

The rights and duties of the laity

By Dennis Coday, National Catholic Reporter

Canon law never explicitly addressed the laity until it was revised in 1983, which is why Sr. Kate Kuentler, a canon lawyer, calls the revised code “the final document of Vatican Council II.”

Canon 208 declares that all the faithful “are truly equal in their dignity and their activity in cooperating in building up the body of Christ.”

The laity are obliged to stay in communion with the church, lead a holy life and promote the growth of the church.

The rights of the laity include: access to the sacraments and a Christian education, to association and assembly, and to their own spirituality.

Key canons for the lay synod movement are 212.2 and 212.3

The first says the faithful have the right to make known “their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires” to their pastors.

The second says, the faithful “have the right and even at times the duty” to make their opinions known to their pastors and to the rest of the Christian faithful.

“The Christian faithful are obliged to express their opinions about the good of the church to their bishops and fellow church members. Not only is it your right, but it is your obligation. Right there in canon law, this is the authentic teaching of the Roman Catholic church,” said Kuentler, a Poor Handmaid of Jesus Christ.

Kuentler often teams up with Lena Woltering, a founding organizer of lay synods in southern Illinois, in advising lay Catholics across the country in organizing synods.

“My main goal is to get people to re-vision their role as Catholics, to start taking some responsibility for the condition of the church,” Woltering said. She and like-minded laity realized “that we could no longer sit and bitch and moan about what was going on unless we took an active role in trying to fix it,” she said.

Her efforts are not always welcome in official church circles, which is frustrating, she said. “When we are regarded as dissidents and outside the church, it is so easy for the hierarchy to . . . set us aside rather than dealing with us and dialoguing with us.”

She said, “Differing theologies have always been a part of Christianity and we should not allow anyone to disregard us or cast us out just because we may not agree with all church teachings. The things that we oppose are not doctrine or dogma.”

The bishops “have to be leaders to all of us. They can’t just set us aside and say we don’t belong,” she said.