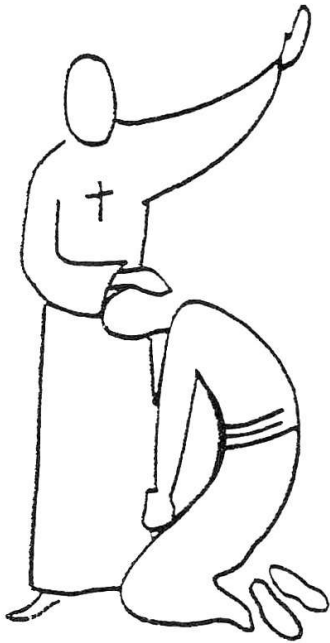


A NEW UNDERSTANDING

OF LAITY AND MISSION

IN THE CHURCH



by John Cioppa

Two of the most significant changes of understanding which came out of the Vatican Council were the definition of the Church as the People of God and the mission of the Church as the responsibility of all Christian faithful. In the Old Testament God spoke to the Jewish People, "I will set my dwelling among you...I will be your God and you will be my people." (Leviticus 26:12) In Vatican II, the Bishops spoke of the Church as a mystery above all else, a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God. They then went on to speak of the Church as the People of God. "God has, however willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness...All men and women are called to belong to the new People of God." (Vat. II, LG 9, 13)

THE LAITY IN HISTORY

In the early church there were no distinct groupings into laity and clerical, there were only Christians. The early disciples (faithful) formed themselves into communities in which they all felt equal, sharing gifts and even material possessions. (Acts; 2) The distinctions were of

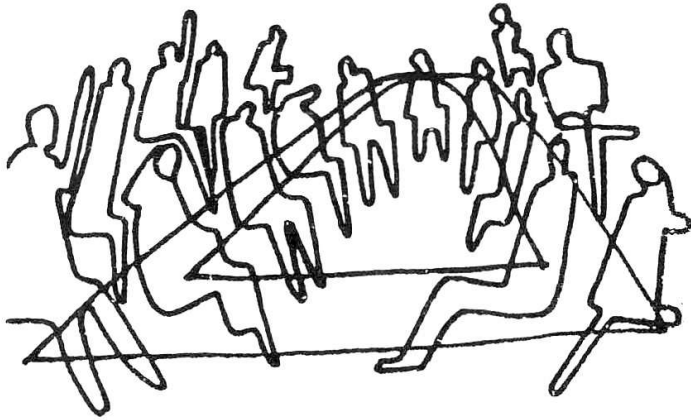
a pastoral or functional nature arising from their commitment to service in its many forms. The only true distinction was between the community of Christians as a community of love and Spirit opposed to the world of sin and evil. The distinction between lay people and clergy and the beginnings of the hierarchial structure as we know it, goes back to the time of Constantine when the differences between clergy as leaders and educated, and laity as simple uneducated folk (plebs) began. Community yielded to institution and charism yielded to dominance. The Middle Ages canonized these structures and reinforced the alienation between groups in the church. Gradually the distance between clergy and laity grew and resulted in an ecclesiology which stressed excessive concern for clergy and Religious, and marginalized the laity.

Originally perceived as a community of faithful by the early Christians, in later centuries the Church was seen first and foremost as an institution to which the Christian faithful belonged for the sake of certain spiritual benefits. It became common thinking that it was the clergy, priests and Religious who were the more important people in the Church, the full-time workers, who served the faithful. They provided the Sacraments, they performed spiritual and corporal works of mercy, ran schools and hospitals. The faithful "went to church" for whatever they needed. Consciously or unconsciously a class system developed and most administration and authority in the Church were in the hands of male clergy or Religious.

In the early part of this century this trend began to be reversed with the emergence of Catholic Action as an invitation to the laity to participate in the Apostolate of the hierarchy. By the middle of the century a new reality and a new understanding emerged with the biblical, liturgical, ecumenical and youth movements presaging the Christian call to all and the new definitions of Vatican II. In the time right before Vatican II despite tensions and ambiguity, lay people began to assume a more active and responsible role in the Church and the distinctions between clergy and laity were looked at more carefully. Vatican II itself and later the new Canon Law have attempted to describe and clarify this newly developing perspective.

