

SEMINAR PAPER

THE LAITY IN THE CHURCH

If this is the century of the Church, then it is certainly the century of the laity in the Church also. While much objective data could be presented to show the truth of this statement, perhaps nothing is more revealing than the fact that it is a layman who is writing these words, committed to the whole people of God in all of its oneness as well as its "wonderful diversity,"¹ committed both to the hierarchical and ministerial priesthood as well as his special status as a layman.² In spite of some ecclesial self-criticism, perhaps these are more privileged times than we know, not only because we can acknowledge "that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life,"³ but also because all of God's people can come together in dialogue to share ideas and deepen insights into their distinctive functions within the Church.

This paper on the role of the laity will confine itself to three major topics. First, we will explore the historical context of the question of laity; secondly, we will present the foundations of a theological interpretation of what it means to be a lay person; thirdly, we will make a few practical suggestions about ways in which the lay person can be fully active within the Church, and as the Church's representative in the secular world.

I

Any effort to examine a theology of the laity must keep two factors in mind. First, the laity is not an abstract term, but a concrete one. A theology of the laity is a theology of concrete persons, of men and women of diverse cultures, backgrounds and occupations, living day to day both in the Church and in the world.⁴ Second, it is not a theology for all times, but for these times only, for this historical period and our immediate perception of it.

Both of these factors are best understood in the recognition that the locus of theology is the human condition.⁵ The theological enterprise

¹ *Lumen gentium* 32, in W. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).

² For an explanation of "status," see H. Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 1 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 235.

³ *Lumen gentium* 32. See also No. 40; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11.

⁴ See for example, *In Each Place, Towards a Fellowship of Local Churches Truly United* (Geneva: W.C.C., 1977), pp. 63-92; also E. G. Rupp, "The Age of the Reformation," in S. Neill and H.-R. Weber, eds., *The Layman Christian History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), p. 137.

⁵ See S. J. Kilian, *Theological Models for the Parish* (New York: Alba House, 1977), pp. 40-42.

must be concrete and historical, that is, it must have as its starting point the specific milieu in which a person lives and works. God's invitation to all people to share in his divine life took place in and through the concrete condition of Jesus' human life.⁶ Furthermore, theology must be historical, that is, as Schoonenberg reminds us, it can exist only in time, not in eternity. Theologians who thought they could create an eternal theology were just as historically conditioned as everyone else by their own misconceptions of history.⁷ Perhaps the most significant theological change of this twentieth century has been the awareness of the concreteness and historicity of the Church's theology.⁸

Thus, a theology of the laity can be understood only in light of the historical development of the laity in the Church. The concrete factors of today, especially socio-political and cultural forces, have made such a theology of the laity prominent, intelligible through experience, and open to our creative imagination. I can give you no detailed outline of the history of the laity here, but certain patterns have emerged which shed light on the current situation.

Every statement about the history of the laity presupposes a certain ecclesiology. If we follow Congar's classical approach, the Church in its fullest mystery is a union of two elements: it is a fellowship of persons in Christ and the totality of means to that fellowship; it is community and institution, life and structure; structure is empty without life and life needs structures as an integrating principle.⁹ Regardless of the distortions of these two elements in the development of the Church's life—and this is the fascinating and sometimes tragic substance of the history of ecclesiology¹⁰—they form an intimate and inseparable unity. The great achievement of *Lumen gentium* was precisely the affirmation of this unity: the wonderful diversity of the Church, the hierarchy, clergy, laity, religious, each with their own place and responsibility, all called to holiness as the People of God made one in mystery with the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹¹

Such a unity is rooted in the Church's foundation in the act of God in Christ. All were called to the Kingdom and consecrated a royal priesthood, a chosen people (see 1 Pet 2:9-14). While there was never a period in the Church of an undifferentiated charismatic community, there is no New Testament vocabulary to express the distinction of clergy and laity.¹² During the first few generations, all were filled with the same

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷ See P. Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1965), p. 192.

⁸ *Gaudium et spes* 11; see also G. Baum's "focus of the Gospel," in *The Credibility of the Church Today* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), pp. 170-76; also "method of correlation," in Tillich's *Systematic Theology I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

⁹ Y. Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1965), p. 114, p. 263.

¹⁰ See Congar, *Lay People*, pp. 28-58; also the bibliography in H. Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 6.

¹¹ *Lumen gentium* 11.

¹² Congar, *Lay People*, pp. 4-5; for *laikos*, see I. de la Potterie, "L'origine et le sens primitif du mot 'laïc'," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 80 (1958), 849.

eschatological expectation. The real distinction was not so much between clergy and laity, though even in the absence of terminology such theological distinctions were never denied,¹³ but rather between those called to the Kingdom and those not, between the holy people of God and the unredeemed world.¹⁴ "Laity" were hardly considered "of the world" as they are today. Lay persons were active in the early Church in liturgy and sacraments and participated with presbyters and bishops in the corporate discipline of the Church. They shared in evangelizing and the teaching of the faith and in the service of the whole community.¹⁵

The Church of the first few centuries was closely bound together as a rejected minority. By the middle of the third century, with the influx of many nominal Christians, the bond of unity was no longer the eschatological hope but sacraments administered by the clergy. The understanding of the Church changed as it took on greater temporal form; greater distinctions were made between those willing to live and die as martyrs and those content to live by minimal gospel precepts.¹⁶ The peace of Constantine made these changes all the more significant. The earlier distinction between the eschatological community, united in different functions, and the unredeemed world became, with the advent of a world which was now Christian, a distinction within the Church itself. The *Apostolic Constitutions* early in the fourth century defined the role of the laity with more precision, putting the bishop more clearly in charge, and separating the clergy and the laity in worship. Lay persons were gradually eased out of positions of financial authority in the Church in the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁷ Important issues were no longer decided upon, as Cyprian had suggested, "with the consent of the whole people."¹⁸ Pope Leo banned the laity from preaching, and Pope Gregory replaced all of his lay servants with clerics or monks.¹⁹

The fourth century marks the end of significant lay influence in the Church. While classical education survived, the laity remained educated and conversant in theological matters. Gregory of Nazianzus could write in 379: "If in this city, you ask anyone for change, he will discuss with you whether the Son is begotten or unbegotten. If you ask about the quality of bread, you will receive the answer that 'the Father is greater, the Son less.'"²⁰ This "Indian summer of the Ancient World" soon passed. After the fourth century, there were no lay theologians for

¹³G. H. Williams, "The Ancient Church," in *The Layman in Christian History*, p. 32.

¹⁴See *ibid.*, pp. 32-53, for documentation.

¹⁵E. Schillebeeckx, *The Mission of the Church* (New York: Seabury, 1973), pp. 117-18.

¹⁶Williams, p. 29; W. Frend, "The Church of the Roman Empire," in *The Layman in Christian History*, p. 58.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁸Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 59, 61.

