

“For Dr. Fletcher, the motto of a 24/7 Christian should be ‘the undivided life is worth living!’ In order to live such a life—and to bridge the gap between Baptism’s universal call to holiness and the frenetic pace of everyday life—lay men and women must begin to see the Gospel story as *their* story. A prayer life rooted in the Scriptures will empower the Catholic lay faithful to answer the call of missionary discipleship in their secular vocations. *24/7 Christian* offers tools for discerning one’s personal calling, as well as inspiration for responding with humility and joy.”

—David D. Spesia

The Diocese of Joliet’s Secretary for Evangelization
and Catechesis

24/7 Christian

The Secular Vocation of the Laity

Christine M. Fletcher



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Preface

Roger was a physician who was the head of his practice group. He was working between 60 and 90 hours a week. He constantly felt stressed: his job meant that he had little time for anything other than work; his family was coming a distant second. He made it to Mass most weekends but felt that he could no longer be involved in the parish or in his community.

Tom was a CEO who had turned around a mid-sized company that had been engaged in unethical practices. He got rid of the malefactors, created a new healthy, ethical, culture, and developed new product lines that benefited the economy, reducing energy costs for consumers and running expenses for colleges and universities. He wanted to work in a soup kitchen to “really live my faith.”

Marsha was a stay-at-home wife and mother who was one of the mainstays of the parish. She taught in the religious education program, helped with the music ministry, was active in the Mothers’ Circle and Women’s Club. She was so involved with the parish that she had little time for anything except the parish and her family. She was concerned that she wasn’t involved in the neighborhood or her children’s schools. Her children had friends from many other faiths, and Marsha didn’t know how to connect with them or their parents.

Sandra was a state representative and on the fast track in her state’s politics. She found herself in disagreement with some Catholics on some social issues, such as welfare, and with other politicians on other life issues. The strain of balancing her work, her family, and

her faith was getting harder and harder. She wasn't sure if she should continue, or just get out of politics.

Roger, Tom, Marsha, and Sandra all suffered from a divided life. Faith and life seemed to be in separate compartments. All of them needed to see their whole life as their Christian life and witness; they needed wholeness and holiness. Their offering to God consisted of their many obligations, all done for the love of Christ. Tom's idea of working in a soup kitchen was right and laudable; but he also needed to understand how his secular work was part of his Christian vocation. Mary's work in the parish was a great service, but she was not bringing the Good News to her neighbors who weren't Catholic. Sandra's life in politics seemed far from her faith, but she was serving an important role for the common good. Roger's life was out of balance; he knew his work was part of his vocation, but he could see that other areas of his life were suffering from lack of time and attention.

This book is for people like them who want to live their faith 24/7—at home, at work, in the community, and in the parish. Living our faith is both our vocation and our mission. *Vocation* comes from the Latin work for “call”; God calls us to love and serve him. We serve him by telling others about God's love. This is our *mission*, which comes from the Latin word for “being sent.” When we talk about the two parts together—God's call and our response—we are talking about being disciples or followers of Christ. We may have been raised to think that vocation meant the special call to becoming a priest or a religious. It is true that each of us needs to choose a state in life, whether that be priesthood, religious life, marriage or single life. However, this choice is only one part of our vocation. Through baptism every Christian has the vocation to become a saint.

If we have chosen the lay state in life, we live out the call to holiness in the secular world. The Second Vatican Council states that “the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life. . . . They are called there by God” (*Lumen Gentium* 31). Fifty years after the council, it is an appropriate time to

reflect on the teachings that council gave us, especially those about the lay vocation. Lay life in the world has been one of the less studied parts of the council. Yet that teaching is a beacon of hope for anyone seeking a unified, whole life in which every aspect of life serves God.

This book will explore Scripture and the teaching of the council about the laity in the world in order to learn how to live this vocation today. Since each of us is a unique creation, this book will then look at discerning our particular gifts and talents. Finally, this book will look at practices from the Rule of St. Benedict that help us live out our vocation and our prayer, the foundation of our Christian life.

