

# CRITICAL ISSUES FOR LAITY

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1987 IS THE YEAR of the laity. Dioceses throughout the world are using this time to launch renewal programmes, lay-formation programmes, lay-ministry training courses, and parish- and diocesan-wide conferences on lay life. Much of this ongoing education in lay issues was in preparation for the Synod on Laity in October 1987, but it is now clear that many dioceses were looking beyond the Synod and utilizing the occasion to intensify commitment to the renewal of lay life. This year provides an excellent occasion to focus on the religious experience of laity and our varied interpretations of discipleship, and on how we see ourselves in the changing contemporary Church. As the universal Church continues the dialogue between these lay experiences and the insights of both our heritage and of contemporary scholarship, there arises a series of critical theological issues which are currently important in any reflection on lay Christians.

In this article we will review developments for Roman Catholic laity since Vatican II; examine some of the current theological understandings, or models, of lay life; focus on the central components of a vision of lay Christians as integrally Church; and identify some of the critical issues for laity today.

## *Developments since Vatican II*

*The Vatican Council II.* The Extraordinary Synod of 1985 insisted that the vision of Church as community was the most important teaching of Vatican Council II. This conciliar vision, formulated frequently in its teachings, and experienced in the ecclesial conversion of 1962-65, implied an upgrading of the image of laity, an appreciation of their roles in ministry, an acceptance of their own charisms as part of a collaborative approach to Church, an openness to their unique spiritualities, and a conscious acknowledgement that lay life is foundational for all levels of Church living.

The Council's teachings produced a series of new emphases in our ecclesiology: stressing Church as community instead of

institution; service instead of power; participatory government instead of hierarchies; world involvement instead of withdrawal; co-responsibility instead of obedience and personal charisms instead of ecclesiastical offices. Without excluding the second part in each case, the pendulum swung to aspects of Church life that made lay contributions important.

The Council's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity was an excellent response to the hopes of lay people in the 1960s, but, above all, it was the Council's understanding of Church, presented especially in chapters one, two, four and five of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, that led to a new way of appreciating the life and commitment of those lay Christians who make up ninety-eight percent of the Church.

*Developments since the Council.* The Council stressed the emerging role of the lay person in the Church, and it was followed by a period of increased apostolic opportunities for laity, and by the local and international growth of lay spiritual movements. Commitment to the upgrading of the role of laity began to wane before the end of the sixties, and within five years of the Council we saw many lay people dissatisfied and frustrated that their hopes for a greater integration of laity into Church life were going unmet. The decade of the seventies focused on the relationship between laity and hierarchy, and both scholarly publications and much lay experience oscillated between encouraging collaboration and fear of lay role regression.

The early eighties have underlined the importance of role clarification, whether in ministry or Church government. The renewed emphasis on lay-ministry and the increased numbers of laity throughout the world who are dedicating themselves to full-time or part-time ministry have led to new ways of thinking about the Church's ministry, especially since the largest ministerial group in the Roman Catholic Church today is laity. These last few years have also given many lay people a new experience of Church with a more highly visible lay contribution which in turn has led to increased collaboration in Church organization and government, or a desire for collaboration where it is lacking.

*Trends in the early eighties.* The most emphasized topic in the early eighties was ministry. Many lay Christians have generously dedicated themselves to a variety of ministries of education, social services, spiritual renewal and local Church life. This ministry

movement, experienced with varying degrees of intensity throughout the world, is bringing more and more lay people into leadership positions in the Church. In the long run it will produce a new understanding of Church among laity in general.

The upgrading of laity in the Church is due in part to the Vatican Council's teaching of the autonomy of earthly realities and to a focusing on lay values in the Church. The international and local Church's new priorities are frequently in areas where lay people have expertise, such as family life, social justice, politics and peace. When such new emphases arise, laity are no longer the non-experts we have been presumed to be but actually can spearhead the Church's service to the world.

In the last two to three decades we have witnessed the wonderful development of spiritual movements which have drawn lay Christians into an experience of community growth, faith sharing, sacramental life and apostolic commitment. This lay-pentecost has fostered a spirit of participation, co-responsibility and collaboration among lay people who see themselves as active, full members of the Church.

#### *Theological evaluations of the life and role of laypersons*

Our present Church offers several different understandings of the role of laity. Different interpretations of the lay experience often complement different models of the Church, but sometimes they are parallel, non-converging experiences.