THE LAITY IN VATICAN II

Vatican II described the Church as a people on pilgrimage in movement through history sharing in Christ's threefold mission as Prophet, Priest and King. In the Second draft of the Constitution on the



Church in 1963 there were four chapters, the second being "The Hierarchical Constitution of the Church" and the third, "The People of God and the Laity". This arrangement was debated by the Council Fathers and there was agreement that the third chapter should be divided and the part about the People of God put at the beginning of the Constitution, immediately after the description of the mystery of the Church. This new division was clearly indicative of the thinking of the

Fathers and their vision of the People of God inclusive of both hierarchy and laity, both sharing the essential mission of the universal Church--all working together by virtue of their belonging to the body of Christ.

In the understanding of Vatican II of the Church as the whole People of God--laity, Religious and clergy--a new perspective has emerged, emphasizing an equality of membership but with different roles and functions for each member. This new self-understanding of the Church highlights the whole community of Christian faithful as the focal point of membership and the framework for the integration of all ministries, leadership and various functions. It emphasizes the common history and call of each member and the dignity and responsibility of what it means to be Christian. Order, organization and hierarchy continue to be present in the Church and are essential elements; however they are re-ordered according to a new perspective. (L.G. 10-17; 32-33)

THE LAITY IN THE NEW CANON LAW

The New Code of Canon Law promulgated in 1983 is very clear on this point when it speaks of the People of God as the Christian faithful which includes everyone: hierarchy, Religious, lay people and clergy.

"The Christian faithful are those who inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through baptism, have been constituted as the people of God; for this reason, since they

have become sharers in Christ's priestly, prophetic and royal office in their own manner, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world, in accord with the conditions proper to each one."
(Canon 204)

In this description of who are the Christian faithful, there are several key elements. Baptism is foundational and through it we become incorporated into Christ and constituted into the People of God. Through baptism we are called to participate in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions that Christ continues to exercise in the world. We are also called to the mission that the people of God carry out as the Church of Christ, a mission God has given the Church to fulfill in this world until the end of time. The call to exercise the mission of the Church is a social responsibility and varies with each individual Christian.

The 1917 Code saw the Church made up of two fundamentally distinct and unequal groups--clergy and laity. What is significant is that after centuries of attempting to implement such a system, the magisterium at the Second Vatican Council rejected such institutional clericalism and sought to locate ministry within the People of God and the common condition of all the Christian faithful. There is, therefore, one chosen People of God: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:5) one hope and undivided charity.

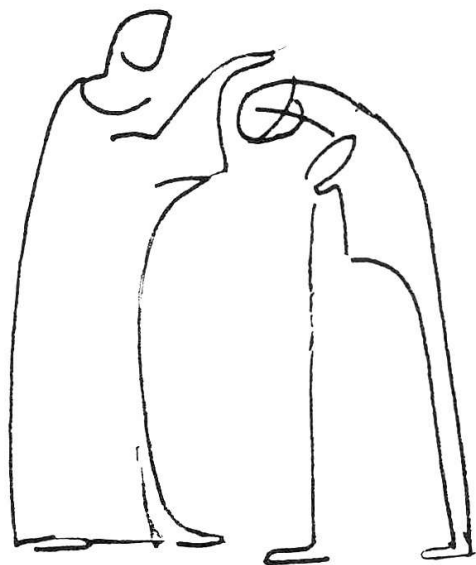
The new Code finds it difficult to define laity and almost apologetically has to define the term negatively as "non-clergy". Among the Christian faithful, Canon 202 distinguishes two groups: sacred ministers who are called clerics, and laity. The laity-clergy duality is by no means a convenient choice of terminology and has resulted in much confusion. In either group, the Code goes on to say, there are those who are specially consecrated to God through vows or other sacred bonds. Sacred ministers (clergy) are placed very squarely within the Christian faithful, i.e. the condition of being a member of the Christian faithful is common to both sacred ministers and the rest of the faithful. The definition of a lay person is practically identical with the definition of a Christian. All baptized are Christians, among whom some are clerics.