Chapter 1, “Faith and Life,” looks at the church/world split and how it developed. Most Catholics now do not remember living in the Catholic ghetto, but the legacy of that time is still with us. We will see how the “world” means God’s good creation, but it also means a creation marked by sin that presents us with difficult decisions in which good Catholics may disagree. We will also look at the particular challenges we face when we try to live our faith in our globalized consumer culture.

Chapter 2, “God Calls Us in Scripture,” looks at Scripture, the primary source of our faith where we meet Jesus. Reading, studying, and meditating on Scripture is an essential step in discerning our particular call throughout our lives. The Gospel of Mark is especially important here because it is a gospel of discipleship, written for believers suffering persecution. The gospel shows how difficult the path of discipleship is, even for those who were Christ’s closest companions. It is helpful to remember how often Peter and the apostles failed, yet Peter is our model because he didn’t give up; when he was wrong, he admitted it and repented. Imitating Peter is the path to life, but it requires us to be humble and know ourselves as sinners.

The gospels also give us insight into how Jesus called ordinary people to be his followers and how he dealt with the outsiders of his day. Jesus lived in a multicultural, multifaith environment, more similar to our own than to the Catholic ghetto of years past. His encounters with the pagans and other outsiders show us a way to act in our own multifaith world. Finally, the gospels teach us how wealth is a temptation and show us God’s values.

Chapter 3, “Vatican II: The Council and the Laity,” will look at the new understanding of the lay vocation from the Second Vatican Council. The council highlighted the call of all Christians to holiness in their baptism, providing a new way of understanding our role in a changed world. This chapter recounts the changed understanding of the laity that emerged from the council as the fathers brought the riches of our tradition into dialogue with the new things of our culture. The documents of the council empower us as laity within the church by recognizing our freedom of conscience and of autonomous action in the world. This freedom carries a responsibility to see things with the eyes of Christ and to love God and our neighbor here and now.

Chapter 4, “Discovering My Call,” looks at how we find our particular, individual call. We look at our personality, talents, values, goals, and stage of life. We stop to listen to what others have to tell us about ourselves, our gifts, and our needs. Joy should be the distinguishing mark of the Christian, and our work should be a place where, most of the time, we find fulfillment and satisfaction. Of course we also need to discern those times when we are asked to take up our cross and maybe do work that is dull, repetitive, and difficult, or suffer illness, weakness, and need. This process of discernment is lifelong, as we move through various stages and commitments. We want to bring our entire life—family, work, politics, church, civil society—into a unity of love and service to the Lord.

Chapter 5, “Living a 24/7 Christian Life,” puts our vocation into the context of the Rule of St. Benedict. For 1500 years Benedict’s wisdom has helped people end the divisions in their lives by bringing their souls and outward lives into alignment—and it remains a relevant guide even today. Benedict has perennial wisdom to teach us to move out of our selfishness and isolation and into community, especially through the practices of humility, stewardship, and a life lived in balance. Here we may find common ground with those of other faiths (or none at all) as we address the pressing problems of our age. Our goal is not to solve all problems everywhere; our goal is, rather, to become the kind of people who bring Christ’s joy to the world as we build a human community based on God’s justice and peace.

Chapter 6, “Prayer,” looks at the foundation of our vocation, our relationship with the Lord. We need to stay close to God in prayer. The Benedictine practices of communal prayer through the Office and the individual prayer of *lectio divina* help us to deepen our relationship with God and thereby see where we are called to serve in our world.

This book is the product of many years of experience as a lay Catholic trying to live a unified life. It would not have been possible without the help of many people, only some of whom can be mentioned here. I want to acknowledge the many good people I have met over the years while volunteering in parishes, people who helped me see how our work was part of our call. Now, as a theology professor, I want to thank those parishioners who responded with enthusiasm and encouraged me to write this book. I would like to acknowledge the group who read these chapters as they were being prepared and gave me such helpful feedback and suggestions for improvements, especially Joy and Paul Fleckser, Melissa Walsh, Fr. Phillip Timko, Fr. James Flint, and Chad Suhr. I would also like to thank the monks of St. Procopius Abbey, especially Fr. Becket Franks, Fr. David Turner, and Fr. Julian von Duerbeck for formation in Benedictine spirituality. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Peter, for his unstinting support and encouragement.

