

THE LAITY IN ASIA

AFTER VATICAN II: A PASTORAL APPRAISAL



by Bishop Alan de Lastic

Some of us are rather impatient when we reflect on the life of the Church in this twentieth century. We would like the Church to change more rapidly since society is doing so, forgetting that history has taught us that the Church does change indeed, but changes slowly.

Twenty years or more have elapsed since the Vatican Council first promulgated its teachings concerning the Church and especially the role of the laity, but only now are we having a special Synod on this topic. Whether or not this Synod is overdue, it must not be viewed as one isolated event in the life of the Church, since life in the Church is an ongoing process of growth and change. It always seeks to understand itself better so as to place it in subjection to the Word of God in fulfilling the mission entrusted to it. To see whether or not it measures up to what God expects of it in every era, it has to evaluate itself constantly and to bring itself up to date, as it were, to meet the challenges of the times.

The Second Vatican council reflected more deeply on the nature of the Church than any other Council in history. A few of the major themes taught by the Council are mentioned in this article so that we may better understand the renewal that is taking place within the church, especially with regard to the laity. It is in the context of these major themes of the Council that the Synod can be better understood.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

When the Council boldly called the Church 'The People of God', it recalled to our minds this traditional and rich Biblical reality. We are reminded of the continuity in God's plan which links the Church of today with the Israel of old; a plan which embraces the whole human race. We are conscious of responding together to this call of God. We realise that we have a common destiny; we are aware of being a pilgrim people called together in communion while moving toward that destiny. In the midst of human history the People of God is the subject of God's saving and forgiving action. As a result of this teaching the Church today must experience in all its members a greater sense of community, of communion and authentic fellowship.

Since the concept of the People of God includes all members of the Church, once this doctrine is fully accepted there will be equality for all, and the laity will be restored to their rightful place in the life of the Church and her mission to the world.

THE COMMON PRIESTHOOD

Under the same title, 'People of God', the Council emphasizes the common priesthood of all the faithful. EVERY member of the Church shares in the priesthood of Christ, exercising in different ways His saving action as Sanctifier, Prophet and King. The Council teaches that there is an essential difference between the common priesthood of all the members and the ministerial priesthood. This should not in any way lessen the dignity of the laity, since the ministerial priesthood is always at the service of the common priesthood.

Priestly ordination is a gift of the Holy Spirit to be used not merely for the benefit of the individual receiving it but for the building up of the entire community of the faithful.

The prophetic role of the laity is exercised through their life of faith. Wherever they are placed by Divine Providence, they believe deeply, and live this belief, preaching by word and deed.

Participation in the sanctifying mission of Christ is not to be reduced to a mere passive reception of the Sacraments or to a physical presence at the Eucharistic sacrifice. The laity, through their lives,

moved by the grace of the Holy Spirit, sanctify themselves and their milieu, thus adding to the sanctity of the Church itself. This is very evident in the life of the lay person in marriage, in the family and in other spheres of human activity. Their active participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice strengthens them to live this sacrifice every moment of their lives.

Finally, the sharing in the kingly mission of Christ is the constant effort of the lay person to restore the world to Christ. The laity must so order worldly realities in which they live to bring them under the reign of God. The consecration of the world is the specific task of the laity.

SIGN & SACRAMENT

Another major theme of the Council is its emphasis on the Church as Sign and Sacrament of the salvation of the world. This places the Church right in the midst of the world. It sees itself as a servant at the service of the world, preparing it for the coming of the Kingdom. It contains in itself the potential Kingdom, because as a sacrament, it not only externally portrays a sign but also makes present the reality hidden behind it. A sign always points toward something else, but a sacramental sign contains in itself the power to make present the reality it signifies. This sets the Church apart as a unique society. Various titles have been used to describe the Church in the past. The Vatican Council re-affirmed the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, wherein we have a diversity of roles but a unity of mission under one head; the Church is one organic union of persons. Scripture has another image used by Jesus Himself when He says that He is the vine and we the branches, thus describing the intimate personal relationship that must always exist between Christ and every follower of His for any effective apostolic activity.

