

WORKSHOP: LAITY IN THE WORLD CHURCH

Consistent with the convention theme of the "World Church," the workshop concentrated on the issue of the laity primarily in the terms of possible structural changes for the Church of the immediate future. It was organized into two equal sessions of forty-five minutes each: the first devoted to an introductory paper and the second to discussion and questions by all those attending the workshop. The paper, given by the undersigned, raised a number of issues about the theological and ecclesial status of the laity as we approach the third millennium of the Christian faith. The discussion included several significant clarifications, objections and suggestions.

The paper introduced the issue by calling attention to the ironic fact that the very Council (Vatican II) which had done most to elevate the image of the laity by emphasizing the importance of its special role in the Church, was also indirectly responsible for the practical disappearance of the laity as a subject of theological study in the years following the Council. With the Council's steadfast insistence on the universal vocation of all Christians and the unity and equality of all baptized in Christ, the older issues of "lay apostolate" or "role of the laity in the Church" were gradually replaced with discussions about the diversity of ministries or the sacramental presence of the Church to the world. In effect, the doctrinal teaching of Vatican II helped to integrate the question of the laity into the broader framework of a total ecclesiology.

This post-conciliar ecclesiology is heavily communal in emphasis, balancing out the older, more exclusively institutional model of the Church which had dominated since the close of Vatican Council I (1870). The institutional model tends to produce a lop-sidedly clerical image of the Church which Yves Congar has aptly dubbed a "hierarchology."

Fortunately in the decades prior to Vatican II this dominant institutional model was continually challenged by the Catholic Action and Lay Apostolate movements and the theology that supported them. This theology of the laity, championed by such pioneers as Yves Congar, Gérard Philips, Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx, would also have a major influence on the ecclesiological teachings of Vatican II. These authors had strongly urged the biblically based teaching that the laity shares in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and by that very participation is consecrated and called to holiness. The Council officially endorsed this theological position.

The Council also taught that the Holy Spirit inspires the laity with special charismatic gifts for the exercise of the apostolate, and that Christ Himself, rather than any form of hierarchical delegation, was the fundamental source of their mission to the Church and to the world. These conciliar teachings served to restore to lay persons a genuine theological

status and an urgently needed sense of sacredness. In a word, the Council dramatically vindicated the auspicious affirmation of Pope Pius XII in 1946: "The laity are the Church."

Beyond these essential teachings about the nature of the laity, the Council was able to define with unambiguous clarity the special mission of the laity as a Christian responsibility for the secular order. This teaching took on even greater significance in a Council which so emphatically advocated the mission of the Church to the world and the secular culture. In such a context to serve as a bridge to the world is not a matter of secondary significance.

Subsequent communal models of the Church inspired by the developments of Vatican II were able to derive the diversity of ministries from the Spirit-inspired community rather than from some direct historical apostolic institution. While the whole messianic community is called to labor for "the salvation of the whole human race" (*Lumen gentium*, 9), the ordained ministries serve the world indirectly by providing for the spiritual and sacramental needs of the community. Ultimately both clergy and laity share in the same mission, but fulfill it through different "zones of action" (Congar). Within this framework, "layness" (Fr. *laïcité*) becomes more a dimension of the whole ecclesial community than a category of Church membership. Since the laity, on the other hand, shares in the whole mission of the Church, it is also fitting that lay people should function in a number of inner-Church ministries.

