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Pope Francis gives a crucifix to a layperson he installed as a catechist Jan. 23 during a Mass i

Pope Francis gives a crucifix to a layperson he installed as a catechist Jan. 23 during a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. The Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life is sponsoring a conference aimed at promoting the "co-responsibility" of laypeople and clergy for the life of the church and its mission in the world. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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For too many Catholics, ordained or lay, the responsibilities of the laity are those "delegated" by the priest or bishop.

As the continental assemblies for the Synod of Bishops make clear that hot-button issues — like sexuality, climate change and the role of women in the church — are not going away, the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life is pointing at a more fundamental issue at stake in learning to be a "synodal church": What responsibility comes from baptism and unites all Catholics?

And, related to the synod's goal of promoting a church where people listen to one another and work together to share the Gospel and care for the poor, the dicastery is asking: How do clergy and laity walk and work side by side?

The dicastery is exploring those questions Feb. 16-18 at a conference titled, "Pastors and lay faithful called to walk together." The meeting, in the Vatican Synod Hall, has an enrollment of 210 participants from 74 countries: 107 laypeople, 36 priests and 67 bishops.

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Cardinal Gérald Lacroix of Quebec, who is one of the main speakers, told reporters Feb. 14 that before he was ordained, the Canadian bishops asked him to give his input ahead of the 1987 Synod of Bishops on the laity.

"I said when you see a young person who comes to church often, sometimes goes to Mass on weekdays, you often ask us, 'Would you like to be a reader? Could you become a member of the pastoral council? How about joining the choir or being a catechist?' — which are all good things — but rarely do you encourage us in what we do in the midst of the world, not inside the interior of the church."

Obviously, laypeople have roles to play in the life of a parish, he said, but priests, bishops and cardinals also need to recognize the way Catholic laity are bringing the Gospel to the world through their jobs, their family life, their volunteering and their social engagement.

"The laypeople are not there at our service," Lacroix said. "We are together at the service of the mission of the church."

Cardinal Kevin Farrell, prefect of the dicastery, said, "I can assure you the laity have a lot more to offer than a mere function that they can perform, such as being the accountant of the diocese or the finance officer of the diocese or overseeing the schools."

"We must go to a much deeper understanding of what it means to be co-responsible for the life of the church" and that, he said, demands "a change of heart, a change of attitude. The laity are not always welcomed in every diocese of the world."

As baptized Catholics, "we are all responsible for the church," he said. When Christ said, " 'Go baptize in the name of the Lord. Go preach the word of God to the ends of the earth,' he wasn't speaking just to the priests; he was speaking to everybody."

Speakers at a Vatican news conference pose for a photo Feb. 14 after talking to journalists ab

Speakers at a Vatican news conference pose for a photo Feb. 14 after talking to journalists about the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life's international gathering to promote closer cooperation and a sense of co-responsibility between clergy and laity. From the left: Andrea Poretti, a leader of the Sant'Egidio Community in Argentina; Cardinal Gérald Lacroix of Quebec; Cardinal Kevin Farrell, dicastery prefect; and Linda Ghisoni, dicastery undersecretary. (CNS/Cindy Wooden)

In too many cases, Farrell said, people think the word of God can be preached "only inside of the church" without accepting responsibility for preaching the Gospel "by what we say, by what we do, whether we are doctors, teachers, nurses, professors, journalists, editors — whatever it may be. And that requires coordinated work between the laity and priests."

A first step in building a synodal church, he said, is for pastors to stop seeing laypeople as those they "delegate" to fulfill certain tasks, as if their contribution to the church is by invitation only.

At the same time, he said, the answer is not "the simple logic of replacement," which is a position held by some people who think everything in the life of the church would improve if laypeople replaced clerics in most positions, especially in decision making and finance.

The solution is to accept "a renewed call by the Lord to walk together, each according to his or her own vocation, without attitudes of superiority, uniting energies, sharing the goals of the mission and assuming responsibility for the good of the Christian community," Farrell said.

Linda Ghisoni, an undersecretary of the dicastery and a canon lawyer, said the conference, like the synod, is trying to give people the tools to "reawaken an awareness of being the church together" and "to promote shared processes, including shared decision-making processes," with respect for the different gifts and roles people have.

A constant effort is necessary to leave behind a notion that the ordained have one "domain" and the laity have another, and the two cross only with specific permission, she said. Learning to actually live and work as "one body" takes practice.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.