

THE AGE OF THE LAITY

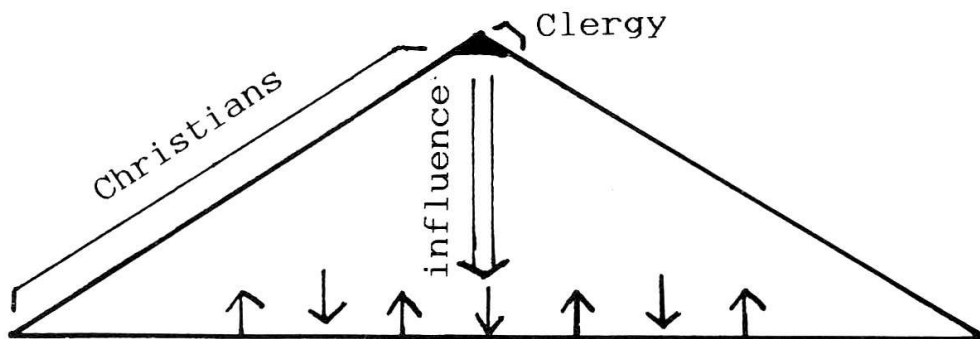
The Training of Lay Apostles

by Jess Brena, S.J.

Introduction

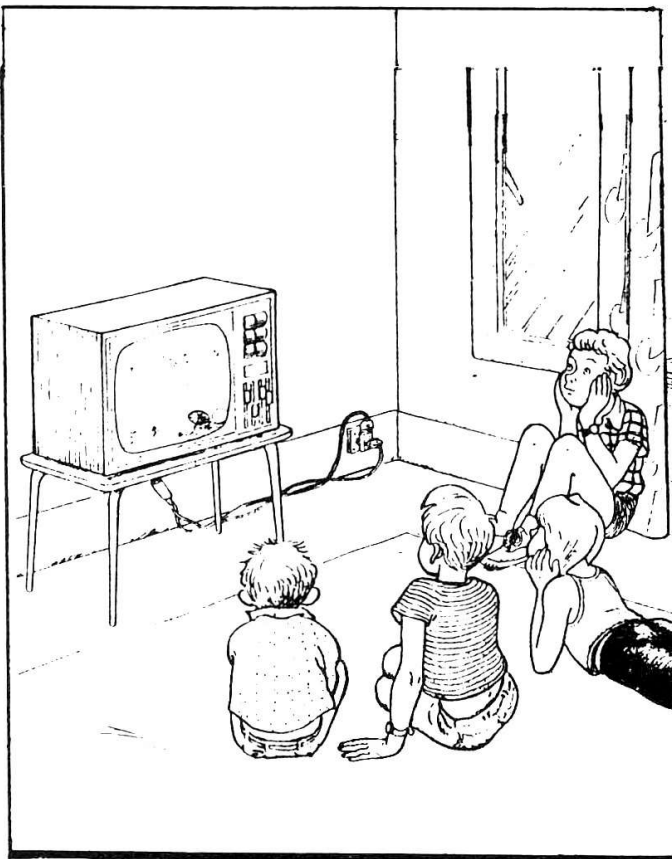
The "information explosion" of the past few decades has created a world-wide society characterized by rapid change. It would not be unfair to say that the Church is sorely lagging behind in its efforts to keep pace with this phenomenon. Confronted by a world of constant change, must we not re-evaluate our methods of evangelization in order to readjust them to present needs and realities? Serious reflection on this situation would seem imperative in order to guarantee a more fruitful spreading of the gospel in contemporary society as we move into the future. A good place to begin such a study might be to review our different conceptions of the Church, for consciously or unconsciously we all operate off preconceived models of what the Church is and how it should function. A better understanding of such models can lead us, then, to a shift in our priorities when making decisions about evangelical methodology and lead us to a better deployment of our resources when engaged in the practical task of spreading the good news.