²⁰Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 70. See p. 82, n. 15, quoting a seventh-century work that monasticism arose "from men's desires to become martyrs in will, that they might not miss the glory of them that were made perfect by blood."

1000 years. Martyrdom, which had been the lay person's path to salvation prior to 313, was no longer possible. Even martyrs and their relics, which were powerful symbols for the early Church, were now held to have no merit until duly approved by ecclesiastical authority.²¹ The laity, in search of new spiritual outlets, turned to monasticism. In the beginning it was their way of rejecting a bourgeois Christianity, especially the worldliness of the ecclesiastical order, and the traditional classical education. Serious-minded laity, often the well-educated aristocratic class, turned to a strong ascetical life, neglecting their responsibilities to society for the benefit of their own souls. Such asceticism was a symptom of a declining culture. Pessimism about life and the world pervaded the fifth century. As one scholar has put it: "The monks were the successors of the martyrs."²² The Ancient World was melting into the Dark Ages.

Monasticism, began as a lay movement distinct from the clergy, gradually became clerical in practice. Some monks were ordained priests while some priests embraced monastic spirituality.²³ The three-fold distinction between *clericus*, *monachus*, and *laicus* gradually became a more basic distinction between men of religion (the clergy and the monks), and men of the world (the laity).²⁴ Schillebeeckx has summed it up nicely: "It was in this way that the disparaging attitude toward Christians in the world came about and that the original biblical antithesis between church and world gradually changed into an antithesis between clergy and Christian lay people who remained 'in the world' "²⁵ This is the basic distinction which characterizes the definition of lay people at Vatican II, and which is essential for our subsequent theological considerations.

From this point on, even greater generalizations cannot be avoided. The Church from the beginning of the Dark Ages to the Reformation is a millennium of complex history, of growth and decline, of change and stagnation, of contrasts of all sorts. With reference to the laity's place, three aspects are worth considering.

(1) With the end of the Empire, the cultural power of education became the exclusive province of the Church. *Clericus* became synonymous with "literate" and *laicus* "illiterate." The antithesis between laity and clergy was sharpened; the laity were the ignorant of the Church and almost all of knowledge of the laity in this period comes through the exclusive eyes of the clergy. Laity became more and more isolated not only by language, since Latin was no longer the common language, but also by intellectual discipline. As one historian puts it: "The view of the Church as the community of the faithful was not completely lost sight of by the theologians, but in the government of the

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²³ Congar, *Lay People*, p. 6; see his discussion on the relationship between monk and cleric, pp. 6-9.

²⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Mission of the Church*, p. 118.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

Church and in everyday speech, the Church was equivalent to the clerical order. The clergy were the shepherds, the laity sheep."²⁶

The laity were excluded from greater participation in the life of the Church not because they were heretics and barbarians, not because there was a conspiracy on the part of the clergy, not because the official Church was corrupt and worldly, as it sometimes was. What excluded them was the Church's failure to find "a way to develop, encourage and educate the enthusiasm it could inspire . . . it failed to instruct the laity, and took away from the layman all initiative and almost every opportunity to use his head in the Church's service."²⁷

(2) The distinction between clergy and laity was not only one of education but also in the understanding of Christian life and Christian perfection, an understanding which was, of course, exclusively the clergy's. For Gratian, the lay condition is a concession to human weakness. The Bull of Urban II in 1092 advocates this view: "From the beginning the Church has offered two kinds of life to her children: one to help the insufficiency of the weak, another to perfect the goodness of the strong. . . ." ²⁸ There was a *duo genera Christianorum*; a true Christian, consistent with the apostolic life, left the world for a life of continence. Life in the world, including marriage and a family, was considered a compromise.²⁹ Such a view, so anti-worldly to the modern mind, indeed opposed to the spirit of the Gospels themselves, is hardly defensible; yet it must be understood not only through our eyes but in the context of the whole social fabric which gave it shape and permitted it to flourish.

(3) Political and economic factors of enormous complexity further enhanced the distinction between clergy and laity.³⁰ The only laymen who could confront the power of the clergy were the lay rulers, the emperor, the monarchs and the princes. The antithesis between clergy and laity took on a much narrower and insidious form, between clerical political power and lay political power. This is typified in the struggle between King Philip the Fair and Pope Boniface VIII, representatives of the *imperium* and *sacerdotium* in conflict with each other. The pope states that the "Laity has always been hostile to the clergy; antiquity teaches us this and it is only too clear in our times."³¹ His attitude of estrangement reflects the historical conditions of the period, while revealing the Church's self-understanding which would have profound ecclesiological effects on the following centuries.³² The Church, in an effort to defend her identity against a variety of lay heresies, continued to define herself in terms of her hierarchical and institutional form. This, unfortunately, spawned a backlash of more anti-clericalism,

²⁶ Quoted in C. Brooke, "The Church of the Middle Ages," in *The Layman in Christian History*, p. 113.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²⁸ Quoted in Congar, *Lay People*, p. 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ R. W. Southern, "The Church of the Dark Ages," in *The Layman in Christian History*, pp. 97-102.

³¹ Schillebeeckx, *Mission of the Church*, p. 31.

³² See Congar, *Lay People*, pp. 28-54.

spiritualism and later conciliarism from the twelfth century through the period of the Reformation.³³

The twelfth century, it may be argued, is a crucial one for the change in attitudes which led to the modern world.³⁴ An awakening of the laity began to take place. There was growing antagonism to the state-like nature of the official Church, an increase of material wealth from the expansion of the mercantile class, contact with new ideas through Islam and the rediscovery of classical antiquity and, finally, a growth in lay education.³⁵ A new understanding of the world, a new epistemology, was being born. What we call the medieval mind was slowly being transformed into a modern understanding of the universe. It would take centuries, of course: Protestantism, with a fresh sense of the individual's relationship to God, would come first; science, industrialization, the enlightenment, democracy, technology and urbanization, would all follow. No longer would the Church be the uncontested center of life. Life would have a value in and of itself, a worldly or secular value. This transformation from the medieval to the modern world was not brought about by the Church, its clergy or monks, but by the laity, those who were living in the world who wished to discover the significance of their lives. As Congar puts it:

During the middle ages the ecclesiastical institution included and formed society; but from the beginning of the fourteenth century society began slowly to assert its independence. First to cut loose were rulers and their politics, then various activities of urban life and welfare, then thought and the sciences, then morality and spirituality itself, finally, and much more radically, the common consciousness of the people in their daily life of sorrows, joys, hopes. . . .³⁶

Much more could be said about the laity in the Church since the Reformation. In addition to the Catholic tradition, there is the complex history of the laity in the Protestant churches.³⁷ What we have said, however, will serve as a foundation for the factors which have brought a theology of the laity into prominence in our own period. These factors include (1) a more comprehensive understanding of the mystery of the Church; (2) a more positive sense of the secular world and the mission of the Church within it; (3) new cultural and social conditions which significantly raised the educational level of the lay Christian.