"In the Church not everyone marches along the same path, yet all are called to sanctity and have obtained an equal privilege of faith through the justice of God." (L.G. 32) Vatican II and the new Code are also both explicit in their teaching that there is one common call to

holiness or perfection for all, clergy and laity alike. (Canon 210 and L.G. 40) This is a reversal of an earlier tradition which suggested a higher kind of holiness for clergy and a lesser one for laity. (Etienne de Tournai: "Duo populi, duo ordines clericorum et laicorum, duo vitae spiritualis et carnalis") Some however may be urged to greater holiness not because of status, but because of their specific role or vocation: for example parents because of their responsibility to rear children, professed Religious as witnesses to sanctity and clergy as the dispensers of divine mysteries. (A.A. 3)

THE COMMON CALL TO MISSION

Again based on their baptismal dignity all Christian faithful participate actively in the communion and mission of the Church. (L.G. 32) The Council placed the action of Christ as central to the Church and as such all Christian faithful share both actively and passively in this



activity. The right and duty of lay persons to participate in the apostolate or mission of the church, for example, arise from their union with Christ and their baptismal commitment (A.A. 3) and are by no means a privilege or concession given by ecclesiastical authorities; nor are they just "helpers" of the clergy or invited to share in mission because of the dwindling number of priests. The foundation for such rights and duties lies deeper than any canon or ecclesiastical directive.

This is a universal obligation and call binding for all times and places and on all the faithful whether cleric, Religious or lay. It applies not only to church leaders, but to every disciple of the Lord. Pope Paul VI in Evangelii Nuntandi has a beautiful description of Church which indicates clearly the role of mission:

"Having been born consequently out of being sent, the Church in her turn is sent by Jesus. The Church remains in

the world when the Lord of Glory returns to the Father. She remains as a sign - simultaneously obscure and luminous - of a new presence of Jesus...She prolongs and continues him. And it is above all his mission and his condition of being an evangelizer that she is called upon to continue..." (E.N. #15)

As mentioned above, up until recently the principal subjects of Church activity were the "professionally trained" church people who assumed all of the major roles and functions in the Church including mission to non-Christians. Today with the shift of emphasis in the understanding of the Church from institution to mystery and from profession to the People of God, our perception of the essential role of all Christians in all aspects of church life has become clearer. Vatican II tells us that the whole Church is in mission and calls for the full participation of all Christians both Religious and lay in a variety of ministries. If we consider the Church as a community of Christian faithful in which the laity have full membership status, then they likewise participate completely and without reservation in the mission of Christ which is the mission of the whole Church. In a Church that is communion, all learn, all share, all teach. There are different ministries and hierarchial patterns, but structuring is done in a spirit of communion and collegiality rather than one of dominance or control.

MISSION IS BY ALL, TO ALL AND FOR ALL

Mission as the responsibility of all Christians (L.G. 9, 17, 33, 38 G.S. 11, 43, A.A. 2, 5) is aimed at the conversion of all, both at home within the borders of the local church and abroad in the entire universal Church. Normally the work of evangelization was considered in terms of missionary work to foreign territories. However, at Vatican II there were two senses to "mission" and "evangelization". One reflected the traditional meaning of bringing the gospel to areas where it was not yet known. A second sense of mission, inclusive of the narrower meaning but extended to the entire world, viewed all activity of the Church as in some sense missionary; the Church is missionary by nature (A.G. 2) and even traditionally Christian areas are ever in need of re-evangelization. In this sense the obligation of spreading the faith is imposed on every disciple of Christ, according to his ability. (E. N. 17-24)

Canon 211 states:

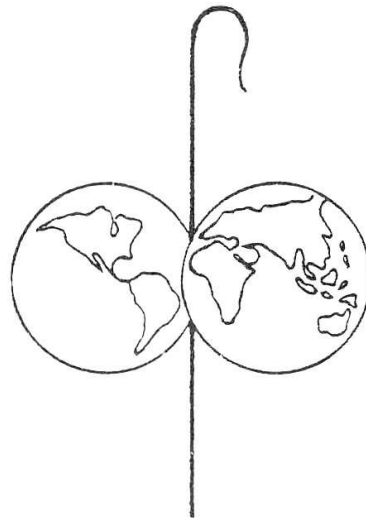
"All the Christian faithful have the duty and the right to work so that the divine message of salvation may increasingly reach the whole of humankind in every age and in every land."