The Pyramid Church



What is characteristic of this Church model is how a small minority (Pope, bishops, priests, sisters, and catechists) leads a vast majority (lay people). Here power and influence comes from above and slowly filters down to the bottom. The majority of Catholics remain passive participants in the work of the Church and they are always on the receiving end of things. Dynamic and dedicated leadership can provide great stability and unity in such a church, and this model has proven itself to be very effective in the past. However, if one were to invert the pyramid, its weaknesses become painfully apparent. There is little hope for large scale development where only a very small, albeit highly influential, minority holds the responsibility for serving the great mass of the faithful. Today in places where its leadership is threatened by a lack of new religious vocations and is faced with an aging clergy, its structure becomes weak and shaky, and a crisis becomes imminent.

The T.V. Church



This model is to be found in a Church that has failed to become indigenous in its cultural surroundings. Local Christians, both clergy and laity alike, can be compared here to an audience watching television. The programme is interesting and colourful, but it is one that is imported from abroad and not locally produced. Many local churches still accept church models that are more traditional to western countries. Spirituality is all too often not assimilated locally and its practice is based on religious styles of other cultures. Local Christians in such a church model often find acceptance by their non-christian neighbors difficult

and, as a result, antipathies arise within the communities.

The Floral Church

Here the Church is likened to a beautiful bouquet of freshly cut flowers which is placed on the centre of a table. The flowers have colour, shape, fragrance, beauty, and a fine location. They lack only one thing; they have no roots. Some local churches have all the externals: a well established bishops' conference, dioceses, parishes, schools and sophisticated social services. At first glance they appear almost complete, but like the flowers, they are not rooted in the soil of the local culture in which they exist. Lacking roots, they cannot hope to endure for very long.

Models from Vatican II

Our search for suitable church models that can adapt themselves to the needs of our time leads us, of necessity, to those offered by the Second Vatican Council. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Second Vatican Council has enriched our understanding of what the Church is and how it is to operate in contemporary society. Among its many models, I have chosen the following sampling:

1. The Church as a sacrament: the Church is a moon reflecting, in an imperfect manner, the rays of the sun. She is ever aware of her imperfect nature and how far she still has to go before the full realization of the kingdom of God and His saving grace becomes a reality in our world.

2. The Church as a sign: she must constantly be at work discerning the "signs of the times" and ever ready to accept the responsibilities for action that arise from her own watchful discernment.

3. The Church as a pilgrim: she is on a long journey following the courses of history, and always in need of being enriched and purified by them.

4. The Church as characterized by locale and time: it is more correct to speak of the Church as "universal, with Rome as its centre, manifesting herself locally with the special characteristics and features of specific cultures" than to say that she is "a universal church having

branches in localities throughout the world." She is integral to the local communities where she serves as guide in matters of faith and morals.

5. The Church as an instrument of the Holy Spirit: she is led by, guided by, and fulfilled by the Holy Spirit, and she lives in constant need of the light of Christ, Who is also the light of the world.

6. The Church as the body of Christ: Christ is her head, and we are His members. Under Christ's leadership, each member must carry out his and her own personally designated ministry, make the best possible use of ones abilities, and together accomplish the work of the kingdom.



Given the above models for evaluating ourselves as a Church in the modern world, it becomes obvious that to achieve our goals, our first priority must be the training and formation of the laity.

The Awakening of the Laity

It is a quite common feeling among ordinary Catholics that the Church expects little more from them than simple faith. Such a role offers little in the way of a sense of accomplishment and often results in their hesitation to bear witness to their beliefs in the world which lies outside the rather narrow confines of their church community. Evangelization is considered by them to be the prerogative and responsibility of the ordained clergy and religious. This notion is passed down from generation to generation with the result that evangelization is sapped of all vitality.

In actuality, to become a Christian is to enter into a rich and glorious existence. A new self-realization takes

possession of the convert, a new sense of importance and worth that gives one courage to assume the responsibilities of the missionary task. Thus is the grace of baptism energized to assist the new Christian in becoming an even more responsible believer.

We, each of us, have come from different milieux and have been moved to believe for different reasons. This is not the result of mere happenstance. Some definite power has brought this about. This power is from God; He is the one who has called us (2 Tim. 1:9). It is the divine plan of God that has made us His children, "other Christs" (Rom. 8:28-30), and He has entrusted to us the mission of spreading the gospel (1 Cor. 9:16).