(1) Since the beginning of formal ecclesiologies in the fourteenth century, there has been a decided emphasis placed on the Church as a visible and hierarchical society. This situation was dictated by the necessity of defending the visible Church against a variety of antagonists, including Gallicanism, Conciliarism, Protestantism, Jan-

³³ Brooke, *op. cit.*, p. 118. He discerns three opinions among the heretics: a dualism, an apocalypticism and a revivalism which anticipated many of the doctrines of the Reformers.

³⁴ Congar, *Lay People*, p. 411.

³⁵ Brooke, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-133.

³⁶ Congar, *Lay People*, p. 47. See S. Neill, "Introduction," in *The Layman in Christian History*, pp. 14-22.

³⁷ See *The Layman in Christian History*, chapters 5-10.

senism, Rationalism and Marxism.³⁸ The Counter-Reformation image of the Church was that of a society organized like a state in a pyramid structure, with the papacy at the top and curial authority just beneath it. This society was less a community given life by the Spirit and more "an organization where Christ intervened at its origin as the founder, and the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of its authority."³⁹ Treatises on the Church in the post-Tridentine period were usually vindications of the Church as the perfect society, or theological support for ecclesiastical authority and papal primacy. In the nineteenth century, ecclesiology, in Congar's famous phrase, was no more than "hierarchology."⁴⁰ Such a theological context was hardly suitable for a theology of the laity. As Congar states:

Thus it was that of the Church's two aspects which Catholic tradition requires to be held together—that in which the Church is an institution that precedes and makes its members, and that in which she is the community made by its members—the theological treatises practically ignored that one according to which a role of the laity could be *a priori* conceivable.⁴¹

With the Second Vatican Council, the Church dramatically changed her own ecclesial self-awareness. She gave up the image of herself as a monolithic institution of salvation and, in the light of her eschatological destiny, redefined her nature as the biblical-historical People of God and sacrament of the world's salvation.⁴² The Church was once again a deep, rich and abundant mystery, both the life of grace and faith among people and the structure which mediates that saving grace in human history. In the context of the Church as the People of God, a more particular and proper theological understanding of the laity would be not only desirable but essential. Thus the conciliar teaching must be the point of departure for any interpretation of the laity's role today.

(2) The Second Vatican Council renewed the Church not only *ad intra* but also in its relation to the world. In the conciliar documents a new and far more positive understanding of the world was affirmed. The one hundred years between Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World was a century of enormous change, of startling advances in science and technology, of shattering social and military conflicts, of a wholly new order of knowledge and world of human experience. Whatever vestiges of a late medieval and Renaissance attitude remained in the Church were dissolved in the World Wars. In redefining her nature, the Church had to do so in the face of a fundamentally different, more independent, more challenging world than she had ever known before. The boundaries

³⁸ See footnote 32.

³⁹ Y. Congar, *L'Église du Saint Augustin à l'époque moderne* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1970), pp. 382-83.

⁴⁰ Congar, *Lay People*, p. 47.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² For background on the change of image in *Lumen gentium*, see R. McBrien, *Church: The Continuing Quest* (New York: Newman, 1970), pp. 31-35; Y. Congar, ed., *L'Église de Vatican II* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1967), pp. 35-218; Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary*, pp. 105-37.

between Church and world were no longer clear and distinct; the sharp antithesis between them which had prevailed for centuries was over. The Council did not shirk its responsibilities. Describing its mission as "supremely human," the Church stated that "it will be increasingly clear that the People of God and the human race in whose midst it lives render service to each other." A new relationship to the world was affirmed: "... the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. . . . We must therefore recognize the world in which we live, its expectations and its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics."⁴³

Because the world had acquired a validity of its own independent of the Church, because life had become secular in every aspect, the laity in the Church returned to prominence. Perhaps it is a cynical characterization, but one could say that in the Middle Ages when the world, distinct from the Church, was of little value, so, too, were the laity who lived "in the world." The Church began to take the laity quite seriously only when human beings and the world itself discovered the value of the world constituted precisely as world, as lay or secular.⁴⁴ This process took place, or rather the Church acknowledged it as taking place, in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. More positively, the Church has become aware that it can reach out to the world with the message of the Gospels in a unique and meaningful way through the laity. It is, after all, the laity who live in the world, who permeate every aspect of culture and society as husbands and wives, craftsmen, workers, members of professions—all those areas which by definition the hierarchy and clergy cannot directly touch. This awareness inspired Pius XI to begin Catholic Action, "the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy" after World War I.⁴⁵ It is precisely this understanding of the positive aspect of the world, a world in need of the gospel message, that has helped to restore the laity to their proper place as part of the Church's mystery.⁴⁶

(3) If we are to take seriously the idea that the human condition is the locus of theology, then one aspect of the current situation that needs to be singled out is the startling improvement in the educational level of the laity. We are not speaking here of the apostasy of the educated layman of the eighteenth century.⁴⁷ No one can deny that for centuries the tendency has been for educated laity to leave the *corpus Christianum*. Often they tragically confused their attacks upon the distortions in church structures or privileges granted the higher clergy with the Christian message itself. There were, at the same time, a great number of well-educated lay persons who remained loyal to the Church and ren-

⁴³ *Gaudium et spes* 4.

⁴⁴ Schillebeeckx, *Mission of the Church*, p. 121.

⁴⁵ See Congar, *Lay People*, pp. 362-99. Note that Pius XII, fearing misinterpretation, changed "participation" to "cooperation."

⁴⁶ H.-R. Weber, "The Rediscovery of the Laity in the Ecumenical Movement," in *The Layman in Christian History*, pp. 377-78.

⁴⁷ J. Grootaers, "The Roman Catholic Church," in *The Layman in Christian History*, p. 311.

dered great service to Christian life and spread the gospel message.⁴⁸ A much more recent phenomenon, however, is the opportunity for *all* laymen and laywomen to be well educated, and not just a select few.

