

DOES THE LAITY HAVE A ROLE IN THE PROPHETIC MISSION OF THE CHURCH?

In his recent book, *The Council: Reform and Reunion*, Father Hans Küng has suggested that one of the areas which will be worthy of careful thought during the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council is a clarification of the role of the layman in the Church. To complete the formulation of the doctrine of the Church begun at the First Vatican Council, a *declaration of principle* on the significance of the layman in the Church would be most appropriate.¹

Justification for such a *declaration of principle* is implied in the statements of some of our leading Churchmen. Thus, just last year His Eminence, Cardinal Leger, Archbishop of Montreal declared:

The presence of laymen in secondary schools and classical colleges, far from being a sign of the advance of laicism, foretells a broadening of the apostolic strength of the Church and a more lively conscience in the midst of the Christian community, of the duty of all the baptized with respect to the civilization which it is building in view of leading men to the Kingdom of God.²

One of the real tasks of the Catholic theologian in exploring the office of the layman in the Church is to more clearly see and evaluate his participation in the ministry of the word. In particular I should like to stress the possibility of the layman as a teacher of Sacred Doctrine.

Briefly I may state my question thus. Since laymen have received

¹ H. Küng, *The Council: Reform and Reunion*. Sheed and Ward, New York, 1961, 183.

² M. Sauvage, F.S.C., *Catechese et Laicat*. Liget, Paris, 1962, xiii. (I have translated this statement into English. Cardinal Leger said this as a part of an address on June 17, 1961.) In this same book, 788 ff., the question is posed whether a layman may receive a positive mission from ecclesiastical authority which would render his teaching official and public. The affirmative opinion seems well grounded both theologically and canonically. The distinction between the power to consecrate (transmitted by priestly ordination), and that of teaching is of note. The layman does not have the first power. The second may be delegated to him even in a public way.

the Holy Spirit, their vocation is to have a part in all the functions of the Church. In this their relationship to the hierarchy is subordinate but not exceptional. With this accepted principle in mind we may go on to envision possibilities for future development.

The mission of the laity will involve them both in the transmission of Sacred Doctrine, and also the spiritual and corporal works of mercy ("doctrine in action").

They will contemplate the Christian mysteries and relate them to cultural and sociological changes. Thus here we look at the lay prophets not only as men who are supernaturally inspired, but also as those who have a profound knowledge of the mysteries. As this comprehension deepens they will seek to understand and promote wise liturgical reforms. Their participation in the apostolate will be imaginative, and not limited to established forms.

Now I shall concentrate in particular upon the prophetic aspect of the layman as a student and teacher of Sacred Doctrine. His Eminence, Cardinal Cushing of Boston, has put the question to us:

We cannot conclude in our wildest dreams that the whole teaching mission of the Church has been confided to priests and religious alone. . . . If we have to pay lay teachers to teach secular subjects, why cannot we pay well-trained lay teachers to teach at least the basic tools of the queen of the sciences, theology?³

First of all we should reflect on a basic theological principle in which the layman's teaching role is rooted. I refer to the royal priesthood of which St. Peter spoke. "You, however, are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people; that you may proclaim the perfection of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 2,9).

Indeed, Father Küng says:

The scriptural concept of the Body of Christ, of which *all* Christians are members, and of the royal priesthood, to which *all* Christians are called by baptism, would form the solid foundation for a specific theological declaration that the layman does not belong to the Church in some secondary sense but that he *is* the Church, not only as a passive, receptive

³ *Proceedings*, C.C.T.S.D., 7 (1961), 11.

object to be cared for, but as an active subject, taking the initiative, and co-responsible for the Church.⁴

Consequently here we have more evidence of what is implied in the teaching role of the laity since the holy people are to proclaim the praises of the Author of their vocation.

It is easy to see that in proclaiming these praises some laymen will undoubtedly become explicit collaborators in the teaching of Sacred Doctrine. Such an apostolate requires as indispensable an interior illumination by the Spirit of Christ. As is the case with sanctity, so here the illumination is not reserved to the clergy alone.

Laymen are able to participate in a notable way at various levels in the presentation of Sacred Doctrine. It is true that by their lives they have the "mission" of proclaiming the gospel before unbelievers. But even further they are encouraged actually to become participants in the teaching apostolate. We know of the desire of the Church concerning their participation in the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. History itself also clearly points out the importance of the role of the laymen at various levels in the ministry of the word.⁵

We do know that professors of ecclesiastical universities or of theological faculties receive a canonical mission for the teaching of the official doctrine of the Church. Laymen are however neither excluded from theological research nor the teaching of theology.⁶ According to canon 1360 §1 the professors in seminaries should be priests. But professors at Catholic universities and ecclesiastical faculties need not be priests.

It is indeed correct that the magisterial power of the Church belongs to the pope and the bishops. Those invested with such ecclesiastical authority are the depositories of the power to teach. Others, whether they be priests or laymen, collaborate in the measure of their competence and the extent to which they have been entrusted to guide the faithful (Can. 1327, 1328).

⁴ Küng, *op. cit.*, 183. (Italics are the author's.)

⁵ Cf. Sauvage, *op. cit.*, sections 1 and 3.

⁶ Discourse of His Holiness, Pope Pius XII, 2nd World Congress for the Lay Apostolate, October 5, 1957. *Major Documents on Catholic Action*. 3; Fides, Notre Dame, 1958, 9.

And in fact,

The *Osservatore Romano*, in two articles of September 15 and 16, 1954, criticized a certain form of "Lay Theology" which would no longer be submissive to the magisterium of the Church. There is only one theology in the Church, not two; but laymen can make a great contribution to the work of scientific theology.⁷

Thus we have on the one hand the genuine need for lay theologians to aid in building up "the Body of Christ." This is one fulfillment of their role as full-fledged members of the Church. In this exercise they will bring certain broadening insights which will enrich theology. Such a fulfillment is not only in terms of the needs of the day, but also because of the very nature of the Church.

On the other hand there needs to be a reasonable control over such teaching. This is provided for in the law of the Church. Yet a reasonable control does not mean suppression. Nor does it imply mere tolerance. Consequently ecclesiastical intervention should not be confined to refraining laymen's activities, but extend to encouraging them in such a manner that these laymen may work in a climate of confidence, and with a feeling of genuine collaboration with the hierarchy.

Let me elaborate this further. We as priests need laymen as collaborators in transmitting the "good news" of salvation. We need them specifically to teach Sacred Doctrine. We also, in a broader sense, should seek out and encourage the mediation of the laymen in the area of the temporal. In this mediation the laymen are not merely amplifying the voice of the hierarchy, but are to exercise their own responsibilities. Thus there is implied here a certain competence in temporal matters which only the laity possesses.

In conclusion, and in stressing the notion of lay competence, Father Augustin Leonard in his article, *The Freedom of the Laity*, has put the matter quite lucidly.

It is through the mediation of the layman, Christianly inspired, but not necessarily and officially acting as a Christian

⁷ G. Philips, *The Role of the Laity in the Church*. Fides, Notre Dame, 82, ft. 16.

(according to the distinction of Maritain) that redemption reaches and irradiates the profane world. Here the Christian adult has the full and entire responsibility for a work that he and he alone can perform. Only Christian married people can redeem human love, only Christian politicians can redeem politics, only Christian economists can redeem economics.⁸

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⁸ A. Leonard, O.P., "Freedom of the Laity," *College of New Rochelle News*, Fall 1960, 7.