There are over 60,000,000 believers in Asia. If these legions of believers were to involve themselves in missionary activities in positive and practical ways - no longer relying only on the efforts of the clergy and religious - the impact on Asia would certainly be tremendous.

Bringing Charisms into Full Play

Mobilizing the laity for mission begins with a basic recognition that everyone is important, and that everyone is needed. "Each one has received a special gift in proportion to what Christ has given" (Eph. 4:7).

There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit (1 Cor. 12: 4-6, 12). God has blessed each one of us with special gifts. While these gifts are different, they are meant to complement one another. There is also a certain correspondence between the immediate needs of the church and the gifts which are bestowed. If at certain times particular gifts are demanded, then the corresponding graces will be made manifest.

If we find in today's church many important needs not yet answered, certain problems not yet resolved, we can be sure that it must be for one or more of the following three reasons:

we tend to look down on these special gifts, or upon the persons who possess them,

we do not search hard enough within our community to find those especially gifted by God,

the gifted in our midst have not yet been activated due to their own lack of awareness or because they have not received the proper kind of encouragement from the community and its leaders.

Christians who possess charisms, besides having personal awareness and receiving the encouragement of others, must also rely on prayer. "If there is any one of you who needs wisdom, he must ask God, who gives to all freely and ungrudgingly; it will be given to him" (James 1:5). "For to everyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but from the man who has not, even what he has will be taken away" (Matt. 25:29).

A parable: Peter and his co-workers were professional fishermen. They had labored in vain the whole night. Acting upon the word of a stranger, who Himself was not a fisherman, they let down their nets for a catch of fish that filled their boats to capacity (John 21: 4-6). This miracle was not the result of professional experience or acquired skill, but the command of Christ.

The Spirit and Task of the Lay Apostle

The lay apostle is one who has been previously chosen by Christ and follows Him closely (Rom. 8:29). The lay apostle is called to participate in Christ's mission as priest, prophet, king, and servant in order to help bring salvation to all peoples (Canon 229).

In the concrete, then, lay apostles must be persons of prayer. With the help of a spiritual director they must find their own methods of prayer and pray daily either alone or with their families.

They must also be people dedicated to study, eager for self-improvement. As the Chinese proverb goes: "Study as long as you live." They should take every opportunity to attend seminars, retreats, etc. where a spirit of reflective, prayerful study is encouraged and nurtured.

They must be men and women of dedicated service, willing to take up the tasks which others dislike and avoid.

They must cultivate a spirit of cooperation that will enable them to work with their pastors and other church leaders, and accept the charisms of other Christians.

They must be generous - open and unselfish - always attentive to developing the spirit of the group in communion with the universal church.

They must be humble, kind, and diligent, without desire for personal success nor should they blame others for mistakes.

They must take responsibility for the church: Ask not what the church has done for me, but what can I do for the church. They should not expect any material compensation for their work.

During Christ's lifetime and in the early church, the work of evangelization was carried out by the laity. Vatican Council II has restored the laity to this important position. Among the Council's documents, Ad Gentes has especially stressed the necessity and urgency of the lay apostolate. We live now in an extremely secular society, and while one cannot claim that the entire task of evangelization falls exclusively on the shoulders of the laity, one can certainly affirm that to a great extent the task does belong to them. Paul VI has said: "The church encounters the world through the laity."

In both theory and practice the concept of the lay apostolate has changed dramatically. The laity have moved from being considered as merely assistants to the clergy and religious to being the directly appointed instruments of God in the salvific work of the Church (LG #33).

The reason for lay participation in the Church's task of evangelization is not because of a lack of clerical or religious vocations or the shortage of priests; rather, they receive this mission in baptism and confirmation. The laity's right to evangelize and to cooperate in the development of the Church is also strongly affirmed by the

new Code of Canon Law.

The Training of Lay Apostles

Our programme for the training of Lay Apostles may be summarized briefly in five steps.