This is especially true in the American Catholic experience.⁴⁹ Catholic immigrant Americans worked hard for a place in American society, seldom questioning the authority or the teachings of the hierarchy and clergy. If the clergy were paternalistic—and it was almost always a benevolent paternalism—it was because the situation required it, and even more so, the laity demanded it.⁵⁰

With the spread of education and the ease of transportation and communication, this situation has dramatically changed. The sheepfold of today is comprised of intelligent, individualistic, highly competent, and intensely questioning men and women. The Church is no longer faced with only a question of what to do with educated laity who have left the Church; she must now face the question of the intelligent laymen and laywomen who are very much a part of the Church and want to deepen their commitment to her life and mission. One of the mistakes of Vatican II was to underestimate the interest and capacity of the average lay person to deepen his/her theological understanding of events. As Congar has put it: "The Vatican II reform was a reform made from above—a fairly unusual phenomenon—which was not prepared from below."⁵¹ This "problem" of an educated laity in the Church which must, in terms of scope, be unique in the Church's history, is at the same time one of the Church's gigantic strengths. It suggests much greater equality and solidarity in the movement towards God's Kingdom of all people.⁵²

II

In this section, we will examine the nature of the laity in a more systematic fashion. Our historical and contextual background has already provided some insights into the significant features of such an examination. The substance will be found in the relevant passages on the laity at the Second Vatican Council as well as the significant theological work on the laity that preceded the Council. Two preliminary ideas should be kept in mind. First, no Council has ever considered the laity an important enough subject for discussion and debate before. Vatican II is thus a significant breakthrough in understanding the laity as an intrinsic part of the Church. Secondly, we ought not to look for a theological

⁴⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 316-28, for example.

⁴⁹ See J. T. Ellis, *American Catholicism* (New York: Image Books, 1965); J. Cogley, *Catholic America* (New York: Image Books, 1974).

⁵⁰ T. O. Wedel, "A Response," in *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 522.

⁵¹ Y. Congar, quoted in R. McBrien, *The Remaking of the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 68.

⁵² If I may be permitted a personal example: In teaching a recent adult education course, I was amazed at the number of interested people, the diversity of the backgrounds, and the level of their education; included in the class was an internist and a woman attorney for a labor union. It suggests that educated laity also want to be educated theologically.

definition of a lay person at the Council.⁵³ It marked the end of an older era in the Church's understanding of the laity, but only the beginning of further theological speculation and development.

This section will be divided according to the typological definition of the laity in the Constitution on the Church. Two special questions will be examined: (1) the manner in which the laity participate in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ, and (2) the understanding of the mission of the lay Christian in the secular world.

(1) The Council did not give a positive theological definition of the laity, but rather a description and an outline of their functions. There are three essential elements of this description in *Lumen gentium*: (1) in a negative sense, the laity is "understood to mean all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those in a religious state sanctioned by the Church."⁵⁴ The lay person is thus *not* ordained as a bishop, priest or deacon nor consecrated to religious life by vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The laity are not clerics, religious or religious clerics.⁵⁵ (2) In a positive sense, the laity are the "faithful" who are "by baptism made one body with Christ and are established among the People of God. They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ." (3) In a positive light again, what distinguishes the laity from others is "a secular quality." The greater part of article 31 of *Lumen gentium* discusses this particular quality, clarifying not ontologically but phenomenologically what "in their own way" means:

But the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called by God... for the sanctification of the world from within, in the manner of leaven. . . . The layman is closely involved in temporal affairs of every sort. It is therefore his special task to illumine and organize these affairs in such a way that they may always start out, develop, and persist according to Christ's mind and to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer.⁵⁶

Each of these essential elements of the laity presents a problem. The first element, their exclusion from orders and/or religious life, defines the laity by what they are not, not what they are. The second element, their being made one with Christ by baptism, positively defines the laity but only in a generic sense; what defines the laity also defines the clergy and religious since *all* are baptized, one with Christ and established as the People of God.⁵⁷ The third element, the secular quality of the laity which distinguishes them from clergy and religious, fails to offer a positive definition but merely specifies a function. What pertains

⁵³See Schillebeeckx, *Mission of the Church*, p. 125, for ambivalence on the laity in some documents.

⁵⁴*Lumen gentium* 31. See A. Grillmeier in *Commentary*, pp.231-52.

⁵⁵B. Kloppenburg, *The Ecclesiology of Vatican II* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974), p. 313; he employs the terms negative, generic positive, specific and functional.

⁵⁶*Lumen gentium*, 31.

⁵⁷See note 163 in *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 57.

to the laity does so by reason of "situation and mission." This function, though "proper and special" to lay Christians, is hardly exclusive since the Council also states that "those in Holy Orders can at times engage in secular activities, and even have a secular profession."⁵⁸ We are left not with an ontological definition of a lay person but simply a difference in function; what is ontologically true of the laity is equally true of all Christians. We must agree with the conclusion that "no one can cite this text in support of the assertion that the laity form a class in the sense of having a particular standing in life or a particular way of life. . . ."⁵⁹ Congar concludes from all of this: "To be quite frank, . . . it is very difficult to define the laity positively, perhaps even impossible."⁶⁰

This inability of the Council to give a positive theological definition of the laity does have positive aspects. It is actually an emphatic statement about the unity of the Church which the Council discusses at the beginning of the chapter on the laity: "Everything which has been said so far concerning the People of God applies equally to the laity, religious and clergy,"⁶¹ Christians cannot be divided into two groups, clergy and laity. The Council states "the chosen People of God is one: 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (Eph 4:5). They have the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection. They possess in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity. . . ."⁶² The Council continues: ". . . It is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity."⁶³ What is truly profound in these words are their ecclesiological implications. The Church has moved not simply from a description of herself in primarily hierarchical and priestly terms to an acceptance of the laity and an explanation, in terms of the clergy, of their place and mission. She has done more than just "make room" for lay people—she has made them an intrinsic part of her life and mystery. The Church had redefined herself as a unity of people, God's own people. All persons are ontologically one by being one in Christ. They are distinguished by their functions, service and ministry; the terms "clergy" and "laity" describe this difference of ministries.

Thus, and this is our second point, the most important statement about the laity made by the Council was not about the laity *as such*. Rather, it embraced the whole Church, the entire people of God. The principle of distinction in ministry derives from the principle of unity in being: "wonderful diversity," understood in itself, is a diversity of gifts and ministries. From an ontological viewpoint, such diversity is rooted

⁵⁸ *Lumen gentium*, 31.

⁵⁹ Grillmeier, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

⁶⁰ Y. Congar, "The Laity," in J. Miller, ed., *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 241. It is most interesting to note that the man who has made the most exhaustive effort to define the laity theologically should come to this conclusion. He states of such a definition: "I tried to do it in my book [*Lay People in the Church*], but in a rather descriptive way from an anthropological point of view."

