

THE CATHOLIC LAITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF RECONCILIATION

Convener and Moderator: John Thiel, Fairfield University

Presenters: Roger Haight, Weston School of Theology
Richard Gaillardetz, University of Toledo, Ohio
Elaine MacMillan, University of San Diego
Ralph DelColle, Marquette University

Respondent: Paul Lakeland, Fairfield University

This session was devoted to a discussion of Paul Lakeland's recent book *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* (Continuum, 2003).

Haight summarized the book's argument. Lakeland seeks a theology of the laity that refuses their traditional definition as nonclergy, and thus as second-class members of the Church. The laity first must come to an awareness of their oppression at the hands of clerical ideology. That critical knowledge should be supplemented by a liberating, constructive theology that promotes the ecclesial integrity and responsibility of the laity. Lakeland develops such an ecclesiology by tracing the ways in which recent magisterial teachings often diminish the importance of the laity in their defensive support of the ministerial priesthood, and by constructing a theology of the laity in which the secular realm is understood as the autonomous sphere in which the laity are free to practice the mission of the gospel according to their talents. Lakeland's proposal is for a democratic understanding of Church in which the clergy/lay distinction gives way to the inclusive practice of ministries, some directed more toward the church and others more toward the world.

Like Haight, Gaillardetz expressed real appreciation for Lakeland's work, while highlighting several concerns. Lakeland's efforts to establish the autonomy of the secular as the field of lay engagement tends to reduce grace to nature. Along the same lines, there seems to be little content to Lakeland's appeal to the Christ event as the measure of the authentically human, itself the measure of authentically lay commitment in and to secular life. Gaillardetz proposed a theology of baptism as a better starting point for an ecclesiology that speaks of the powers of ministry. He praised Lakeland's analysis of the sex abuse crisis as a crisis of leadership, and acknowledged his sympathy for many of Lakeland's proposals for the structural reform of the Church.

MacMillan welcomed the book's felicitous appearance at this crisis moment in the life of the Church. She appreciated the way in which Lakeland's argument took Congar's theology of the laity to new and fruitful levels. She pointed to the need for a more developed role for the Holy Spirit in Lakeland's ecclesiology and encouraged him to attend to the role of popular religion in configuring who the laity are, what they believe, and what they practice. Attending to rhetoric, she deeply appreciated the book's uncompromisingly gender-inclusive language, but questioned whether it was appropriate generally to describe the situation of the

laity in a U.S. context as "oppressed" when for many in the Church oppression is a death-dealing circumstance.

DelColle agreed with Lakeland that reform in the Church is needed and that Lakeland's proposals are doable. He voiced concern, though, about Lakeland's theological justifications for the reform he commends. Lakeland's stress on the secular realm as a grounding for his ecclesiology leads him to ignore the pneumatological dimensions of the Church and so of the lay vocation. This oversight leads him in turn to misunderstand the way in which the ecclesiology of Vatican II is normative and to overlook the communion ecclesiology in the magisterial teachings on the laity that he views as limited. Like Gaillardetz, DelColle was disappointed that Lakeland did not accentuate the ecclesiological implications of the believer's new life in grace conferred in baptism, focusing instead and wrongly on a secular vision of the Church which does not recognize any proper distinction between ordained and lay ministry.

Lakeland expressed appreciation to his critics for the time and care they took in interpreting his work. He devoted much of his response to defending the role of secularity in his theology of the laity and, by implication, to addressing the criticism that his theology diminished pneumatology and the role of grace. Conceding that he offered no thick description of pneumatology and grace, Lakeland yet defended the presence of these theological accents in his book. The importance of a liberationist paradigm for his thought, he argued, makes him wary that the power of traditional theological language often can be invoked to disguise unjust ecclesial structures. The notion of secularity affirms the created freedom that Lakeland places at the heart of his proposal as the common possession of all Church members, and indeed of all human persons to whom the Church is called to witness by example. This freedom will flourish in structural transformation that enables all voices to share in an open dialogue that will make the Church the truly communal reality it should be. In Lakeland's judgment, clericalist hegemony, itself the bad practice of traditional belief, stands as an impediment to the realization of such community.

Discussion with the large audience pursued many of these concerns, and issued in some practical proposals for the realization of Lakeland's theological vision.

JOHN E. THIEL
Fairfield University
Fairfield, Connecticut

* * * * *