Initially, the parish priest selects from among the community thirty to fifty parishioners. They form a full and colorful spectrum in age, educational background, profession, language, etc. Actually, every Christian is qualified to take the course, because every Christian by baptism in Christ is reborn an apostle, is another Christ. Our aim is to develop an active, motivated, and fairly well trained apostle out of every Christian. This is possible after the candidate comes to a fuller understanding of his or her basic Christian vocation. During this preparatory or "seeding" period, which lasts for several months, the parish priest meets with them and together with them reflects on the experience of God's call to the apostolate. Discussions concern themselves with the many aspects of their society, their parish and their own personal faith responses as members of the Christian community. Over a period of weeks, through clearly expressed unmistakable signs, those called to the apostolate will be confirmed in their vocation. This is the time for planting the seed and the necessary first step in the training of lay apostles.

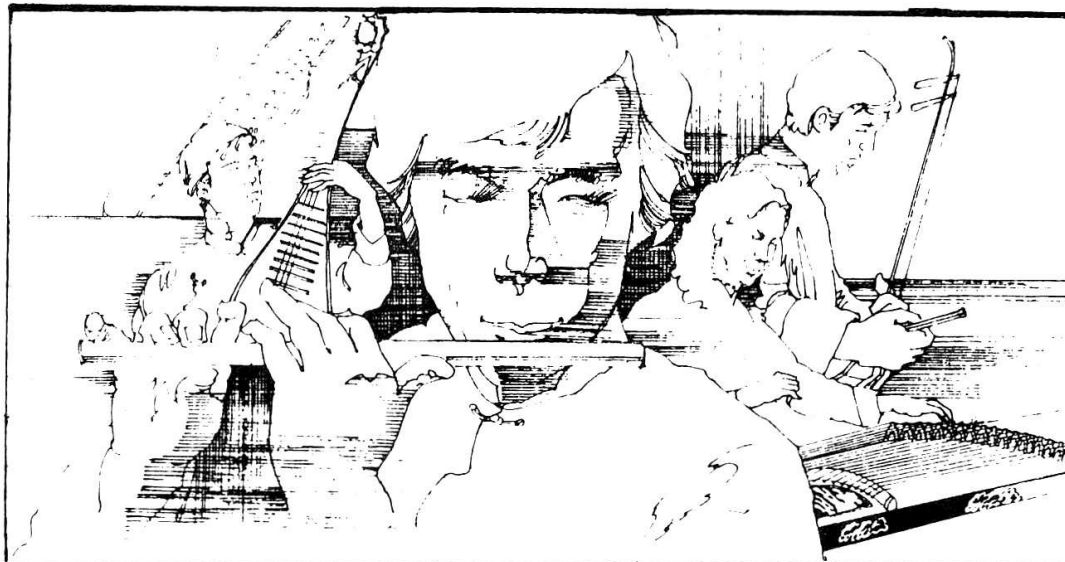
The second step consists of an introductory course which lasts from six months to one year. Here those called by God come to recognize the meaning and goal of their training. They gradually become more and more aware of the value of the training programme as a means for equipping themselves properly for their future work, and here they strive for greater personal improvement.

Step three is the formal two-year training course. This follows upon the candidates' clear and existential recognition of God's call and the commitment of themselves to the lay apostolate. During this period candidates learn by doing. They gradually improve their skills through actual engagement in apostolic work. Their work is specifically selected to coincide with their own interests and natural abilities.

At the end of the two-year training course, the candidates are ready for step four. Here they are accepted and formally sent forth by the bishop to work as apostles in the parish. The fifth and final step of their training is open-ended and consists of a programme of on-going education and continuing guidance under the direction of the pastor. The training programme centre offers support through its many publications which are prepared specifically to meet their needs. Graduates of the course are encouraged not only to take responsibility for their own continuing spiritual growth and maturity, but they are also encouraged to maintain close contact with the centre.

The Content of the Training Course

In theory and practice, the centre emphasizes whatever is useful and helpful for the self-development and growth of its candidates. This is the general principle for curriculum formation. Our core course focuses on the study of the Bible, the liturgy, and fundamental Christian doctrine. However, we also have a large number of auxiliary courses, such as: group dynamics, leadership training, public speaking, community organization and social development. Candidates are introduced to such movements as marriage encounter and such practical activities as home visitation and organizing parish councils. Also, the arts are not neglected. We have courses in sacred music, drama, art and design, and a general introduction to the understanding and use of mass media.