This too is a foundational Canon and articulates clearly the right and obligation every Christian has to evangelize. According to the 1917 Code, which reflects the thinking of the time, the work of spreading the gospel was primarily the responsibility of the pope and bishops. Others participated in this work by designation from higher authority. The average Christian lay person had only a passive role of supporting the missionary endeavor particularly by prayer and financial offerings.

With the Church established in almost every country around the world, there is no such thing as "mission countries". All are mission countries--countries which send missionaries and which receive them. The distinction between sending and receiving churches is no longer relevant. Mission is no longer a specialization of high priority within the Church, it is an integral part of the life of every Christian. The Church does not have a mission; mission has Church. "The whole Church is missionary and the work of evangelization is a basic duty of the

People of God." (L.G. 35) Many countries which only a few years ago were being served by foreign missionaries are now sending missionaries to other countries themselves. Korea, Mexico, Brazil, The Philippines and Kenya, to name a few, are local churches which have established seminaries to train priests exclusively for overseas missionary work. In addition there are even more countries which have sent local lay missionaries to work in foreign lands. America alone has over 400 Catholic Lay Missioners serving in 35 different countries around the world.

Missiology which previously was considered a separate discipline is today being integrated into ecclesiology. Christian charity, social concerns, political involvement, and issues of justice and peace are not



seen as an "overflow" consequence of Christian values, but integral to Christian faith. The main concern, therefore is not the Church or ecclesiastical structures but rather the global mission of the Church, the reign of God and the obligation we all have to witness to the presence of God in history and in the world.

A CHALLENGE TO ALL CHRISTIANS

Having looked at the shift in the self-understanding of the Church as people of God and the responsibility of all Christian faithful for the mission of the Church, there are a number of practical concerns which flow from this new perspective:

1. How does one get people to accept a new vision of Church, many of whom (laity and clergy) still cling to an older model continuing to view clergy and Religious as the principal actors on the ecclesiastical stage? In some ways this rejection may be an escape, because to accept a new model, for laity, might mean greater involvement and more responsibility or, for clergy, less authority and less control.
2. How can the Christian faithful be a more effective presence in the world? This is the primary lay vocation--a call to live the faith in a secular world. The call to lay ministry is a more restrictive role and refers to a special function in the context of the Christian community.
3. How can the laity exercise their various charisms, gifts and ministries in greater harmony and co-responsibility with the clergy and hierarchy and vice versa? Our purpose is not to clericalize the laity nor to secularize the clergy. Each has a specific role and function.
4. How to distinguish more clearly the "ministry" of the non-ordained laity from the ordained ministry of the Priesthood? In many areas there is convergence, but there are also major distinctions.
5. How to better involve "the great silent multitude of laity" in a church which is now open to their participation?
6. How to develop within the church structures which provide for greater co-responsibility, subsidiarity and collegiality among all the Christian faithful?

7. How to clarify and promote the role of women in the church as equal members of the Christian faithful and equal sharers in the mission of the Church?
8. How to promote a "total ecclesiology" of the Church as the community of Christian faithful all with the same call, right and duty to evangelize?
9. How to use language and symbols which unite rather than divide? (i.e. promote the fundamental union between laity and clergy, male and female, lay spirituality and Christian spirituality)
10. How to develop a common spirituality for all Christian faithful: lay, cleric and Religious, equipping all to be true apostles in the world?

The understanding of the Church as the People of God and the key role that lay people have in its mission is really nothing new. Very likely St Paul himself, the great missionary of the early Church, was never ordained a priest. In the fifteenth century it was laymen who brought the Faith from China to Korea, and among the first martyrs on the American continent were a number of lay people. What has happened in the last 20 years since Vatican II is that the Church has turned the spotlight on itself sharpening its focus and identity. The Church today like so many other institutions is trying to return to its roots and a more authentic form as a communion of Faithful in which each Christian plays an active role. As this model becomes more commonly understood and accepted and begins to affect both structures and action, what will emerge is a truly vibrant and dynamic Church, one clearly recognized in the world as the sign and symbol of the Kingdom of God.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AA - Apostolicam Actuositatem (Apostolate of the Laity)
- AG - Ad Gentes (Missionary Activity)
- EN - Evangelii Nuntiandi (Evangelization in the Modern World - Paul VI - December 8, 1975)
- GS - Gadium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World)
- LG - Lumen Gentium (The Church)