If the Catholic community is to accept seriously the challenge of becoming "world Church," it is time to translate the doctrinal teachings of Vatican II into concrete forms of appropriate structural change. Significant changes affecting the laity are already evident in the New Code of Canon Law. The canons dealing with the laity are fittingly incorporated into a chapter entitled "the People of God," and immediately remind the reader of the conciliar teaching of the universal participation of all Christians in the priesthood of Christ and in the mission of the Church (cc. 204 and 216). Title II of this section, dedicated to the obligations and rights of the lay Christian faithful, officially confirms the new, stable lay ministries of lector and acolyte as well as a number of provisional ministries. It recognizes the right of competent lay people to teach the sacred sciences and even to serve as experts at Church councils (see cc. 228, 229, 230). While these changes alone would go a long way toward enhancing lay participation and leadership in the Church's saving mission, their implementation would require a radical re-ordering of financial priorities. Without the assistance of scholarships and other forms of financial support too many worthy candidates will be pressured out of these important ministries on economic grounds. In addition to financial adjustments, the proper, professional performance of the new canonical ministries calls for a wide-scale and concerted effort at upgrading religious and theological instruction among the laity (see c. 229).

Apart from the changes that have already been incorporated into Canon Law, other structural innovations would also prove helpful in

fulfilling the Church's mission during the new millenium. Above all, a greater participation of lay people in the decision making processes of the Church would seem to be connatural with the doctrinal developments of Vatican II. Lay suffrage in the election of bishops would also be particularly consonant with the image of a laity "come-of-age" that emerged from the Council.

While an optional, married, ordained priesthood would not really constitute a structural change for the laity as such, it would likely have important symbolic value for the vast majority of lay Christians who serve the Church in the married state. It would also help in closing the gap that separates the sacred realm from ordinary, everyday Christian living. A self-supporting, part-time married clergy would suitably complement the ministry of a full time celibate priesthood. As an alternate style of hierarchical ministry, it ought not to undermine the primary lay vocation of direct ministry to the world.

In the discussion which followed it was generally conceded that the term "laity" might eventually become obsolete, with deepening awareness of the call of all Christians to share in the Church's apostolic mission. This change of emphasis would not entail any blurring of the ordained priesthood/common priesthood distinction, but rather the recognition that the common priesthood is itself a sacred call and ministry.

The discussion also brought to light a strong sympathy among the participants with the views expressed in the 1977 Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern. This milestone document representing both clergy and laity of the Catholic Community of Chicago had expressed serious reservations about the recent Church trend to emphasize lay involvement in ecclesiastical ministries. The signees were wary of any unconscious attempt to "clericalize" lay people by creating what might ultimately amount to a lay elite. Such an outcome, they feared, would undermine the distinctive teaching of Vatican II on the peculiarly secular nature of the lay vocation, whereby lay people are committed to transform the world in its political, economic and social institutions. A certain skepticism about the new canonical lay ministries and especially about the permanent married diaconate that was voiced in the discussion was based on the sentiments of the Chicago Declaration.

For similar reasons some members objected to the suggestion of establishing the function of "theologian" as a stable canonical ministry for both lay people and priests. They argued that in the present ecclesiastical climate this step would probably end up stifling the charismatic quality of the theological task by an excessive use of external controls. An approval of such ministries based on discernment rather than on law was recommended as a better approach for the present moment.

From a completely different perspective, an objection was made to the paper on the grounds that Vatican II had never really established a total and balanced ecclesiology on which to build an authentic theology of the laity. Questions about the current theological understanding of traditional

concepts, such as "divine institution" and the "sacramental character" of the priesthood would certainly have an important bearing on any correct evaluation of Vatican II's ecclesiology. It was also agreed that even if Vatican II had fallen short of a balanced ecclesiology, a number of current theological developments based on the principles of the Council might reasonably claim to have achieved that goal.

Two objections were raised against the proposal of ordaining married men to the priesthood. The first of these made the case that the Protestant experience of a married clergy ought to make it clear that the option of a married priesthood would not automatically obviate the danger of clericalism. The second objection was directed at the separation of the issue of married priests from that of the ordination of women in the course of the introductory paper. While it was generally recognized that the doctrinal principles of Vatican II might well provide a basis for ordaining women as well as married men, it was also clear that the Church's prohibition against women priests was officially presented as a doctrinal issue. As a strategy for structural change it might be wiser and more efficient in the long run to begin first with the alternative of a part-time, married, male priesthood.

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