Christine M. Fletcher
Feast of St. Procopius 2014

chapter 1

Faith and Life

Many of us feel a separation between our religious life, when we pray or go to Mass, and our “normal” life. It is hard to see our work as part of God’s call for us. It is even harder to see getting involved in politics or coaching the youth soccer team as something God is interested in. Speaking theologically we are experiencing the split between the church and the secular world. The church is the body of Christ, the people of God. At one and the same time it is participating in the kingdom of God and being present on earth. It is the heavenly kingdom beginning but not yet fully realized.

On the other hand we have the secular world where we work and live, pay a mortgage, raise our children, and try to get through the day. It seems to run on completely different rules from the church. For many people there is a huge gap between the church and the world, the church is for religious people and the world is for normal people. Religious people shouldn’t bring their faith into their secular life; faith is okay as a private security blanket, but it must not challenge the way the world works. This is the dilemma that lay Christians face in trying to live a life of discipleship where every part of life is under the lordship of Christ.

Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that “world” has three meanings in Scripture. First, it signifies God’s creation, and so the world is good (Gen 1:31). Second, it implies creation reaching perfection in Christ: “God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19). If the world is reaching perfection in Christ it is because something is wrong with it. What is wrong with the world is the third meaning of “world” for St. Thomas—the world as creation marred by sin: “The whole world lies under the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19).¹

The Jewish and Christian creation story tells us that when God created the world, he created beings in his image, like God in some way. The writers of the ancient account in Genesis 2–3 tell us of Adam and Eve and how God gave them one law to obey, not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. These first humans had freedom to choose whether to obey God or use their freedom to seek their own will. They chose their own will, and that choice meant that the world no longer was in harmony with God’s will but bound over to the power of the evil one. Relations between man and woman, humanity and nature, and those within nature now had difficulty, pain, and death. This is not a factual report of two people in a garden, but is a story that tells us a deeper truth: original sin affects all of creation. G. K. Chesterton said that the one empirically verifiable doctrine of the church was original sin. When we look around at our good intentions gone wrong, or when we try to change a bad habit and fail over and over, we realize the power of this original sin. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that because of original sin, “human nature is weakened in its powers; subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death; and inclined to sin” (418). The world, which is good because it is God’s creation, is disordered because of sin; it is corrupt and corrupting. The secular vocation of the laity in the world is to try to make God’s love and justice real in a world marked by greed, selfishness, and sin. We believe we can do this because we have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. Our baptism makes us members of Christ’s body the church, and so we are part of God’s work of reconciliation.

Even though the divide between the church and the world as fallen creation seems pretty clear, we must find a way to bridge the gap and live our faith 24/7 in the world and in church. This requires us to change ourselves, the kind of people we are. Our choices form our character; if we choose goodness, we become good people. Our Christian life of the sacraments, our personal prayer, and our moral efforts with God's grace work together to make us the kind of people who can bring God's love to the world. We are also responsible for bringing God's love to each part of our lives: to change the world, to alleviate pain, to correct injustices, to care for others. We know we will never create a utopia here on earth but that doesn't excuse us. We must make our work, family, and community life part of building up God's kingdom on earth.

The early Christians lived like this. The time of the early church, the apostolic age, was a time when Rome was the center of a globalized economy, where there existed stock markets, commodity trading, sexual license of every description, abortion, and divorce. Slavery was common, and a man's wife and children were his property. It was a multiethnic, multireligion culture unified by Rome's political and administrative system. Christianity was one religious sect among many. Christians had a bad reputation: they were considered *atheists* because they denied the state gods and did not take part in emperor worship; *cannibals* because they spoke of the Eucharist as eating the flesh and blood of Christ; and *incestuous* because they called each other brother and sister. Christians usually couldn't go out and openly convert others, they had to rely on the witness of their lives.

