

# LAY DISCIPLESHIP—A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

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**T**HIS ARTICLE presents the reflections of a small group of lay people on our attempt to understand the call to discipleship and our position and role in the wider Church. Such an attempt naturally led us to consider the extent to which our experience might be representative of more general currents within the Church.

## *1) Our experience of the call to discipleship and our position in the Church*

Although from different backgrounds, we feel a high degree of unanimity about vocation. In our various ways we have experienced a call to lives of witness to the gospel. This call is an all-embracing one—it demands expression in our work, life-style, values and attitudes. Its chief features are a commitment to prayer, a desire to share closely in the life of a Christian community and, above all, a dedication to service as a concrete expression of the gospel message—service not only to Christians but also to society as a whole.

Church organizations, sacramental life, liturgy and the example of Christian men and women have played a decisive part in mediating this call to us. Consequently, we acknowledge a profound commitment to, and love of, the Church. We wish it to become ever more fully the Church of Christ whom it has helped us to know and experience. We want to live out our calling in communion with it and with the assistance of its structures. We thus look to the Church for appropriate models of discipleship and for practical assistance in developing our vocation.

In this dialogue with the Church, all of us seem independently to have been through the same process. Initially, we were led to

consider expressing our vocation in religious life—the chief model of discipleship which the Church seemed to offer. This option was explored with varying degrees of thoroughness, in the case of one member of the group during almost six years of formation, but always with the same result—a conviction that religious life was not, for us, the appropriate way to follow the gospel. The reasons for this are difficult to summarize, particularly without giving the impression of a blanket rejection of religious life, which is far from our intention. Broadly speaking then, to enter religious life involves embracing a realm of experience separate from that of the rest of the population. To take poverty as an example. The poverty of a member of a religious order is accompanied by precisely that security which is absent for the secular poor. It does not normally involve the risk of homelessness, unemployment or lack of necessary resources. Indeed, the structures of religious life free members from the financial pressures and concerns which are the lot not only of the poor but also of the majority of the population. As a result of this, poverty for religious becomes the cultivation of a spirit of generosity, a means to inner detachment and outer simplicity. It expresses the selflessness of Christian service: poverty of time in availability to others, poverty of will in obedience to authority, and poverty in relationships through acceptance of the solitude of celibacy.

The crucial point here is that, within the structures of religious life, poverty comes to have a meaning entirely different from the one it has elsewhere. Moreover, this 'poverty' can only ever be realized within those structures. Religious may thus come to an experience and understanding of life which sets them apart from other social groups. An awareness of this separation was a key factor in our decision not to enter religious life. We felt that the discipleship to which we were called must be a possibility within the realm of everyday experience.

However, if religious life does not offer us an appropriate model of life, neither does the lay state. For example, we experience a call to community living of a depth impossible within parish structures but for which no other outlets are immediately apparent. We wish to take seriously the gospel injunctions on poverty and simplicity of life, but no example apart from religious poverty seems to exist. The life of the lay Christian is, in this respect, largely indistinguishable from that of his or her secular contemporary. Again, we feel there should be a close relationship between the

work we do and our commitment to Christian service. However, if we are to work outside the Church, we feel keenly the difficulty of making a sufficiently close connection between 'secular' activity and the life of faith. Examples of how to bridge that gap seem few. This brings us to a final difficulty. Without opportunities to prepare for, and reflect on them in the light of the gospel, secular commitments are likely to remain secular. Practical resources such as theological formation, retreats, spiritual direction and community support are regarded as indispensable for the cultivation of apostolic work amongst religious, yet they are hard to come by for the lay person. We have all experienced the assistance in growth in vocation which they can provide. But this leads us to regret all the more that they are often only available to lay people at considerable personal cost and in a form designed to meet the need of religious and priests.

This then is our situation. On the one hand we feel the call to live a life of 'full-time' discipleship, on the other we find that the Church's structures do not readily accommodate this call. We are saddled with a desire which involves our whole sense of identity. Yet we are unable to incarnate this desire within the very Church which has given it to us. Caught in this confusion, we can also experience a subtle, but still painful, form of rejection. Our hopes and frustrations meet with incomprehension from many people because in their eyes we seem to be a sophisticated sort of misfit—rejecting what the Church does offer and then lamenting that it offers nothing. Misfits or not, we believe that our experience highlights a profound, and perhaps prophetic, tension within the life of the Church.

2) *What is the meaning of this experience?*

It was a central insight of Vatican II that there is a universal call to holiness. The life of discipleship and witness to the gospel is thus for every baptized Christian. Unfortunately, while adopting this understanding in principle, in practice the Church is still bedevilled by the mentality and structures proper to a 'two-tier' understanding of discipleship. Within this latter understanding only some have a vocation to radical discipleship. This is a demanding life of prayer, self-sacrifice and service to others, and it is expressed through the priesthood and religious life. The remaining laity are not expected to have the same level of commitment. Their life-style is thus subject to fewer and more minimalist

demands. Implicit in this understanding is the assumption that holiness is far more likely to be achieved in religious rather than lay life. Practically, it gives rise to structures which provide a high degree of training and support for religious, but little for lay people who are not thought to need, and indeed do not want, such facilities to anything like the same degree.