Hence, combining the view of the People of God together with that of the Sign and Sacrament of the world and Mystical Body of Christ we are now given new insights into the nature of the Church and its mission. It cannot live apart from the people in this world. The same world has to be redeemed and brought to Christ. The call goes out to all nations for all times. In this way the Church is always in a state of mission, of continually preaching the Word of God and reconciling men to God by forgiving sins. As one organic unity it is a visible sign of God's forgiving love on earth.

VOCATION & MISSION

In this great community it is the laity that forms the majority, and therefore every lay person must first of all recognize and acknowledge an individual vocation and then see this mission in the light given to him by Christ. The recent working paper on the Synod made a very good distinction between vocation and mission because very often these terms are confused.

A vocation is a call and it is a personal one. It is a personal grace given to everyone who freely responds to Christ, and as such, it takes place within the community of the Church. As a consequence, the person so called after prayerful discernment recognizes or comes to the knowledge of a particular task assigned to him and this is called mission, a participating in the entire movement of the Church toward preparing the world for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Vocation then flows into mission both by personal discernment and by assignment to a particular role within the Christian community.

HIERARCHICAL COMMUNION

Like any society there must be order and organization but this must never kill the inner spirit of communion. The Church is a hierarchical communion where there are duly appointed leaders who are given special powers, not for themselves but for building up the community. These sacred powers are placed at the disposal of the entire People of God and, therefore, in the Church it is true to say that members who have the greatest power or the greatest authority are to be the servants of the rest. That is why the Popes continually call themselves the 'Servant of the Servants of God'. Jesus Christ took no end of trouble to teach us that authority in the Church is a grace and a charism, a gift to be used as a service for others. The one who is in authority must first serve and not claim to be served. In this way the balance is kept between the hierarchical element and that of communion. If we emphasize too much, as has been done in the past, the element of the hierarchy, then we diminish this feeling of fellowship and communion. In order to correct this wrong emphasis, the Vatican Council stated in no uncertain terms that the mission of the Church is to be carried out by every follower of Christ. To quote: "Bishops and Pastors must not presume that they are the only ones entrusted with the mission of the Church". Though the mission of the Church is for everyone, each person participates in this mission in a unique manner, that is according to the gifts given to him or her by the Holy Spirit.

THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS

Continuing its emphasis on communion, the Council teaches in no uncertain terms that all are called to holiness. Formerly, because of a wrong understanding about various states of life leading to perfection, holiness was considered the prerogative and monopoly of a few chosen ones, invariably priests and religious. The Council states that all are called to holiness, all are called to the perfect following of Christ, to be perfect as the Father is perfect. The following of Christ, therefore, is the same for everyone. There is only one source of holiness. The means of holiness are the same and the end of the call to that holiness is the same permanent union with Jesus Christ. However, the way in which this holiness is manifested in the world will depend on the particular state of life a person chooses or a particular state of life assigned to that person by a special gift of God. Holiness, therefore, will take on some specific characteristics depending on the way that person fulfills his or her mission within the People of God. This will then indicate the way in which Religious, priests and laity are distinguished. The holiness of the lay person will, therefore, have a strong bias or tendency towards secularity, since a lay person is called by Christ to be in the world and to make use of the things of this world in such a way as to bring them under the dominion of the Kingdom of God.

It is very important that we do not lose sight of this so-called secular dimension of the Church's mission. In fact, I would go as far as to say that if the Church is to be truly present in the world and to be at the service of the world then in some areas it can only do so through lay people.

This gives a very special character to lay holiness, although basically holiness is the same for everyone.



MINISTRIES

Another theme of the Council which has rendered a substantial contribution to this renewal is its emphasis on Ministries. The concept of Ministry has now been enlarged to include other forms of service. There are a few elements, however, which should be kept in mind when we talk of Ministries.

There are three stages in the assignment of Ministries understood in a broader sense.