All of the above resources notwithstanding, our experience has shown that the success or failure of a candidate rests largely upon the encouragement and support of the parish priest. For this reason, the attendance of parish priests and their cooperation in the course is vital to the outcome of the training programme.

I would like to list here a number of publications that our centre puts out as an aid to parish priests and lay apostles. All are available at our Volunteer Lay Apostles Promotion and Training Centre in Taiwan.

"The Call" (both in English and Chinese), an Introduction to the Program of Volunteer Lay Apostles.

"You Called Me: I am Here". (in English, Chinese, Indonesian, Bengali, Japanese, and Spanish), Vocation and Training of the Laity.

"The Family Gathers Around the Bible" (in Chinese).

"The Voice of the Apostle" a Bi-monthly news-letter (Chinese).

"The Road to Cooperation", Social Work Cooperatives (in Chinese).

"Liturgy Without a Pastor"

Reference Book: For more detailed information, we refer you to the book "You Called Me: I am Here" available at the H.K. Catholic Center or at the Voluntary Lay Apostles Training Center, P.O. Box 8-342, Taipei, Taiwan.

Lay Apostles in Taiwan

The movement in Taiwan began in 1979 among the mountain aborigines and spread from there to other areas. Up to the present over 500 candidates have undergone training in 13 training courses established in five dioceses. Our candidates come from 15 different counties and cities and include both mountain and plains peoples. Other regions are now in the process of setting up more training courses

and the lay apostle movement is bearing fruit everywhere in Taiwan, both in parishes and in the many areas of social service.

The first Bishops' Institute for the Lay Apostolate (FABC - Northeast Asia Region) took place in Changhua in 1984 from November 1st to the 9th. Fifty delegates from northeast Asia, including some bishops, participated. They discussed extensively the role of the laity in the church today and explored concrete ways to promote the training of lay apostles throughout the region, with the Taiwan training program serving as a prime model. Participants shared their practical experiences regarding the lay apostolate and resolved to set in motion the ideas and programmes they discussed during their conference without further delay.

Some Important Points to Keep in Mind

The lay apostle's work is determined according to the concrete charisms and interests of each individual, as related to the real needs of the local church.

Apostolic training will vary according to local situations; there is no uniform pattern that can be applied everywhere.

The highest ideal of the apostolate is for each believer to become an apostle. Any attempt to establish the lay apostolate as another rank in the church should be avoided.

Lay apostles act as partners and co-workers with priests, sisters and professional catechists, and not as their servants. The lay apostle accepts direction and counseling in order to make a better use of his or her own gifts. Hence, priests, sisters, and professional catechists should be accepting and openminded, putting their faith in and being supportive of the lay apostles.

Lay apostles should not only emerge from the local community of believers, but they are to live in that community, be accepted by its members, and receive their co-operation.

Apostolic training is not merely a means of furthering Christian education among the laity; rather, it aims to form lay people as practical workers and witnesses for Christ in the church, in society, and in their places of work. It is not spiritual formation for the individual, but the exercise of individual charisms for his or her own sanctification and for the sanctification of others.

Conclusion

Jesus has said: "In the evening you say, 'It will be fine; there is a red sky,' and in the morning, 'Stormy weather today; the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to read the face of the sky, you cannot read the signs of the times" (Matt. 16:2-3).

Why is the training of lay apostles flourishing so well in Taiwan today? Why has that which was previously considered by many to be inconceivable now become a reality? Why are mountain aborigines so willing to spend one week each month and busy city dwellers one night each week in participating in the lay apostolate training course? It is a sign of the times. The age of the laity has dawned. Clergy and faithful alike ought to make the most of an opportunity to tap this infinite resource of the Church, so that the Church may be filled with new hope and strength for the future.

It is a matter of record that after the lay apostles have completed their training, pastors become more open to change. The laity bring new life and further development to all areas of church activity, while at the same time continuing to mature in personal spirituality. After the faithful have become apostles, they do retain their original ways of speaking and acting, but now they speak what they have never dared to speak and do what they have never dared to do; they speak and act in ways they never knew how to speak and act before.