We are caught in the conflict between these two understandings. We are trying to become the committed lay disciples Vatican II tells us we should be. But we find that the available models of such discipleship are almost exclusively those of the priesthood and religious life. The confusion and lack of identity we have experienced result from this. But we are not the only ones affected. We believe that this situation has negative effects on the whole lay community. Because no workable model for lay discipleship is put before them, it is difficult for most people to understand the call to it as a realistic possibility in their situation. They are thus led either to conclude that the evangelical demands are not addressed to them, or to feel an uneasy sense of being second-best because they are unable to make the radical commitment of those in religious life. In either case, they seriously undervalue the holiness and consequent importance of their own experience as an experience of God.

We must recognize that a two-tier understanding is not being promulgated by repressive clerics determined to rob the laity of their rightful inheritance. Indeed, as outlined above, it would find few adherents in any part of the Church. Nevertheless, it has exerted, and continues to exert, a profound influence on the mentality of all of us and on the structures within which we operate. It often remains the operative model even when we imagine that we have outgrown and replaced it. Two examples will perhaps make this clearer.

a) *'Vocation'/'discipleship'*

The language we use to talk about our Christian calling shows a persistent tendency to carry misleading overtones which imply that some individuals have a more radical call to discipleship than others. These implications are reasonably obvious and easily detectable when, for instance, 'prayer for vocations' means prayer for recruits to the priesthood and religious life. However, the more liberally-minded, who would energetically criticize such use of language, often fall into the same trap themselves when they throw

around phrases like 'radical discipleship'. This is fine insofar as it highlights the cost and consequences of following the gospel, but it too serves to perpetuate the myth that there are varying degrees of discipleship open to Christians, ranging from the room-temperature 'punter' in the pew, to the white-hot hermit in his wasteland shack. Such slogans need to be sanitized: discipleship is radical and that is the only kind of discipleship there is.

b) *Images of holiness*

It is a curious fact that discussion of holiness reveals a lingering dualism even in the most trenchant advocate of the sanctity of the lay vocation. If asked to imagine a holy person, most people's minds will immediately turn to features characteristic of monasticism or religious life. If the figure they imagine is not actually a monk or desert ascetic, he or she is very likely to possess characteristics appropriate to those modes of life: to be set apart, alone in contemplation aloft the vulgarity of political, social and economic strife. The danger here is that we do not recognize the subliminal influence of the two-tier model. Consequently, we mistake understandings that result from its conditioning for absolute states of affairs. If the holiness of the religious is the only true holiness, then holiness is for most people an impossibility. It is defined precisely in terms which are incompatible with the reality of their lives. We need to recognize that religious life is one historically and socially conditioned path to holiness. Only then is holiness a possibility for all people in an infinite variety of circumstances.

The above should serve to illustrate that the two-tier understanding will not disappear simply with a change of language. Critical thinking, practical measures and, above all, a constant openness to the direction of the Spirit will be necessary if a theoretical understanding of Vatican II is to break through the incrustation of inherited presuppositions and find concrete expression.

3) *Conclusions*

A model of lay discipleship is not going to drop ready-made from the skies. It will only be created in the attempt to live it. To our minds, what is crucial is that more and more lay people be a) challenged to make this attempt and b) supported in doing so.

a) People must be encouraged to recognize that God is present in their experience. Through that experience God is addressing them and challenging them to ever deeper dedication. That experience is the locale for a discipleship which only they are able to

carry out. To this end, there is a need to develop, and pass on, forms of prayer and understandings of spirituality which are appropriate to, and possible within, the rhythms of everyday life. These must encourage the discernment of the presence and the promptings of the Spirit within 'ordinary' experience.

b) The second step is of necessity somewhat vague since it depends upon the results of the first. In general, the Church must be prepared to take the consequences of the discipleship it has called into being. This means creating room for it to grow to its full expression, providing whatever practical supports seem necessary. Areas where some action can already be seen to be needed are the following;

- (i) Greater lay participation in planning and decision-making processes. Equality in vocation is incompatible with gross inequality in power.
- (ii) Spiritual formation for lay people. The opportunities for spiritual and personal growth usually associated with retreats and spiritual direction must be made much more widely available, both practically and financially.
- (iii) Opportunities for lay ministry. Increasing numbers of lay people feel called to undertake a variety of full-time ministries within, and on behalf of, the Church. Often their desires are thwarted by lack of opportunities or funding. If its commitment to the laity is to be taken seriously, the Church must be attentive to what such people are seeking. It must not reject or be apathetic towards their enthusiasm, but attempt to encourage and accommodate them, matching its theoretical approval with opportunities and funding.

Problems will arise when the Church succeeds in the first of the above tasks but fails in the second. The danger is that Church documents and contemporary thinking raise the laity up as the priestly people of God only for them to be left floating in this exalted state without any effective opportunities for ministry. Such a gap between proclaimed intention and actual practice will always be likely to cause frustration and resentment. The Church we live in will no doubt never be quite up to the standard of the one we talk about. That, however, does not absolve us from the responsibility of making them resemble each other as closely as possible.

We hope the above observations are offered in a constructive spirit. We recognize the limitations of our experience. Our reflections, based as they are on a continuing process, are necessarily

provisional. We would like to emphasize this by making our own the reservations—as well as the confidence—expressed by Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always . . .