⁶¹ *Lumen gentium* 30.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 40.

in the mystery of the oneness and equality of Christ's body. One commentator has summarized this mysterious unity in the following manner:

Underlying all these differences is a fundamental unity which springs from the fact that all Christians are incorporated into the one body of Christ through their common baptism. The immediate effect of this fundamental unity is that there is a basic equality among all Christians. All Christians are basically equal because they are all reborn as children of God through the same baptism. . . . The basic equality is prior to any difference of office and power within the Church. . . . The diversity of functions within the Church is itself a unifying force in that it aims at bringing the faithful together and building up the Church as a whole.⁶⁴

This "ontological unity" of Christians implies that clergy and laity alike, share in the three-fold office of Christ as priest, prophet and king.⁶⁵ How does this priesthood of the faithful or the common priesthood by virtue of baptism and confirmation differ from the hierarchical or ministerial priesthood? In what way does the laity share in the hierarchy and ministry in the prophetic office of teaching and bearing witness to the faith? Is there a common prophetic office, an ontological, universal responsibility for every Christian prior to the distinction of clergy and laity? With reference to the kingly office of Christ is there a universal participation in its royal privileges and responsibilities? The answers to these questions require a detailed analysis of Christ's three offices and the unique roles of hierarchy and laity in fulfilling each office. No study in this area surpasses Congar's *Lay People in the Church*. For our limited purpose of clarifying the laity's role, the following reflections on the priestly office may prove sufficient.

First, two facts from the conciliar documents are clear: all persons baptized "by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit are consecrated into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood." At the same time, a distinction must be drawn between the common priesthood and hierarchical priesthood, a distinction of "essence" and not only of "degree." The hierarchical and common priesthoods, declares the Council, are interrelated and "each in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ."⁶⁶ Of the members of this priesthood, the council Fathers write:

Incorporated into Christ's mystical Body through baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate of the Lord himself. They are consecrated into a royal priesthood and a holy people, in order that they offer spiritual sacrifices through everything they do, and may witness to Christ throughout the world.⁶⁷

To clarify how there can be one priesthood of Christ which contains within itself a qualitatively different ministerial priesthood, in other words, to explain how the laity can understand the richness of their own

⁶⁴L. Ryan, "The Laity," in K. McNamara, ed., *Vatican II: The Constitution on the Church* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1968), p. 244.

⁶⁵*Apostolicam actuositatem* 3, 10.

⁶⁶*Lumen gentium* 10.

⁶⁷*Apostolicam actuositatem* 3.

priesthood as part of the common priesthood of the faithful while living in cooperation and submission to the hierarchy, it is necessary to explore the idea of priesthood more fully. It is wise to note Congar's warning at this point. Too many modern writers do what the Fathers did not do—consider the priesthood of the faithful in reference to and by comparison with the priesthood of the hierarchical ministers.⁶⁸

What then comprises the essence of priesthood? Congar suggests that it is "the quality which enables a man to come before God to gain his grace, and therefore fellowship with him, by offering up a sacrifice acceptable to him."⁶⁹ In the history of religions, the content of the sacrifice was as varied as reality itself. The priest sacrificed in the name of others; some objective matter was used by a person in a ritual in which the matter was consumed or given up, representing an inner transformation of the self in an effort to win God's favor. All sacrifice was sacramental, thus pointing to a reality beyond itself while participating in the reality it pointed out.⁷⁰ In traditional terminology, this was the *res et sacramentum*, the union of the objective matter of the sacrifice (the *sacramentum tantum*) and the reality, always in some sense transcendent and eschatological, which the sacrifice intended to effect (the *res tantum*).

Regardless of the objective matter of the sacrifice, what defined the sacrifice in each case was the "preference of something before the self" as the price of a right relationship to God.⁷¹ Something had to be chosen in place of the self, consumed or given up as a symbol of the self's willingness to surrender itself to God. Ideally, such surrender would completely fulfil the self since total turning to God would realize the self's highest good. Sacrifice in practice, however, is painful; the self, afflicted with a profound ambivalence, is unwilling to give itself up without getting something in return. A centeredness in one's self, classically called *hybris*, and the desire to draw all things into one's self, or concupiscence,⁷² constitute the two-fold essence of sin.

Thus, sacrifice, while identified with outward cultus, profoundly concerns the inward reality of the person. In the broadest sense, to sacrifice is to live: it is an acknowledgement of human insufficiency; it is a quest for divine grace, the most profound movement of a person's being to its completion in the life of God. Though all sacrifice is in some sense sacramental, the internal cultus, which concerns each person, must be distinguished from the external cultus, which concerns the minister or priest.⁷³ When offering sacrifice, the priest or leader of the cultus represents the two elements of the sacrificial act, divine grace and human need. In Christian terms, the ministerial priest symbolizes

⁶⁸ Congar, *Lay People*, p. 188; I will follow his general argument in chapter IV, "The Laity and the Church's Priestly Function," in what follows.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-55.

⁷⁰ See P. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), pp. 42ff.

⁷¹ Congar, *Lay People*, p. 156.

⁷² See P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 47-51.

⁷³ See Congar, *Lay People*, pp. 190-93.

Christ's divine and human nature; re-presents the action of Christ in the community by making present the power of Christ's unique sacrifice; and "stands in" for the community. It expresses externally what is essentially possible in each human person, the inner sacrifice of oneself to God. Congar calls the external cultus the sacramental hierarchical priesthood, and the inward cultus the spiritual-real priesthood. All persons are called to the spiritual-real priesthood by their very being. Even bishops and priests, though members of the ministerial priesthood, also lead the personal religious lives of the laity. Between this spiritual-real priesthood and sacramental hierarchical priesthood lies the sacramental mystical priesthood which all Christians belong to by their sacramental incorporation into Christ through baptism and confirmation.

As priests, the laity share in the threefold office of Christ at two levels; through the spiritual-real priesthood of all righteous persons and the common sacramental priesthood of baptism. One could say that in the spiritual-real priesthood, they represent the world, or that part of the world in pursuit of righteousness, to the Church; in baptismal priesthood, they embody the Church to the world in a common, spiritual/mystical, non-ministerial way.

Critics of Congar's three-fold division of priesthood briefly sketched here have suggested a two-fold priesthood, that of the common priesthood of baptism and the ministerial priesthood of Holy Orders, as more useful.⁷⁴ But as Congar rightly suggests, baptism makes public and formal a person's commitment to Christ. Furthermore, if we understand the priesthood in the broadest sense as described above, more people, by the "inward worship each one offers up in the temple of his soul," inwardly surrender their lives to God than publicly announce it in baptism.⁷⁵ They are truly "priests" because only they can offer in sacrifice the "matter" of *this* particular sacrifice—their own lives. (Such an offering is not sacramental in an objective sense, but maintains an inwardly sacramental character in so far as complete self-sacrifice is an eschatological concept which must be expressed in the "sacraments" of self-offerings, in what the poet suggests is "a lifetime's death in love.") By offering themselves, these people act as priests like Christ, who gave everything back to his Father and continues to do so in eternity.