*Vatican II.* The Council dedicated number 31 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church to a theological evaluation of lay life. As number 31 changed through four schemas we saw three different understandings develop, from the rather negative and minimalistic view of lay life in the first schema, to a more positive appreciation of both the world and lay life in the second and third schemas, to the ecclesial vision of the final draft in which laity are characterized by their active belonging to the Church and co-responsible sharing both in internal Church affairs and in ecclesial outreach to the world to build up the kingdom.

*Laity as instrumental in the hierarchy's mission.* The Council's explanation of lay life has been interpreted in various ways. Some, believing that Jesus entrusted his mission exclusively to the hierarchy, see the laity as subordinate to the hierarchy and in need of delegated authority to participate in the hierarchy's mission and

ministry. While individuals and groups may spontaneously organize their own ministry, they need an ecclesiastical mandate to be considered officially Roman Catholic. This was the approach of Catholic Action, and it is reaffirmed by the new Code of Canon Law, canons 298-300. This theological explanation of laity as being instrumental in the ministry of the hierarchy has been pastorally useful in past periods but it is inadequate today.

*Laity's transformation of the world.* Another interpretation of lay life sees lay people as inserted in secular situations to be an ecclesial presence influencing the world with Christ's message and transforming the world through their work, family life and social responsibility. The prime and specific duty of lay life is to be found in the world. This was the emphasis of the conciliar Decree on the Laity, the basic assumption of the Vatican's document in preparation for the Synod on Laity (*Lineamenta*), and it is clearly the interpretation accepted by the present pope, John Paul II, and extensively documented in his sermons and speeches. The understanding that sees laity's role as specifically the transformation of the world has received major support in the United States from the Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern and the movement that resulted from it. The main weakness of this position is that it can be understood as maintaining the split between clergy and laity, assigning Church matters to the former and secular matters to the latter.

*Lay experiences of exploration in faith.* Many lay Christians, having responded to the call of Vatican II, find that the road before them is not all that clear. The Council's challenge to abandon passivity, dependence and religious immaturity was clearer than its portrait of future lay life. Nowadays, the response of many laity is an exploration into uncharted areas of Church life. Motivated by an awareness of our new responsibilities, our own charisms, our sharing in the priesthood of all the baptised and the challenges to participation, many lay people are discovering new ways of living our baptismal call. Our experience is exploratory, and later the Church will take note and theologically reflect on it. Thus, many lay Christians are seeking further training in ministry, financing their own theological and pastoral formation, working in renewal programmes, founding Christian social ministries, seeking positions in education, parish work, retreat-giving, family ministries. This self-discovery is full of hope and, provided the laity involved

maintain a sense of Church and a good knowledge of the faith, it should be a very positive experience for the Church.

*Anticipating the Synod on Laity.* Preparations for the Synod on the Laity have produced several books and articles on lay people, focusing on their emerging leadership, their pastoral ministry to society, their mission in the local Church and their role in secular society. Most writings and movements specify an interpretation of lay life based on what the laity do. It is critical that we also stress who lay Christians are as a result of baptism, since being Church is the essential characteristic of a Christian personality. The ecclesial identity of laity is the foundation for all reflection on their life and role, since ours is a lay-centred Church. Until the implications of laity's ecclesial identity are clear, any searching for greater clarity in roles of priest or religious will be futile.

#### *Laity as integrally Church*

Lay persons do not belong to the Church, nor do we have a role in the Church. Rather, through baptism we are Church, and in union with Christ, our mission is the mission of the Church itself. There is no particular vocation for laity in the Church, no need of a quest for lay identity. Being Church in its fullness is the spirituality for laity.

*Baptismal vocation—a common calling.* Many lay Christians are rediscovering their baptismal vocation. The Vatican Council had presented baptism as the common foundational experience of Christianity, even representing priestly ordination and religious profession as reintensifications of baptismal vocation. Through Christian initiation a person becomes Church and is challenged to live out the implications of baptismal responsibility. Today's task is not to specify the laity's ministry or mission but to educate to awareness of who we are in baptism. At once both people of the Church at the heart of the world, and people of the world at the heart of the Church, laity are called to live as a community of faith based on the Word and on the freedom of Christ. We are all called to one and the same life.

Instead of the passive approach to faith of past decades, we see approaches to Church, family, work, social and political issues which are motivated by a growing sense of baptismal responsibility. Thus, rediscovery of baptismal vocation is like a new pentecost. It challenges each of us to end the departmentalization of religion,

and to integrate baptismal awareness and dedication into every aspect of life.