1. a person should have a natural or acquired aptitude for a particular task
2. this gift must be recognized as such by those having legitimate authority within the community
3. those in authority must then give that person an official mandate or assignment on behalf of the community

In this manner the Ministries are co-ordinated and become part of the mission of the whole Church. To grant lay persons a share in these ministries is to restore to them the status and dignity that rightfully belong to them.

ASIA

What has been the impact on the laity in Asia of the Conciliar teachings since they were promulgated?

In Asia, events over the past few years have manifested an even greater awareness of the role of the laity in the mission of the Church. The Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) set up a special committee in 1982, and in 1987 this was elevated to the rank of an 'office', thus giving it a more permanent character. One meeting after another was held in various countries throughout the continent. In 1983, Hong Kong was the venue of a major conference on the laity in Asia that was organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity in Rome.

The Committee for the Laity of FABC organized a series of three meetings for specific regions. The first was for the Far East, or 'chopsticks' region: Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Macao, etc. In May 1986, another was held in Bangalore for Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. This was followed by the third which was held in the same year

at Singapore, for the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Burma.

These meetings, called the 'Bishops' Institute for the Lay Apostolate' (BILA), were meant primarily for the updating of the Bishops of ASIA on the Conciliar Doctrine of the Laity. They also suggested practical means for initiating training programmes for the laity. The BILA meetings were also unique occasions where all sectors of the People of God came together, lived together, and shared their experiences and plans for the future. One participant even remarked that such a unique experience could very well be a model for the Church of the future in Asia; a Church of hierarchical communion, where each one's importance is recognized and given due respect, with the assignment of proper roles and functions through approved ministries that have as their goal the building up of the Church and the extension of the Kingdom of God.

Throughout these meetings, the following themes were found to be most common:

1. All felt the need for adequate formation of the Laity. In fact, at the Hong Kong meeting the Holy Father in his message to the gathering said, "The adequate training of the laity must become a pastoral priority".

2. There is a need for a general catechesis for all, and a particular need for in-service training: that is, the laity should not be given a training programme on the pattern of that offered to seminarians but the training should take place within the milieu in which they are placed. The training will then be closely related to life. Existing groups of the lay apostolate must be updated and renovated in the spirit of the Conciliar Documents. The emergence of new groups will have to be discerned with pastoral care so that they can be integrated into the life and organization of the parish or diocese to avoid the danger of becoming "elitist".



In the BILA meetings held in Bangalore and Singapore, various MODELS of community living were presented, in an effort to realise in practice a Church of Communion, where leadership roles are defined, where everyone is called to participate in the mission of the Church.

Models from the Philippines and from the cities of South Asia, where Catholics were concentrated in considerable numbers, were patterned after Basic Ecclesial Communities composed of Catholics. In a number of parishes such groups were instrumental in reviving the entire parish, bringing about a closely-knit community where everyone has a role to play. Close links were also established with the diocesan pastoral councils. The sense of unity that prevailed was all the more remarkable since the parish was composed of a variety of different ethnic groups. On the other hand, in Indonesia there were examples of groups that were composed of persons of different religion, who were united in a common cause for the promotion of human dignity, justice, peace and development. This was a good example of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration in action.

Various models for training the laity were also presented, such as the one from Africa. The Lumko Institute offers a simplified form for training lay leaders that has been very effective among African communities. The volunteer training programme in Taiwan also deserves to be mentioned here as one that reaches out to the lay people who form the bulk of our communities. Both these movements indicate that training for the lay apostolate is not confined only to the so-called educated sectors of the laity, but is meant for everyone.

There is also a need for the formation of those lay persons whom one may term professionals - doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses and others. Till such time as the laity undertake responsibility for their own formation, the Bishops should provide skilled directors to help them become more effective apostles in and through their professions.

All voiced the need for making available, in a more simplified form, the teachings of the Council, especially its social doctrine. There is no doubt that a profound communication gap exists, and this must be bridged as soon as possible, if the Conciliar teaching is to reach the ordinary person.