Their spiritual-real priesthood, however, is darkened by sinfulness, constantly threatened by idolatry at one pole and sacrilege at the other. That dimension of self estranged from the image of God within makes its own self-sufficiency an idol (sometimes through the subtlest means of religion) while tearing down what is truly sacred in one's person and in one's world. When Christ entered the darkness of the tomb, he took all of humanity with him, making our darkness his darkness so that in his Resurrection, his light might become our light. Christ's ontological relationship to all persons is at the heart of our own capacity to be priests: as we sacrifice ourselves, we give up the darkness

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 233; this is an 1964 edition.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

of our own isolation by "performing every work with the aim of uniting them [us] to God in a holy fellowship."⁷⁶ When this ontological relationship to Christ in his Pascal mystery is expressed sacramentally in baptism, the laity, though they are not ministerial priests, share profoundly in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ.⁷⁷ They use the entire movement of their lives in a limited and fragmented way to do what Christ did perfectly in the wholeness of his life. Through baptism and confirmation, they are the sacramental embodiment of both the fullness of divine grace incarnate in Christ, and, by the very nature of a sacrament, their human limitations which separate them from this fullness. The sacraments thus represent God's infinite love and mercy as well as man's weakness; they express in sacramental form what is essentially possible in the whole order of being. This is especially true in the Eucharist, which makes present the full Pascal mystery of Christ as a saving reality and an eschatological hope.⁷⁸

Since these ideas are tentative, they do not take into account the relationship between the common priesthood and the hierarchical ministerial priesthood. For too long, however, laity or priesthood of the faithful have been understood only in terms of clergy or the ministerial priesthood. We must acknowledge that the laity can be defined in a positive way by their spiritual ontological priesthood expressed sacramentally in baptism, confirmation and especially the Eucharist. The priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood are not mutually exclusive; all are called to the former, a chosen few to the latter. All are called to seek God's kingdom by ordering the affairs of the world to the plan of God; a few are chosen to serve God's Kingdom by the special path of ministry to his people. The Council sums this up perfectly with a quote from Augustine: "What I am for you terrifies me; what I am with you consoles me. For you I am a bishop; but with you I am a Christian. The former is a title of duty; the latter, one of grace. The former is a danger; the latter, salvation."⁷⁹ Writing 1500 years later, another bishop at Vatican II emphasizes the unity of all God's people, laity and clergy alike. He speaks of a unity like the priesthood of all the faithful, rooted in being and eschatological in nature.

We must bear in mind that hierarchic power is a transitory thing, limited to this time of pilgrimage. In the life to come, our final state, such power will have no place, for the elect will have reached perfect unity in Christ. The people of God abides forever, the ministry of the hierarchy passes away. We must be careful not to fall into 'hierarchism' when we speak of the Church. . . . The important things is the people of God.⁸⁰

(2) Our second question is the theological understanding of the mission of the laity in the world, what the Council called the "secular

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁷⁷ For a detailed outline, see Kloppenburg, *op. cit.*, pp. 315-29.

⁷⁸ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 6-8, 47.

⁷⁹ Quoted in *Lumen gentium*, 32.

⁸⁰ Bishop Émile-Joseph de Smedt of Bruges in a memorable address of December 1, 1962; quoted in Kloppenburg, p. 311. See also his famous pastoral letter, *The Priesthood of the Faithful* (New York: Deus Books, 1962).

quality . . . proper and special to the laity."⁸¹ There are two aspects of this issue, the mission itself, and its secular quality. The Council admits that attention must be paid to the particular mission of the laity "because of the special circumstances of our time."⁸² These circumstances are linked to the powerful emergence of the secular world, especially after the Enlightenment, a world no longer defined by its relationship to its divine source of sustenance, but understanding itself as an independent, free world, capable of making and shaping its life and destiny.

Vatican II consistently affirms that the entire people of God share in the dual apostolic task of spreading the gospel message, and acting as sacraments of the world's salvation.⁸³ What is significant in the Council's discussion is its acknowledgement that the laity, like the clergy with their own unique hierarchical and ministerial mission, have a mission or apostolate *as laity*. More than a participation in the apostolic work of the clergy, it is a mission peculiar to the laity:

The lay apostolate . . . is a participation in the saving mission of the Church itself.⁸⁴ As sharers in the role of Christ the Priest, the Prophets, and the King, the laity have an active part to play in the life and activity of the Church.⁸⁵ In their very vocation as laity, they seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them to the plan of God.⁸⁶

The significant word here is vocation: the laity, as well as the clergy, are called to an active mission.

What is the source of the laity's mission or apostolate? Much of what has already been said of their role in the priesthood of the faithful anticipates our answer. Their apostolate derives from the real spiritual priesthood perfected by baptism. As Congar expressed it: ". . . the apostolate is based, not on a reality of the juridical order, but in the supernatural ontology which makes a person a Christian, namely in Christian existence itself."⁸⁷ The Council states: "On all Christians . . . is laid the splendid burden of working to make the divine message of salvation known and accepted by everyone throughout the world."⁸⁸ This "splendid burden" is not an additional responsibility for the Christian; to accept the message of Christ is to make it known to others. Nor should this "burden" be understood as the completion or perfection of the Christian life. "Minimal" Christianity, where one is concerned with individual salvation while apostolic work is left to the elite, does not exist. Christians everywhere share "the same filial grace, the same vocation to perfection."⁸⁹ Each is a consecrated being, and consecration includes mission to others. Not only at the level of Christian dignity

⁸¹ *Lumen gentium*, 31.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸³ See *Lumen gentium* 1, p. 48; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 51.

⁸⁴ *Lumen gentium* 33.

⁸⁵ *Apostolicam actuositatem* 10.

⁸⁶ *Lumen gentium* 31.

⁸⁷ Congar, "The Laity," p. 242.

⁸⁸ *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 3.

⁸⁹ *Lumen gentium* 32.

are all Christians equal "but even from the viewpoint of what they bring to the building up of the body of Christ."⁹⁰ Equal in privilege, in gift, in responsibility, Christians join in the apostolate of the whole Church by forming the Body of Christ; all members participate in Christ's mission by that very fact.⁹¹ To live in Christ is not to live for oneself, in isolation. It is to live for one's sisters and brothers, for both those who share a common Eucharist, and those united sacramentally by baptism; for those who are not touched by the Word but who in silent deed seek the unnamed Christ of their lives; finally, for those, both in and out of the churches, darkened by sin and despair, those not yet redeemed and who appear unredeemable but made in the image of the Father and washed in the blood of the Son.

The mission to others is part of the common priesthood. At the heart of the real-spiritual sacrifice of this priesthood is the sacrifice of oneself to God, not in isolation from the world or by empty words or rituals, but by making sacred one's daily actions and serving others. This is the true mission of every Christian. One is not a priest who *then* serves others; service is an intrinsic part of one's priesthood. As the Incarnation signifies, a sacrifice is of nothing less than the total person. We participate in the priesthood of Christ in some limited and fragmented way by doing what Christ accomplished perfectly through his cross and resurrection. This apostolate of the laity can take on many objective forms, but at the root of each form is the substance of Christianity itself: to accept the gospel message and share it with others; to live in Christ and spread his loving words and merciful deeds to all persons.

