing communities or provide the laity with the formation they need to be effective in their vocations in the world.*

Looking about, we do find some good news here: we see leaders emerging in our midst, seemingly called forth by the Holy Spirit for just such a time as this. For instance, the 13,000 permanent deacons in the United States are men whose experience in the secular world, personal formation, and office in the Church all combine to make them excellent potential formators for lay apostles.

> In order to assist the Christian faithful to grow in knowledge of their faith in Christ, to strengthen it by reception of the sacraments and to express it in their family, professional and

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> social lives, much attention must be given to catechesis of the faithful of all stages of Christian living. With growing secularization and the ever-greater challenges posed for man and for the Gospel by contemporary society, the need for complete, faithful and lucid catechesis becomes all the more pressing.
>
> So too is the service of charity in Christian education; in training preachers, youth groups, and lay groups; in promoting life in all its phases and transforming the world according to the Christian order. In all of these areas the ministry of deacons is particularly valuable, since today the spiritual and material needs of man, to which the Church is called to respond, are greatly diversified. (*Directory for the Life and Ministry of Permanent Deacons*, 25, 38)

In addition, 90 percent of deacons in the United States are married. Their wives, most of whom have participated in the formation process and who are encouraged to share in their husband's ministry, could also play a significant role in this ministry.

Tapping the strengths of converts

One of the Holy Spirit's surprises in recent years has been the wave of evangelical Protestants entering the Catholic Church. As one who was born and raised in the evangelical tradition, I know this choice was once unthinkable for committed evangelicals. Yet it is now repeated thousands of times each Easter. Evangelicals, though often ignorant of the Christian history, worship, and theology that loom large in Catholic minds, are nonetheless inspired teachers and equippers of lay people. In my own life, for example, I took for granted the abundance of personal formation and support that was readily available to me as an ordinary evangelical college student and young adult. I thought it was only natural that every Christian received years of preparation for his or her personal mission in a local parish. (Most important, I never found myself *alone* in my spiritual quest or discernment. I was surrounded by lay peers who were asking the same questions and wrestling with the same issues.)

Intriguingly, these new Catholics are often evangelicalism's best and brightest. Such converts bring with them a formidable amount of evangelistic and formation expertise from which we can benefit. Many were employed as ordained ministers in their own denominations. In becoming Catholic, they have not only changed communion, but have sacrificed their careers and risked their families' security. These are men and women of conviction, willing to risk a great deal to follow Christ.

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The very qualities that made them outstanding evangelical leaders compelled them to explore the riches of the great saints and doctors of the pre-Reformation Church, and eventually drew them into full communion.

Just a short time ago, I managed to track down one such man about whom interesting stories were circulating. He had, until recently, been a leader in a highly respected Protestant organization dedicated to lay formation. Their motto is, "To reach, disciple, and equip people to know Christ and make Him known through successive generations." I heard that this man had resigned from national leadership to "work with Catholics." To my surprise, he told me that he wasn't just working with Catholics, he had become Catholic. He has restarted his formation ministry on a much smaller scale and is committed to spending the rest of his life equipping Catholic laymen. I hope that his bishop realizes what a pastoral resource he received into the Church when he accepted this man.

We must find creative ways to help our gifted evangelical converts make the difficult transition. They have to identify and fill-in the gaps in their spiritual and theological formation while familiarizing themselves with Catholic culture and pastoral practice. They need our encouragement, understanding, and support during this process—and then we need to turn them loose to do what they do so well: challenge, teach, form, and empower lay men and women for their Christian mission.

Lay groups, third orders, and women

Third orders, and other lay apostolic groups constitute another source of Catholics who could contribute importantly to the formation of the laity. Many of these groups provide for their members particular formation and apostolic support that is superior to that found in most parishes. At present, such formation is usually directed to the growth of the individual or the mission of the group involved. But could not these groups offer parishes formation for "non-members" as well? Lay Dominicans, for instance, participate in the Dominican mission to be "of use to the souls of others" through the ministry of preaching. What would be more in keeping with true Dominican spirituality than for lay Dominicans to prepare themselves for the formation of lay apostles in their parishes, in collaboration with their pastors? Lay formators who are members of a particular order or apostolic group could place themselves at the service of their pastor and support the vocations of those who are called to other spiritual paths.