The climax of all these meetings in Asia took place at the Plenary Session of the FABC in Tokyo in September, 1986. A number of bishops, priests and Religious, together with lay people, prayed and reflected on the vocation and mission of the laity in Asia. All those who attended

the Conference said that this was for them a unique experience. The lay persons said that they experienced a strong feeling of belonging to the Church and wished that all meetings took place in a similar way. The experience of living together, talking to each other as persons on an equal footing was very much the Church in real communion.

The final statement of the meeting in Tokyo highlighted various aspects of the role of the mission and vocation of the laity in Asia and it will be a Document to which we can return time and time again for inspiration and guidance.

Keeping in view all that has taken place in Asia, I venture to comment on the role of the laity in the face of the challenges in Asia.

The role of the lay person in the mission of the Church in Asia must take into account the realities of the Asian situation.

- a. Asia has been the birthplace of the great religions of the world, hence the lay person must be clear about what the Church expects of him or her in relation to them. We should ask ourselves some pertinent questions. Christianity has been encountering these great religions for three centuries, but what influence has it exerted on these religions? How far have the laity been mobilised to carry out this mission? I'm afraid the answer will be - very little! Dialogue at every level is an essential part of the mission of the Church, especially on this continent. Unfortunately up to now very few lay persons have been trained for this task. While many feel that this is a task only for the specialists, the recent Document from the Secretariat for Non-Christians on dialogue and mission has this to say:

Every follower of Christ, by reason of his human and Christian vocation, is called to live dialogue in his daily life, whether he finds himself in a majority situation or in that of a minority. He ought to bring the spirit of the Gospel into any environment in which he lives and works, that of family, social, education, artistic, economic, or political life. Dialogue thus finds its place in the great dynamism of the Church mission. (30)

Dialogue here is an essential component of the mission of the Church which is very complex. It is not a monopoly of priests and religious but the duty of every Christian.

In every situation, the whole Church is called to a dialogue of life with fellow-Christians of other churches, the billions of other religious believers and the members of various social groups. Since the laity live in a more direct and day-to-day contact with people of other faiths, they are the ones most called to this living dialogue, especially regarding common problems which effect the life of the community. (3.1.11)

- b. Closely connected with the movement toward dialogue is the concern of the Church in Asia for the evangelization of the various cultures. This continent has been blessed with a rich variety of cultures, all expressing the fruits of human wisdom carried down through the centuries in works of art, literature, dance, drama, etc. Today there is a great danger that the forces of secularisation may destroy the authentic values contained in the cultural heritage of Asia. I believe the Church has a role to play in preventing these truths from being lost forever.

The whole Church in Asia must make an effort to incorporate these values into its worship and into the lifestyles of its members. The local churches of Asia have much to contribute to the universal Church by utilizing Asian forms of prayer and ascetical practices. Spirituality in Asian countries will naturally manifest specific and distinctive characteristics according to the variety of cultural and religious traditions.

In this movement for the evangelization of cultures, the importance of integral human education cannot be minimized. The lay apostolate in this field will necessarily include an active presence in the universities and centres of research. The Church in Asia has done much in the field of primary and secondary education, but one may well ask what influence it wields in the universities and centres of research? No one can deny that the ideas and ideologies current in the universities have a tremendous influence not only on the youthful students, but also on the leaders of the various countries of Asia. The presence of the Church in our universities through dedicated lay persons, is an urgent contemporary need since Asia is a continent of youth.