Their neighbors would learn about Christianity from knowing them and how they behaved, or by attending the circuses where Christians were tortured and killed. Lucian wrote:

You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted,

and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws. All this they take quite on trust, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property.²

Christians were committed to their beliefs and knew why they mattered. Saint Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Cor 15:17-20). Belief in the resurrection, which changes everything in life, was the power at the heart of the Christian message. Humanity was no longer the victim of cruel gods, condemned to a life filled with pain ending in death. For Christians life is changed not ended at death; knowing that enabled them to face persecution and torture with equanimity, and even joy. Lucian recognized their courage.

The Christians in those days were normal people; it wasn't a time of bliss with no dissension in the local churches. Most of the epistles show us communities where disputes and factions had arisen, and the normal human behavior of honoring the rich and despising the poor occurred. But in addition to this there was fervor, a joy from the Good News of Christ's resurrection that meant Christians were prepared to live in a new way. They took their place in society as far as they could and lived according to their faith.

When the church was accepted and Christianity became the state religion new problems arose, but the idea of the unity of faith and life permeated society. We can refer to these ages in Western Europe as Christendom. The church seemed to order all parts of society: politics, economics, war, and family life. Kings looked to the pope for support, and the church definitely thought it had the answers for many worldly concerns. This was the source of new problems, as historians of the church know. However, in daily life, the church ordered not just prayer on Sunday, but the round of days. In an age of serfdom, holy days offered a release from toil and a chance to rest and hopefully to feast.

In the Reformation, Christendom was divided, and religion became the cause for wars; it seemed that religion was the problem and not the solution. The ruler decided what religion the people were to follow. Obviously that didn't work, we have Protestant martyrs, Catholic martyrs, Anabaptist martyrs— all Christians condemned to death by other Christians for believing and worshiping differently from the state church. Religion seemed to be a hindrance to peace and civil order.

New scientific discoveries such as the Copernican system (the Galileo case) and evolution saw the churches and science seemingly opposed to one another. This was at least partly the effect of misguided clerics who read Scripture as if it were a science textbook. Then in the age of the Industrial Revolution, the churches seemed to be on the side of the owners, not the workers who endured such terrible conditions. Marx called religion the opiate of the masses. Christianity seemed not only out of date and ignorant, it seemed to be an oppressor of working people.

The Preconciliar Church

By the nineteenth century the church and the world were viewed as competitors. In the church, the “world became both the enemy to be feared and avoided, and at the same time the ‘unchurched’ were to be conquered for Christ.”³ The laity were seen to need protection from the depravities of the secular world. A Catholic culture of schools, hospitals, universities, pious confraternities and societies grew up, a kind of Catholic mirror of secular activities. In America, the Catholic experience was of an immigrant church needing to protect itself against a society predominately Anglo and Protestant.

The experience of worship divided the laity from the clergy. The experience which most Catholics had of the church's prayer, particularly the Eucharist, was one of praying alone in their native language while the priest—at the altar with his back to the congregation—was saying the Mass in Latin. This fostered a sense among the laity that we were the passive recipients within the church; the real church was the priest who was performing the sacraments and the religious who ran the schools and hospitals.

The ecclesial infrastructure of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced a strong Catholic culture that was inward-looking and institutionally focused. It meant many Catholics could live without routinely interacting with unbelievers. In this Catholic culture, many believers saw their faith as requiring them to stay within the narrow sphere of parish and special spiritual work. Cardinal Joseph Suenens, who later would be one of the major figures of the Second Vatican Council, described this in a book he wrote in the 1950s, “In the eyes of too many ‘practicing’ Catholics, a Christian life is reduced, alas! to a few religious exercises: Sunday Mass, Easter Communion, abstinence on Friday; and observing some commandments, particularly the sixth, on which attention is concentrated, as if the duty of justice, for instance, were not as binding as that of chastity.”⁴