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For the foreseeable future, however, the delivery of faith formation in the parish for all ages will most likely remain in the hands of women. Of the lay staff and volunteer leaders/teachers who provide the bulk of parish services in the U.S., over 80 percent are women. (CARA report, 1998) Not since Catherine of Siena convinced the Pope to return to Rome from Avignon have laywomen held so much of the Church's future in their hands. At present, though, the majority of faith formation staff work with children and teenagers. Few work primarily with adults, and even fewer have been trained to form and support adults in the discernment and living of their secular vocations.

Ironically, while 99 percent of Catholics have been anointed by Christ as apostles to the secular, almost all available formation for the laity focuses upon preparing them for ministry within the Christian community. All of the 207 different lay formation programs described in the *Catholic Ministry Formation Directory* (CARA, 1999) focus primarily upon preparation for parish or diocesan service; only 11 even mention the mission of the laity to the world. And rather than producing mission-minded equippers to raise up other apostles, nearly all the programs seem designed to form ministers who will provide direct pastoral care. In light of these facts, need I say that if we are to call forth the millions of vocations that God has given us, we must radically change the way we prepare our pastoral leaders?

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Part Three
Onward

Our Church has called the laity to take up their role as lay apostles, but there is a tremendous disparity between her teaching and the lived experience of the average parishioner. Formation is a right and duty for lay Catholics as surely as it is for the clergy. In the same light, lay vocations ought to receive every bit as much attention. The need to form lay Catholics in a manner worthy of their calling is critical, and the parish is the most logical and practical venue. Several areas of content need attention if we are to provide lay Catholics the formation they need to gain a real competency as lay apostles: basic elements of community, revelation, and worship; discernment of call and vocation; development of mission skills; and leaders who equip others to be apostles to the world.

Effectively meeting the challenge of providing formation in the parish entails changes on an organizational and institutional level beyond the parish. At the Catherine of Siena Institute, we strive to reach leaders at the diocesan level, to enlist the support of the hierarchy, and to form seminarians for their future role in calling forth the gifts and vocations of lay Catholics. We seem to be steadily gaining ground, but one must realize that real change happens slowly.

What Can a Person Do?

Each of us can start taking the initiative. You may well ask, given the dearth of trained formators, the want of established formation networks, and the scarcity of adequate resources, "Where do we begin?" Each of us is responsible in large part for our own formation. We begin where lasting change always begins—with ourselves.

First of all, are we ourselves intentional, well-formed disciples of Christ? We cannot pass on to others what we do not possess. If you find that you lack some of the basics, good resources are available. An excellent place to begin your search is the Institute's website, *www.siena.org*. Our "links" section can connect you to 1,200 sites of interest to lay apostles; they are divided into easily navigable headings and subheadings such as "Adult Formation," "Resources for Lay Ministry," and "Gifts and Vocational Discernment." Our website includes an extensive list of frequently asked questions on spiritual gifts, and while

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visiting, you can review and order a number of the Institute's own resources for lay formation or check out our workshop schedule. And speaking of "passing on to others," as you grow in your own faith, make a habit of thinking about how you could share what you are learning with someone else. Your new discovery could revolutionize someone else's life.

Our friends in Boise recently shared this story: A young man, who had been through our gifts discernment process, had taken over coordinating the Eucharistic ministers for the homebound at his parish. He was called to visit a wheelchair-bound woman with a bleak future. Dependent upon others but unable to continue in the family home, she had moved to a nursing home with no hope of ever returning. Instead of sympathizing with her, this young man informed her that she was an apostle who had been given gifts for the sake of others. He then challenged her to discern her gifts and use them in the midst of this very difficult situation. Jolted out of her despair, the woman took heart and began visiting other residents, praying for them and reading Scripture to those who could not read it for themselves. Today she is a different woman, having left behind the weight of feeling useless and discarded to take up the work of love for which she had been gifted.