- c. Asia is also a developing area where, with few exceptions, the benefits of progress have not yet reached the ordinary person. Poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, exploitation of women and

children, discrimination and all other forms of evil are still rampant on this continent. There is no doubt that the whole Church must read the signs of the times and initiate as well as participate in realistic plans for bringing about peace and justice. The Holy Father in his message to India has called upon the laity to work like leaven in the dough to improve its social, economic and political structures:

It is the duty of the laity to make God's goodness known in the world of temporal affairs, to work for the common good and to help build a society on the principles of Justice and Truth, Freedom and Love. (36.6)

While the whole Church must be involved in this work for community development and social justice, the laity have a special role to play:

The Church, in her service to the world, must count ever more on the contribution of the laity. The laity, in matters of assisting the poor, eradicating hunger and promoting human development, social reforms and peace, are in a special position to assume roles of service and leadership. (5.9)

In the Document on Christian Freedom and Liberation, the Conciliar teaching on the role of the laity in the world is repeated with an emphasis that the "distinction between the supernatural order of salvation and the temporal order of human life must be seen in the context of God's singular plan to recapitulate all things in Christ. In each of these spheres the lay person, who is at one and the same time a member of the Church and a citizen of his country, must allow himself to be constantly guided by his Christian conscience." (No. 80)

The Church has developed guidelines for a theology of education and of work but very little has been promulgated for action in the political field, and yet this sector is the most powerful one for bringing about changes that are necessary for authentic human progress and development. The lay person must enjoy in this area the maximum amount of autonomy and freedom of action. The leadership of the laity in this field must be pre-eminent and the role of the clergy must be more inspirational. The clergy must realise that the political community, like other societies, has its own laws and processes, hence it must enjoy legitimate autonomy. Very often it is only through the lay person that the Church is present in politics. Since Christians are in a minority

in most Asian countries, it would be inadvisable to expect them to form their own party or to work apart. They must join with other parties and work along with others. What guidelines is the Christian lay person to follow, or must he make his own?

The lay person should join that political party which upholds the dignity and integrity of the human person, the fundamental rights of the human being, and respect for human life at all stages.

Parties that are sectarian and exclusively communal should be avoided. In fact, I do not agree that any political party should use the word 'Christian' in Asia, since this would immediately classify it as communal. There is also a danger of identifying the action of the political party with the Christian Church. The lay person in the political field must be aware of the close relationship that exists between the Church and the political community. "He must be able to distinguish what his Christian conscience obliges him to do in his own name as a citizen, and what he does in the name of the Church." (G.S. 76, Vat. II - The Church in the Modern World)

Both spheres are mutually independent. It is not within the competence of the Church to state which political system is the best. This belongs to the realm of political science. The body-politic is free to use any system of government that respects the liberty and the dignity of human persons and works for the common good of individuals, families and other groups.

In decisions concerning political actions the lay person, informed by his Christian conscience, will do what he thinks best in that particular situation where the Church is present through him. If he is open to the promptings of the Spirit he will certainly be assisted by Divine Grace. Imbued with the Spirit of the Gospel, he must avoid the use of violence as a solution to problems. In this sphere he could make an outstanding contribution to political activity by having recourse to active non-violence inspired by evangelical love.

It is sad to note that the political arena in many Asian countries is tainted with corruption, unduly influenced by sectarian and religious motives and is heavily biased in favor of the ruling class. Marxism and other materialistic ideologies are also increasingly influencing political leaders. Another threat to unity and communal harmony comes from certain revivalist or fundamentalist groups, who have no other aim but to establish a regime of their own beliefs and traditions. Programmes for development, though meant in theory for all, seldom reach

the poor and the marginalized, whose tragic situation remains unchanged. There is an urgent need for the lay person to dedicate himself in a spirit of service to organizing the people at the grass-roots level, so that they become both the subjects and the beneficiaries of programmes meant for their development. People's power is the need of the day. Here the ordinary person is represented and here he plays an active role. Up to now it has been only those who are financially powerful who control political parties. The poor, who form the vast majority of the populace, take no part in the decision-making process which is supposed to be directed toward the common good. If one is to interpret the signs of the times realistically, then it can be stated that in Asia the need for the lay person to make the Church present in the political sphere is a moral imperative:

The need of the hour in Asia is for competent and principled lay people to enter into the realm of party politics and, from within, influence the philosophies, programmes and activities of political parties and personalities for the common good in the light of the Gospel. (FABC TOKYO - 3.1.6)

The influence of the Church in this field will depend primarily on the laity, and I am confident that they will be equal to the task.



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