

## Individual Rights & Responsibilities Under Canon Law

The current code of Canon Law promulgated in 1983 reflected the theology of the Church that emerged from the Second Vatican Council. It contains a new section entitled *The People of God*, which provides a “Bill of Rights” for all members of the Church for the first time in Christian history. The Code specifies that as baptized lay members of *Christ’s Faithful*, we have defined rights and responsibilities. Our rights include:

- ❑ Making known our needs, especially our spiritual needs, and our wishes to our Pastors (“Freedom of Speech,” Can. 212)
- ❑ Access to the Sacraments (Can. 213)
- ❑ Freely establishing and directing associations which service charitable or pious purposes or which foster the Christian vocation in the world (“Freedom of Association” Can. 215)
- ❑ A Christian education (Can. 217)
- ❑ Knowledge of Christian teaching (Can. 229)

We know that all rights come with responsibilities. According to the 1983 code, we have the obligation “to work so that the divine message of salvation is made known and accepted by all persons everywhere in the world” and “to imbue and perfect the order of temporal affairs with the spirit of the gospel.” Those who are married are bound by “to work through marriage and the family to build up the people of God.”

Many of us have been drawn to the work of renewal by our concern for our children and our desire to share the gospel with them. When we cannot trust our pastors to keep them safe, when a Diocesan bishop cannot pass the background check necessary to work with young people in his own Diocese, we are clearly obligated to make our concerns known. How do we respond if our rights to meet and to discuss our concerns with our pastors are denied?

The 1983 code as approved by the Commission authorized Episcopal Conferences to establish in their territory 'administrative tribunals' to deal with grievances, but these canons were “deleted” before the new code was promulgated. How do we make violations of our rights known in the absence of any formal channel?

As lay Catholics, we have been conditioned by centuries of clericalism and are often reluctant to assert our rights even if we are aware of them. But if we do nothing in the face of church leaders who refuse to meet with us, or teach us in any meaningful way, or forbid us to meet in our parishes or speak to one another across parish lines, or refuse access to the sacraments directly or indirectly by failing to consider new modes of ministry, we are yielding our rights without a struggle.

Let us resolve to speak openly when we experience abuse of power. Let us demand honest, open and meaningful dialogue with our Pastors when they make apparently arbitrary and unjust decisions. Let us assert our right to free association with others to foster a Christian vocation in the third millennium. And let us reach out to others like the Leadership Conference of Women Religious as they struggle to define what a true Christian vocation and true Christian leadership look like in our time.