

## THE LAY PERSPECTIVE IN THEOLOGY

This workshop began with a presentation by Georgia M. Keightley, Trinity College, Washington DC, which asked whether a lay perspective in theology can be discerned, then attempted to describe that perspective and to provide theoretical support for it.

The sources for this exploration of the lay perspective were described as feminist analysis and social theory, especially the sociology of knowledge, which enables one to concentrate on topics such as women in the church and the social mission of the church, as contrasted with institutional and hierarchical concerns. The issue was not defined as men/ women, but as cleric/lay. Thesis 1 of the paper affirmed, on the basis of theory from Berger and Luckman, that some knowledge is available only to certain individuals, and that when individuals learn a role they are initiated into specific cognitive layers appropriate to this role. Applied to Christian experience, this suggests that the early division which establishes the distinction between clergy and lay is primarily social not theological. This division—celebrated ritually—establishes the basic relationship pattern for the community. Moreover, consistent with their different statuses and roles, the clergy and laity appropriate from the Catholic tradition, by virtue of their particular viewpoints, two different perspectives on the community's body of shared meanings and values.

Thesis 2 affirmed that the lay perspective presents a challenge to the epistemology operative among the clergy who have been responsible for articulating, preserving, and transmitting the Christian tradition. The lay standpoint brings into theological purview questions arising out of a variety of situations and contexts that are constitutive of the lay world. The Catholic faith is then articulated out of the Christian praxis that characterizes the lives of the church's most ordinary people, and is not experienced as the imposition of institutional forms on a group of individuals.

Thesis 3 asked how a consciously aware lay perspective on theology might actually manifest itself, and answered that it would first of all be in a methodology that investigates the laity's witness of faith. Secondly, it would concern itself with new questions for theological analysis, such as the shaping of Catholic identity, the religious meaning of life in the world and the sanctification of the temporal order. Thirdly, the lay perspective would highlight the diversity and plurality within the Catholic experience.

The presentation developed at some length the difference in the way in which the lay theologian construes the categories of the basic theological framework "church/world." An overview of the theological development of these categories revealed that the overriding symbol has been that of the kingdom of God. However, a dual citizenship model was consistently applied to the laity while the clergy

and religious were assumed to inhabit the sacred order. To illustrate the point of view of the traditional or clerical perspective on theology, the document *Christifidelis Laici* (the Pope's recently published reflections on the 1987 Synod) was analyzed, demonstrating its dichotomous treatment of the categories church/world. A lay perspective, on the contrary, suggests that such an approach to the laity (dual membership with a dual set of responsibilities to church and world respectively) is inadequate to and inappropriate to the actual experience of the realities of church and world in the context of one life experience. What is needed is a conceptual framework that is capable of revealing the interconnecting, interdependent character of all experience; above all, one that shows human existence to be comprised of a complex network of relations connecting persons, ideas, things.

Three major themes, church mission, economics, and marriage and family were used to illustrate more concretely the difference between the document and the proposed lay perspective. The argument with regard to church mission focused on ecclesiology, and how the Catholic community actualizes itself as church in today's increasingly secular, pluralistic world. Keightley borrowed a model of church from Francis Fiorenza as best able to overcome the church/world dichotomy and be faithful to Vatican II's description of the ecclesial body as being "the church in the world." The church's ecclesial character thus increases (or contracts), it achieves fullness (or suffers setback) through the actions of its members who—whether acting collectively or individually—to the degree that they make the life praxis of Jesus their own, make visible—either in the encounter with others or in their own corporate life—the gracious, beneficent power behind the world. The theme of economics also benefits from the lay perspective by overcoming the split between church/world and replacing idealistic demands with realistic presumptions about the world. The lay perspective reveals the need for the Catholic community, including the laity as major partner, to formulate realistic moral criteria for evaluating the systems of social and cultural life.

Traditional treatment of the issue of marriage and the family reveals a fundamental ambiguity as to which realm, church or world, it actually belongs. Some texts suggest one, others another. Also problematic is the way in which the relationship between men and women is formulated. *Christifideles Laici* asserts that marriage is prior to as well as the paradigm for all other relations. By contrast feminists might object to having their lives defined in terms of their relations with men and children, while married Catholics might argue that friendship ought to be considered essential and certainly prior to any attempt at conjugal union. Moreover the husband and father is clearly presented (section # 51) as the weaker partner who "has to be helped to overcome forms of absenteeism and of periodic presence as well as a partial fulfillment of parental responsibilities." Women are said to have the "task of assuring the moral dimension of culture. . . ." At the same time it is urged that women's participation in churchly affairs be carefully controlled so as not to discourage the participation of men. On this theme as well as the previous two the lay perspective finds the document inadequate and inappropriate. Catholic families do not fit the ideal, yet are expected to be the vehicle of evangelization. The laity is not seen to be competent to discern on its own but only to carry out the officially determined witness of the church. Keightley concluded with the recognition that each of these questions required refining and further exploration from the lay perspective; in addition many other questions need to be

raised. Her intended contribution was a theoretical foundation for such a possibility.

The respondent, David P. Killen, Loyola University Institute of Pastoral Studies, Chicago, after objecting to the length of the presentation, raised several issues for the group of ten who were in attendance. He agreed with the first thesis, then developed briefly what he considered to be the major problem, that is, that the traditional theological metaphor has been rescue/redemption. Within that framework, Christ has to be interpreted as priest as well as victim. But if the metaphor is discovery, a different set of symbols as well as interpretation becomes revelatory. From the lay perspective, it is more important to form baptised Christians than to form officials. One problem has been that authority is imposed, not proven. The lay perspective would insist on the need to demonstrate leadership and ability *before* an individual is given authority. Another point made is that laity best represent themselves. In fact, the laity is, almost by definition, "those who have virtually no support." With regard to lay theological activity, Killen identified two issues: that it is rarely representative of the laity, but most often representative of what he called "chancel" Catholics; and that everyday experience must be brought to the theological disciplines. He spoke of mission as the result of relationship, not its cause; of renewal in the church and the experiences of stress that are often associated with it for the laity; of the liturgy as too often monological rather than dialogical celebrations; and of a spirituality appropriate to the laity. Rather than have relegated to them what doesn't fit, the lay perspective needs to create a common faith and knowledge around the metaphor of discovery.

Responses from the group included an expression of appreciation as well as statements of agreement and dissent.

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