**The Content of Lay Formation**

**Philosophy/Vision of the Office of Spirituality & Formation for Ministry**

**Diocese of Charleston**

“The single most critical personal and spiritual skill for a lay apostle is **discernment**”

(Sherry Weddell) What should formation for the lay apostolate comprise? This question is important because **formation is never generic**. We must always design it around the unique mission of the person who is being formed. Formation for the laity must not be a “watered-down” program. For example, seminarians require formation for a quite different mission-that of ministry with the Church. On the other hand, the vast majority of lay Catholics are called to vocations that live **outside the parish**. Lay people need preparation to engage and evangelize individuals, cultures, and structures which may be non-Christian, or even anti-Christian. 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** (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*).

If it would follow the Church’s teaching faithfully, formation of the laity must emphasize the mission of the Church to the world; meditate and insist upon the real objectivity of faith in contemporary society; educate Catholics in their apostolic dignity and invite them to consider the talents, gifts and opportunities for their apostolate already present in their lives; insist upon the secular apostolate of the laity—those on the forefront of the church’s mission to the world;

illumine the proper relationship between the laity and the ordained in such a way as to foster real **collaboration in the mission of the Church**; take place in parishes which are ordered, **not** merely to the maintenance of existing structures, but to the mission of the Church to the world. The Church has outlined the basic elements of such a formation for us in some detail. The single most critical personal and spiritual skill for a lay apostle is discernment.

**Lay Christians need formation** in order to adequately **discern** their God-given talents and spiritual gifts (charism); their personal call or vocation; the leading of the Holy Spirit; the meaning and value of temporal things; the creative application of Church teaching to specific situations.

**The Holy Father says of this discernment**: to be able to discover the actual will of the Lord in our lives always involves the following:

* A receptive listening to the Word of God and the Church;
* Fervent and constant prayer;
* Recourse to a wise and loving spiritual guide; and,
* A faithful discernment of the gifts and talents given by God, as well as the diverse social and historic situations in which one lives (Christifideles Laici, 28).

Note how the pontiff insists that formation must involve “a faithful discernment of the gifts and talents given by God.” Priests have, in fact, been given a special gift of the Holy Spirit for this purpose. Priests are ordained to serve the faith, hope, and charity of the laity. They recognize and uphold, as brothers and friends, the dignity of the laity as children of God and help them to exercise fully their specific role in the overall context of the Church’s mission. The ministerial priesthood conferred by the sacrament of holy orders and the common or “royal” priesthood of the faithful, which differ essentially and not only in degree, are ordered one to the other—for each in its own way derives from the one priesthood of Christ. Indeed, the ministerial priesthood **does not** of itself signify a greater degree of holiness with regard to the common priesthood of the faithful; through it, Christ gives to priest, in the Spirit, a particular gift so that they can help the People of God to exercise faithfully and fully the common priesthood which it has received (Pastores Dabo Vobis, 17).

Indeed, pastors know how much the lay faithful contribute to the welfare of the entire Church. They also know that they 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 charism that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart.” (Christifideles Laici, 32).