Burying oneself in parochial and spiritual concerns is illustrated in a story of a priest’s visit to very good Catholics, asking for their cooperation in reaching out to the unchurched. The father refused, “So you would like me to do your work for you?” The mother excused herself on principle, “It is a matter of principle with me, Father, not to interfere in what is not my business.” The daughter, when told she would be wanting in charity if she did not help, responded, “I, wanting in charity! Oh! Father, how little you know me, I never interfere with anyone.” Finally the younger brother, an ecclesiastical student at home for the holidays, when asked what he had been doing for souls, replied, “I have not had the opportunity.” Suenens commented that there is a need to revise our Christian education since it produced such an inward-looking and narrow conception of discipleship.⁵

Reinforcing this culture was the understanding of the church as the “perfect society,” governed by the hierarchy. In practice this meant that most lay Catholics identified the clergy as the church. Obedience was the prime virtue of the layperson. This caricature of Catholicism, of the docile laity taking their orders from the priests, was the basis of much of the anti-Catholic sentiment in America. It contributed to the common view that religion, any religion, is an unwelcome participant in the marketplace of ideas. Religion is supposed to be your private activity; not something that impacts how you work, vote, or spend your money.

This divide between secular life and the church may have been a consequence of these forces, but it is not correct theologically. It ignores what Suenens called the central paradox of our faith that “combines the prospect of life after death, which lifts us from the earth and makes us raise our eyes to heaven, with the lesson of the Incarnation, which teaches us to take upon ourselves in the sweat of our brow the immediate temporal happiness of men.”⁶ Christians are to care for and about the world they live in.

The Second Vatican Council and Today’s World

The Second Vatican Council ushered in a new relationship between the church and the world. First of all, it recognized freedom of conscience, and it initiated many of the ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues that we take for granted today. Second, it gave us the conception of the church as the people of God, a pastoral and more egalitarian vision to correct the excesses of the “perfect society” model of church with the pope on top and the lay faithful at the bottom of the pyramid. Third, it called on the church to dialogue with the world, to read the signs of the times and engage with culture. Together this meant that Vatican II recognized the laity’s role to order the world rightly, and our autonomy to do so as we have knowledge from living in the situation. This does not eliminate the challenge of living in a fallen world with a fallen human nature. The old temptations—the world, the flesh and the devil, the world and its goods, the desires of the flesh, and the demonic sin of pride—must be faced in a new environment.

Fortress Catholicism had withdrawn into a special Catholic world (where those old temptations were as strong as ever). Today we are encouraged to go into the world, learn the signs of the times, and see both the good and the bad. The world of the 1960s, the time of the council, certainly needed the witness of the church as it hovered on the brink of nuclear war. The peace movement became part of living the faith for some Catholics. Other Catholics were galvanized by the pro-life movement and got involved in politics. Many, disturbed by the coarsening of culture (particularly movies and television) to

increased violence and ever-more explicit sexual depictions, wanted to retreat to a safer Christian world.

Today our challenge is living the faith in an interconnected virtual world that annihilates time and space. Our contemporary world can simultaneously bring us together in a global community and isolate us in our own private virtual reality. We are in touch with people around the globe, but on our terms. Every idea is on offer; we have a spiritual buffet where practices from the world's different religions are presented as of equal interest or worth. People who are repelled by the idea of an all-knowing benevolent God watching over their lives find themselves instead living under the watchful eyes of speed cameras, GPS locators, and the NSA. Like all human inventions, the wired world brings us challenges and gifts. Like any new technology, we have to learn to humanize it and decide how it fits into a truly human life. While pornography is one of the big businesses of the Internet, many Christians have embraced the new technology and use it as a way to witness to God's love and care for everyone, promoting justice and peace.

Our technological advances have meant that more people are facing not the problems of starvation and subsistence living (though too many people still do face these), but the problem of handling wealth. Christians throughout history faced the temptation of making wealth into an idol. The church has always warned us of the temptations of worldly goods. There are two deadly sins directly related to wealth and possessions: gluttony and avarice. Envy and pride are also related to wealth, but more to what it buys in terms of power or status. We are warned about misuse of wealth in the gospels, by early church fathers such as St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom, and in the great writers of the Middle Ages, Chaucer and Dante. These warnings were written in a society with a small-scale economy where markets were between buyers and sellers who knew each other and would have to trade with one another in an ongoing relationship. Goods were limited by the technology of production. Scarcity of food, clothing, and other necessities was a fact of life for most.