While the Council did not formally define the laity's mission in ecclesiological terms, it spent a great deal of time addressing the question of the secular quality of the laity's apostolate. It acknowledged that since many people today consider themselves autonomous and so many dimensions of the secular world are accessible only to the laity, the Church's apostolic mission must be entrusted to them with an urgency unique in the Church's history. *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World and the most extensive and progressive document of the Council, considers the laity's mission within the secular world. It discusses those issues—marriage and family, the whole political, social, economic and cultural order—which are exclusively lay concerns. In one of the most significant passages on the laity, the Council writes:

The faithful, therefore, must learn the deepest meaning and the value of all creation, and how to relate it to the praise of God. They must assist one another to live holier lives even in their daily occupations. In this way the world is permeated by the Spirit of Christ, and more effectively achieves its purpose in justice, charity and peace. The laity have the principal role in the universal fulfillment of this purpose.⁹²

⁹⁰ Congar, "The Laity," p. 244.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁹² *Lumen gentium* 36.

This text, and others in *Lumen gentium* and *Apostolicam actuositatem*, when seen in the light of *Gaudium et spes*, suggest a profound change in the Church's understanding of the secularity of the world and the laity's relationship to it. The Church rejected the secularization of the world for centuries, not for theological reasons, but because she felt herself threatened at a socio-political level. The modern world appeared to contradict the supernatural truth which the Church embodied. Two factors led to a change in this attitude. First, as the Church herself gradually absorbed a secular attitude from her members, she either had to ignore the world or re-evaluate the biblical truth of the goodness of creation. Secondly, the world itself did not possess a Godless or graceless face. Though it did not always affirm the classical Christian symbols, it accepted the same values that the Church did, the transcendence of the human person in the quest for social justice and a fair distribution of earthly goods. *Gaudium et spes* portrays most vividly how these two attitudes have worked together.⁹³

Thus, the world is seen in a new and fresh light. Secularization does not threaten Christian forces, but is implied in the Christian truth of creation and redemption. The world is all God's, but it is also all ours because God has embraced, accepted and freed it in Jesus.⁹⁴ A "more vivid sense of God" is possible by allowing secularity to illuminate the face of its Creator and Savior. If the secular world works in this way, then "the laity must take on the renewal of the temporal order as its own special obligation."⁹⁵ They must seek the Kingdom of God in and through their daily actions in the secular realm. Only the laity are able to consecrate that greater part of the world which is explicitly secular and non-religious to the service of the Kingdom by "everywhere and in all things [seeking] the justice characteristic of God's Kingdom." As the Council states: "The temporal order must be renewed in such a way that, without the slightest detriment to its own proper laws, it can be brought into conformity within the higher principles of the Christian life. . . ."⁹⁶

One final question should be mentioned before concluding this section: How can the laity be understood in relationship to ecclesiology? Describing the laity in terms of the secular quality of their mission clarifies their relationship to the world more than to the Church. Schillebeeckx suggests that the theological distinction of the laity must be found in their relationship to the Church.⁹⁷ Our understanding of the laity as part of the priesthood of the faithful may allow us to develop this question more fully. The secular quality of the laity, however, should be considered in more detail. The laity not only live in the world as an object of the Church's mission, they are also part of the Church and

⁹³ See *Gaudium et spes* 7b, c, d.

⁹⁴ Much has been written on this subject. See for example, J. Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); also K. Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), pp. 74-75.

⁹⁵ *Apostolicam actuositatem*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Mission of the Church*, p. 112.

therefore themselves ministers. In Schillebeeckx's words, "The relationship with the secularity of the world can only be included in the theological concept of the laity if the Church herself includes a relationship with the world which is specifically of the Church in her own mission. . . ." If the Church accepts the "distinctive, but real and meaningful relationship with the world" as part of its mission, the laity's relationship to the secular world is more than descriptive. In so far as a lay person represents the Church's mission to the world, by that very fact she/he is constituted as lay in the Church. The relationship of the Church to the world through the laity (though not exclusively) suggests a fruitful point of departure for a more precise theological definition of the laity.⁹⁸

III

Having briefly explored the historical context of the laity in the Church and examined two aspects of the Second Vatican Council's description of the laity, the common priesthood of the faithful and the secular quality of the layman's mission to the world, I would like to conclude with some practical suggestions. One involves the role of the laity within the ecclesial structure, and the other, the relationship of the laity as representatives of the Church to the broader culture. These suggestions, chosen at random, have in common an effort to limit the question of the laity within the concrete historical focus of daily living in the Church and in the world. The discussion of the laity by the Council suggests a profound change in perspective. Laymen are no longer passive objects of the Church, recipients of the pastoral care of the clergy. They are now active subjects, unique participants in the Church's inner life and mystery as well as sharers of the apostolic mission of the Church to the secular world.

(1) To the majority of lay persons, the word "Church" does not signify a universal mystery nor an abstract theological truth. It refers to their concrete understanding of the Church at the level of parish, which is the "here-and-now actualization of the universal church and the sign of Christ's saving presence and power in the world."⁹⁹ The lay person is active in the Church almost always by being active in a particular parish. In the decree on the Church's Missionary Activity the laity are recognized as possessing an essential role in building up the local church.¹⁰⁰ In the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, the Council asserts that the laity, as part of the people of God, play an active role as subjects, along with the clergy, of the liturgical celebration.¹⁰¹ These, along with other examples point to a new understanding of the laity's vital importance in the local parish community.

At the same time, crises within the Church are most discernible at the parish level by the alienation of a broad spectrum of the laity from the

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-13, 121.

⁹⁹ Kilian, p. 83; the book is valuable both for the theology it contains and the excellent bibliographical material in the notes.

¹⁰⁰ *Ad gentes*, 21, 41.

¹⁰¹ Schillebeeckx, *Mission of the Church*, p. 126; see *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 26; Kilian, p. 70-88.

life of the local church. This is true of every age level, but most noticeable among those who have taken part in the parish or diocesan educational system in the last two decades. If I may speak personally, nothing has amazed me more than the failures of this system to motivate and inspire young people to maintain strong liturgical, apostolic and social ties to their parishes. Catholic graduates at the secondary and university levels, good and sincere lay people with some sense of the spiritual—real priesthood, are seldom inspired to express this priesthood ecclesially or sacramentally. Those who do are often passive in their expression, falling into the older paternalistic patterns of clerical-lay relations.

A complete analysis of this problem is impossible here. Motivation by paternalism, the traditional model, is no longer effective and an alternative has not yet been fully developed at a local level.¹⁰² What I'd like to discuss here is how one parish has reformed itself and reorganized its internal structure. The goal of this reorganization is to revitalize the spirit of the parish from the inside out so that pastor and laity share the responsibility, each in their unique way, for establishing the fullness of the Church in a local area.