*Sacramental life—common source.* The second Vatican Council moved away from any elitist approach to Christian growth and instead presented the universal call to holiness. The sacramental system of the Church was seen as the basis for all growth, and lay people were called to take an active part in the Church's sacramental life. Since God makes his covenant with the whole people and not just their priestly ministers, the liturgy becomes the central expression of the whole covenanted people's commitment to the Lord. However, sacramental life, the common source of life in the Lord, is a dialogue between the Lord and the people. Liturgy includes attitudes of celebration, prayer and community which grow out of the daily experiences of lay life. No miracles are worked in sacramental services, but the pastoral leader must work with what he or she finds in the pews. In times past people hoped the sacraments and Sunday service would influence the rest of the week, whereas laity now know that sacraments are truly a source only when influenced by the dedication of daily efforts in secular circumstances during the rest of the week. The outward form of liturgy and sacramental life comes down to us from Church officials, but the heart and spirit of liturgy comes up from lay life.

*Church as communion—common community.* The 1985 Extraordinary Synod stressed the ecclesiology of communion as the central idea of the Council (II,C, 1 and 6). If nothing significant could happen without the clergy, then we would have a clerical Church. However, the Church is a community of disciples with equal dignity and rights before it is hierarchically structured. The Council's ecclesiology, reinforced by the Extraordinary Synod, is visibly portrayed through participatory styles of government and collaboration in ministry. Lay participation in all dimensions of Church life now contributes to the moulding of a contemporary image of the Church. Current models of the Church call for communion of life and collaboration in ministry. They imply willing cooperation, new styles of collaboration, a collegial spirit and an appreciation of unity at the local level. Authentic contemporary Church life means gladly working with others, stifling no one, mutually empowering each other and capitalizing on the competence of everyone.

The community dimension of the Church is lived at all levels and leads to efforts to build community in all aspects of lay life:

family, work, parish, Church committee work, parish councils, diocesan pastoral councils, national and international organizations. The efforts needed to build community stress the importance of lay life and lay contributions to the Church.

*Spirit's gifts—common charisms.* Vatican II described the lay person as a living instrument of the mission of the Church itself. In order to be Church and to reach out in ministry to the world, the Holy Spirit endows all believers with personal charisms to be used for the common good. The essential gifts and functions of Church life belong to every baptised member. Each one is filled with the Holy Spirit and enlivened with God's gifts of faith, hope and charity. Within the Church there is a secondary vocational distinction but a primary and essential equality. After the first twenty-nine sections of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Council claims that everything stated applies equally to laity, clergy and religious. All are endowed with charisms for the life and work of the Church; all share a true equality, a profound dignity and a personal and communal sense of vocation.

The Spirit's gifts make us who we are as Church, and we always remain incomplete unless we identify and channel the potential charisms of every member. In fact, being an ecclesial community that mutually appreciates each member is more directly connected with our mission than outreach is. The priest is incomplete in life and ministry unless he knows, values and utilizes the charisms of laity; so too laity or religious in their appreciation of other vocations' charisms. We are an intervocational community that finds life and enrichment in each other.

*Priesthood of all the baptized—common ministry.* One's understanding of the Church is most clearly seen in one's approach to ministry. The prime priestly reality in Christianity is the priesthood of all the baptized, and the task of the ministerial priesthood is to support this and facilitate its awareness in others. As a consequence whatever ministry a person is involved in is a ministry of the Church, because every baptized Christian carries out the priestly mission of the Church. The contemporary emphasis on the universal call to integrate a dimension of ministry into one's life has led many lay Christians to appreciate a new perspective on their own baptismal priesthood and call to ministry. Two trends are identifiable among lay people: a growing awareness that service of others is a necessary part of baptismal dedication, and a realization

that in these years God is calling many lay men and lay women to make service of others a professional commitment.

The source of ministry is Christian initiation; through baptism, confirmation and a loving community, the Holy Spirit gives the faith, hope and love that produce a ministerial vocation. The Roman Catholic Church in particular experiences no shortage in vocations to ministry, even though we sadly acknowledge that vocations to ministry are less expressed in priesthood and religious life than formerly. However, all ministries are basically equal because we all share the same cause of ministry, the Holy Spirit; we receive the same call and commissioning of Jesus; we receive a common ministerial vocation in baptism; we are endowed with charisms as the Holy Spirit sees fit; we are consecrated into the same common priesthood; we are equally endowed with the three-fold office of Christ: priestly, prophetic and servant; we are fed as ministers with the same sacramental life; we authenticate our ministry in the consensus of the faithful.