That has all changed drastically. The advances of human creativity and productivity mean that the poorest people in America

today live better than the lords of medieval Europe. Clothing is now something we can buy as a disposable good instead of something to be cared for and, when possible, reused. Food is plentiful and relatively cheap. Most people, even those on low incomes, have a television. If wealth was a challenge in a society where most people experienced scarcity, it is an even greater challenge in our society. We have advanced in technology and wealth, but we have not changed our fundamentally flawed human nature. We know that we have always had a problem with our desires, we want more of everything. In an era of mass production, those out-of-control desires meet advertising designed to stimulate them. The result is consumerism.

Our world is marked by an unconscious acceptance, by Christians as much as everyone else, of a consumerist worldview that is opposed to gospel values. Our generally accepted measure of prosperity, the Gross National Product (GNP), is based on mass consumption. The mass consumption is encouraged by marketing and advertising that is ever-present. Baptist theologian Harvey Cox has described consumerism as a religion in “The Market Is My Shepherd, and I Shall Want and Want and Want.”⁷

Consumerism has unstated assumptions about human beings, the purpose of life and its components, the economy, society, and the state, which are vastly different from those in the Gospel. In the gospel story, people have inherent worth, whether they are young or old, sick or healthy, fit or unfit. They are designed for a community life that stewards and protects the gifts of nature. There are things that are of so much value they should not be sold. In the consumerist narrative, however, people are autonomous individuals, valued for being young, healthy, fit, and wealthy. Everything can be sold, nature is just something to be used, and the only purpose of life is to buy more stuff to keep the economy growing. This makes us blind to the real values of the world that God made for all his creatures. Pope Francis feels this: “How many of us, myself included, have lost our bearings; we are no longer attentive to the world in which we live; we don’t care; we don’t protect what God created for everyone, and we end up unable even to care for one another!”⁸

Solving the very real problems of this world is the way laypeople today live their call to follow God. As laity in the world, we have to figure out for ourselves how to change a world in a culture that doesn't pretend to be based on God's law. It says instead that a good life is immediate pleasure and infinite choice. Most people in the world, even in the business and the advertising agencies and marketing departments, want to live a good life that is full of purpose, but find little help in learning how to do so. Our religious discussions tend to focus on individual spirituality and morality rather than on witnessing to the world at large.

The council fathers tell us that God's way of love "is not something reserved for important matters, but must be exercised above all in the ordinary circumstances of daily life" (*Gaudium et Spes* 38). We must live the way Christ taught us and bring all parts of life—our ownership of goods, our marriages, and our freedom—to reflect this way of love. We need to bring this way of love to places where the priests and religious are not usually found: our homes, our offices, Wall Street, Main Street, the mall, the PTA meeting, the Little League field, and the senior center.

We are like the early Christians. We will be witnessing in a world of people who believe in many religions or in none. Our witness must begin a dialogue that respects others as persons and believers. Lately, it is those of no professed faith who have been calling us to live up to our faith. The sustainability movement warns us that we are using up the earth's resources in our wasteful consumer lifestyle, polluting the air and water, and depriving future generations of their rights in this world. The so-called "New Atheists" criticize us for not doing anything about the very real problems that exist in our world, but going along with the dominant culture. They see us using religion as a cosmic security blanket.

Our task is both more urgent and more difficult because of the clerical sex abuse scandals. Those who do not wish to listen to any church teaching just bring up the sex scandals and tune out. We must acknowledge the evil that was done and pray for healing of the victims and the church. But we cannot let this scandal, or anything else, stop us from witnessing to Christ and his love for us, sinners though we are.

Each of us is called to be a disciple, and each of us has a special mission. We are prepared for it by the uniqueness of our identity: our gifts and talents, our personality, the time and place we were born. We have a specific situation in which to use our gifts and specific challenges to answer. To prepare for this great work and to understand what being a disciple of Jesus means, we start with Sacred Scripture—especially the Gospels, the record of Jesus in the world. That is the topic of the following chapter.