Vatican
Vatican News
A toddler holds Pope Francis' hand as his sisters and parents stand around him

Pope Francis greets Santiago Pérez de Camino Gaisse, a staff member of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life, Leticia Sánchez de León and their children during an audience at the Vatican April 22, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

Cindy Wooden

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — April 24, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The ministry of lay Catholics, whether formally instituted by the church or simply inspired by the Holy Spirit to serve the needs of others, flows from baptism and a recognition that every Christian is called to take part in the mission of the church, Pope Francis said.

"All ministries are an expression of the sole mission of the church, and they are all forms of service to others," the pope said April 22 during a meeting with members of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life, which was holding its plenary assembly at the Vatican.

Cardinal Kevin J. Farrell, prefect of the dicastery, said by focusing on "laity and ministry in a synodal church," members of the dicastery discussed ways "to promote

a readiness for service that stems from the many gifts and charisms that the Holy Spirit arouses in the people of God, and which give rise to various ministries for the benefit of the women and men of our time."

"In particular, we discussed the challenges of those experiencing marital crises of all kinds, which involve the consequent short-circuiting of the transmission of the faith," he said. "Today there is a greater need than ever, in the area of family ministry, for a specific ministry, for an authentic closeness and witness on the part of married couples at the service of families for the pastoral care of those experiencing crises and problems of all kinds."

While all ministry in the church, lay or ordained, begins from the call of baptism, Francis said that in the specific area of a Catholic couple's service to other couples in need, ministry has its "sacramental foundation in marriage" as well.

When most Catholics hear the phrase "lay ministries" they think of those formally instituted, like lector, acolyte and catechist, the pope said. "These ministries are characterized by a public intervention of the church -– a specific act of institution -– and a certain visibility. They are connected with ordained ministry, because they involve various forms of participation in the task" of the priest, even though they do not require ordination.

But, he said, "the instituted ministries do not represent the full extent of the ministeriality of the church, which is broader and, ever since the first Christian communities, regards all the faithful."

Advertisement

Many of those other ministries, he said, while not requiring a formal institution by the church, are, nevertheless, inspired by the Holy Spirit for the good of the church and the world.

"First a charism appears, inspired by the Spirit; then, the church acknowledges this charism as a useful service to the community; finally, in a third moment, it is introduced and a specific ministry spreads," he said.

Laypeople participate in "the prophetic and regal function of Christ" when, for example, they minister to the poor or to migrants, he said.

"In these areas of charity, many services can arise that take the form of genuine ministries," he said. "It is a broad space of commitment for those who wish to live in a practical way, in relation to others, the closeness of Jesus that they have often experienced firsthand. The ministry thus becomes not only a simple social commitment, but also something beautiful and personal, a true Christian witness."

However, no form of ministry must ever become "self-referential," he said. "I get angry when I see lay ministers who –- pardon the expression –- are 'puffed up' by their ministry."

"At times you see laypeople and they seem to be default priests," the pope said. "Please, clean up this problem."