*Foundational Church—a lay-centred Church.* The Council complemented its teachings on the universal Church with strong emphasis on the local Church. This teaching, found in numbers 26 and following of the document on the Church, emphasizes the centrality of the particular diocesan Church, but the basic insights are then applied to parish and even to the domestic Church of the family. Recently it has become common, following the lead of Pope John Paul II, to speak of 'foundational Church'. Small local groups, basic ecclesial communities, neighbourhood groups, small inter-vocational cells of Church life and families are foundational expressions of Church. If ecclesial life is strong in these basic and primary groups of local Church, then it can be strong at other secondary levels of parish, diocese and universal Church. What is presumed is a view of the Church as a community of communities with appreciation that local expressions of Church life are the key to Church growth. Whatever is built on this foundation of local Church life will be strong or weak depending on the strength or weakness of this foundation.

In any reflection on lay Christians we need to appreciate recent history, be aware that there are different interpretations of the lay experience, but above all value the key common components of our life. All the baptized have a common calling, a common sacramental source of life, a common community, a common source of charisms, a common ministry and an equal opportunity

to give life to the universal Church through strengthening our local expressions of Church life.

*Critical issues for lay people*

*General trends in the contemporary Church.* When we look at our contemporary Church there are several general trends that lay Christians need to appreciate and even develop. We witness a humanizing of Church structures with the development of decentralized collegial forms of organization at all levels. This encouraging development offers lay people increased opportunity for participation. Moreover the emphasis on local Church rather than international hierarchies generates a spirit of co-responsibility among laity.

Many of our current changes challenge laity to new styles of discipleship. Their involvement in ministry, Church life, family renewal or spiritual movements has produced new approaches to spiritual life and new ways of living out the cross of the Lord. Several laity, more deeply aware of their baptismal vocation, are sensing a new approach to the notion of vocation, which leads to different educational emphases for their children.

*Areas of development.* With the decrease in numbers of clergy it is crucial that lay people involve themselves more in ongoing education in their faith. More laity throughout the world are studying theology than clergy or religious and this is encouraging. However, religious education cannot be a luxury of an élite group of lay people but must be stressed for all, since the future of the Church is with adults not children.

We have seen the recent emphasis on lay values, and the official Church's ministry priorities in areas of lay life. This stressing of non-vocationally distinct values will have a firm impact on spirituality, ministry, ethics and even ecclesiology. Among the lay values receiving increased emphasis will be family, work and the inter-relationship between religion and politics.

Clearly current trends call for a renewal of lay life and spirituality. There is no such thing as lay spirituality but multiple vocational spiritualities within lay life, each requiring specific formation. This will necessitate a refocusing in the spiritual ministries of clergy and religious.

*Some areas of concern.* Lay people now live in a divided Roman Catholic Church, and many parishes move from low Catholicism to high Catholicism as services succeed each other on a Sunday

morning. In addition to these differences in ecclesiology, liturgy and ministry we need to acknowledge sadly that ours is now a Church with a two-party system, divided as we are between liberals and conservatives. Pluralism that does not strive for unity seems uncatholic, and reconciliation will need to be a key dimension of lay spirituality. In the last decade we have experienced the rebirth of conservatism, pressure and control. Tension will remain and internal mutual persecution of Catholics by Catholics will likely increase in a sorrowful Church. Lay people must bring their experiences of healing divisions, learnt in family life, at work and in politics, to ease the pain and bring relief.

Much change and adaptation has taken place over the last twenty years, but little doctrinal renewal. Lay Christians will need to work for renewal in ecumenism, sacraments, authority and ministry since today's crisis for laity is not one of orthodoxy but of relevance.

Contemporary reflection on lay Christians needs to appreciate the developments since Vatican II that help explain our current situation. However, groups of Christians frequently interpret the lay experience differently and we need to be aware of different approaches when discussing the same topic. Lay people are integrally Church, and we have reviewed some of the common and central components of the life we all share. Finally, there are some critical issues that the laity and the universal Church must focus on to assure continued growth in lay life.

*Suggestions for further reading:*

Leonard Doohan: *The lay-centered Church*, (Harper and Row, 1984). *John Paul II and the laity*, (a collection of the Pope's sermons for laity), (Human Development Books, 1984). *Laity's mission in the local Church*, (Harper and Row, 1986). *Laity: a bibliography*, (1114 entries), (Michael Glazier, 1987).