We can all follow her example and learn how to discern our charisms and, furthermore, how to help others discern theirs. I have personally taught 250 Catholics how to help others discern, and only a handful of them were priests or religious. No theological degree is required, only basic emotional and spiritual maturity, good listening skills, a real desire to help others recognize God's call, and the ability to participate in a weekend of intensive training.

What else might you do? How about gathering interested parishioners together, including pastor, staff, and other lay leaders, to study what the Church teaches about the role and formation of the laity? You could begin by reading *The Parish: Mission or Maintenance?* together with this booklet (both Institute publications). Then, perhaps, move on to Pope John Paul II's "*The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful.*" Discuss together what steps your parish could take to become a house of formation for lay people.

As a step in your our formation, discern whether God is calling you personally to commit yourself to the crucial ministry of preparing lay apostles. If you are already working in faith formation, do so with "attitude," with determination. Forming others, whether children or adults, is like being John the Baptist. One becomes a forerunner of sorts, called to make straight the path of one whom God has sent to bless and

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heal our world. The great nineteenth-century evangelist, Dwight D. Moody said, “The world has not yet seen what God will do through the life of a man or a women who is wholly consecrated to him.” If we truly honor and answer God’s call to evangelize and form our own, we will see not just one, but many such men and women—new Dorothy Days and Jacque Maritains, Mother Teresas and Francis Xaviers—emerging from the pews of our very own parishes. Nurturing the faith, gifts, and call of others is a privileged ministry. Through this work, you and I can literally change the course of history by helping to unleash the greatest power in the universe: the Spirit of God working through a man or woman wholly devoted to him.

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About the Author

Sherry Anne Weddell, raised as an evangelical Protestant, entered the Catholic Church in 1987. In 1993, she created the first spiritual gifts discernment program designed especially for Catholics. She has taught thousands of lay, religious, and ordained Catholics across North American, Oceania, and in Rome about the lay apostolate and the discernment of charisms and vocation, and has trained many parish and diocesan leaders to help others discern. She co-founded the Catherine of Siena Institute, a program of the Western Dominican Province, in 1997. Sherry has done graduate theological work at the Earlham School of Religion and the Fuller School of World Mission, holds an M.A. in adult education from Seattle University, and is an adjunct faculty at the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology at Berkeley. She lives with her husband, Jim, in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Additional Resources

- *The Discerning Charisms Workbook* (English & Spanish)
- *The Catholic Spiritual Gifts Inventory* (English & Spanish)
- *The Called and Gifted Workshop* 4-cd set
- *Discernment in Depth* 3-cd set
- *The Spiritual Gifts Resource Guide* (English & Spanish)
- *The Call to Christian Happiness* 3-cd set
- *Friendship with God* 3-cd set
- *Discerning Marriage* audio cassettes
- *The Parish: Mission or Maintenance?* (English & Spanish)

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The Catherine of Siena Institute

Equipping Parishes to Form Lay Apostles

The Catherine of Siena Institute was founded in July of 1997 as a program of the Western Dominican Province to make apostolic formation and support readily available to all lay Catholics. We have adopted as our mission the work of

1. Making self-formation resources available to lay Catholics throughout the world.
2. Equipping parishes to become houses of formation, discernment, and apostolic support for the laity.
3. Forming clergy, religious, and lay leaders to be effective formators of lay apostles.
4. Fostering awareness, discussion, theological inquiry, and pastoral consultation throughout the Church regarding the apostolic mission and formation of the laity.
5. Collaborating with interested individuals, groups, or organizations in the service of this mission.

You might also want to read

The Parish: Mission or Maintenance.

This booklet provides a theological background for parishes wishing to strengthen their identity as centers of evangelism and outreach for their communities. Co-authored by Fr. Michael Sweeney and Sherry Weddell, founders of the Institute, the book gives an overview of lay theology extensively citing Church teaching. The topic of why parishes must become houses of formation for the laity is discussed, along with how clergy and laity can collaborate in the governance and mission of the parish while retaining the distinct nature of their separate offices. This book is available from the Institute in a size and format like the one you are holding.

For more information call us at (888) 878-6789, or visit **www.siena.org**

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