This parish renewal program is called B.A.S.I.C.S.—Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Serving. Originally conceived in the parish by the pastor, it first involved three of the most active and trustworthy couples in the parish. Fairly large in size (about 1200 families), the parish is solidly middle class with church and school on Main St. in a mid-Western town. With the pastor, they prayed and struggled together for a program to fit their specific needs. They decide to divide the parish into twelve areas based on the boundaries of Catholic Charities, each with an apostle's name as its title and patron. Couples or singles from each area who could be found to serve as leaders divided their individual areas into smaller units and sought neighborhood leaders for each unit. Each neighborhood unit contained from eight to twelve families. After forming their "neighborhoods," the leaders visited each family and took a census of the area. They also greeted and welcomed new parishioners to a special Sunday liturgy where they were introduced to the whole parish and greeted personally over coffee afterwards.

Each area leader invited the neighborhood leaders in the area to the leader's home on a social basis so that they could get to know one another and discuss what had taken place so far. This exemplifies the whole purpose of such a program: community, not just as an idea but in a practical and experiential way. The larger community is formed by groups of smaller communities, the objective of which is to give each person in the parish an opportunity to meet others in a Christian and sacramental context, so that they can talk, realize that someone cares and even solve problems. The original group of the pastor and six lay people or pastoral delegates found a great need for personal contact within the parish, having unearthed a significant number of lonely people "out there," nominally baptized, sometimes with bitter feelings

¹⁰² See McBrien, *The Remaking of the Church*, pp. 81-86.

toward the Church. People often feel lost in a large parish, functioning like robots who come to church on Sunday; they notice cliques of people running parish activities, and a constant plea from the church for money in the collection; most of all, they believe that nobody knows they are there, that they have their own problems and are wanted and needed in the parish.

This kind of pilot project must proceed slowly and is not without problems. In some areas, leaders are hard to find. The pastor must tread lightly since older paternalistic ideas are often difficult to change. Many people prefer the way things were—less was expected of them and less had to be sacrificed. The “dead wood” of any community, when prodded, often respond with initial hostility. Still, such a program provides a “unique” opportunity for the laity of a parish to be genuinely active in the common priesthood, working to make each group of families a vital, spirit-filled community within the larger community of the parish. Such activity of laymen and laywomen does not infringe on the office of the pastor. On the contrary, it allows him to more thoroughly fulfill his responsibilities as spiritual shepherd. In this particular parish, the pastor felt out of touch with many in his community and thus delegated authority to the laity so that the parish could once again be drawn together as a human family by the creation of smaller families within it. In our large urban dioceses, very little can be done at a diocesan level to involve the laity. It is essential that such lay activity begin in the parish with pastors who understand the problem, see the need for change and encourage the active participation and cooperation of the laity in constituting the parish at a community level. No text of the Second Vatican Council is more pertinent at this point than the following:

Priests much sincerely acknowledge and promote the dignity of the laity and the role which is proper to them in the mission of the Church. They should scrupulously honor that just freedom which is due to everyone in this earthly city. They should listen to the laity willingly, consider their wishes in a fraternal spirit, and recognize their experience and competence in different areas of human activity, so that together with them they will be able to read the signs of the times. . . . Priests should also confidently entrust to the laity duties in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. In fact, on suitable occasions, they should invite them to undertake works on their own initiative.¹⁰³

(2) My final topic does not involve the laity within the Church but their quality of secularity, and their relationship to the secular world which, though stated theoretically, must be understood at the most concrete and practical levels. If the laity are to be apostles to the secular sphere, they must understand the profound ambiguity in the meaning of the world. The secular culture can neither be rejected nor accepted wholeheartedly and uncritically. The laity can be effective as a sign of Christ's presence only by grasping the texture of the concrete culture in which they live.

¹⁰³ *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 9; it is not without irony that one of the strongest statements on the laity at the Council was in the document on priests.

Therefore, there are two dangers confronting the laity in their secular mission: an unbridled enthusiasm for the culture on one side, and a return to a biblical or ecclesiastical fundamentalism on the other. When Catholicism emerged from its self-confinement to embrace the values of the modern world, it did so on sound theological and Incarnational principles. For a faith, however, that was so "transcendent" and "other-worldly" in the face of modernity for so long, it appeared to embrace the values of modernity too quickly, becoming "immanent" and "this-worldly" in uncritical fashion. Simply stated, theology could not be reduced to psychology, history could not be transformed into myth, religion could not be translated into therapy. Conflicting signals from the Church during the transitional 1960's and 1970's often confused the laity. The Hartford Appeal warned us that the world could not set the agenda for the Church.¹⁰⁴ Peter Berger alluded to the dangers of modernity which he described as a "world without windows," devoid of "transcendent referents."¹⁰⁵ Yves Congar emphasized the danger of the laity failing to recognize the specific nature of the religious sphere, and the reality of an aspect of the world that "does not lead to God."¹⁰⁶ Finally, Philip Rieff, the Jewish sociologist, expressed in vivid terms the risk of the Church's "spelling out" what he calls the anti-creedal therapeutic culture:

Nor does the present ferment in the Roman Catholic Church seem so much like a renewal of spiritual perception as a move toward more sophisticated accommodations with the negative communities of the therapeutics. Grudgingly, the Roman churchmen must give way to their Western laity and translate their sacramental rituals into comprehensible terms as therapeutic devices, retaining just enough archaism to satisfy at once the romantic interest of women and the sophisticated interest of those historical pietists for whom the antique alone carries that lovely dark patina they call faith.¹⁰⁷

All of this is not meant to suggest that the laity withdraw from the world into a new ecclesial fundamentalism, or create a new paternalism from clergy to laity. The reforms of Vatican II must proceed, and they themselves must be reformed. There is no going back. The laity, however, must understand the culture they are seeking to imbue with the Spirit of Christ. Just as they cannot judge it from without, which would be an illusion, they cannot accommodate themselves uncritically to its values, which would be a surrender of mission. If the laity do not carry Christ's spirit into the world, as one theologian has suggested, then "the missionary spirit is practically dead."¹⁰⁸ This certainty must not be the

¹⁰⁴"An Appeal for Theological Affirmation," in *Against the World and For the World*, ed. by P. Berger and R. Neuhaus (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), theme 10, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵P. Berger, "For a World With Windows," in *Against the World and For the World*, pp. 8-19, esp. p. 10. See A. Dulles, "The Critique of Modernity and the Hartford Appeal," in *The Resilient Church* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 63-92.

¹⁰⁶Y. Congar, "Laic et Laicat," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 9 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976), 101-02.

¹⁰⁷P. Reiff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 253-54.

¹⁰⁸Kilian, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

future of the Church which God fills with his life and Spirit. For centuries, the laity have been responsible *to* the Church. Now, as part of God's people, they must be responsible *for* the Church as she moves with courage and renewed faith into a new era and a new millenium.

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