

# CONTEMPORARY LAY IDENTITY AND THE CONCEPT OF CONSECRATION

By VIRGINIA SULLIVAN FINN

**R**ESPONSES TO TWO QUERIES regarding the laity and the concept of consecration provide the focus for this contribution:

- \* Should the term 'consecration' be generally applied to lay believers?
- \* Is this the time for such application?

In other words, is 'consecration' suitable terminology for lay people? Is the term timely or premature or past its prime?

## *Terminology*

An immediate concern of many lay leaders today is whether language coheres with concepts that unfolded from Vatican Council II and whether usage emphasizes the validity and significance of the laity in the Church's mission within the world. Does the term 'consecration' protect the dual identity of the lay believer – solidarity with peoples along with dedication to God? Favouring terms easily understood by common usage, some might argue that historically the term 'consecrated' is too rich in ecclesial refinements. Warning that terms in common language come and go, others might argue that a term rich with historical and ecclesial nuances is exactly what is needed to protect lay identity from erosion by secularity. Regardless of where one sides, in the decades since Vatican Council II two shifts in lay identity can be noted. First, few lay believers now echo the common preconciliar self-designation: 'I'm just an ordinary laym'n'. Second, more and more lay believers have an understanding of their ongoing baptismal identity that is different from that of their grandparents, who departed from mass on Sunday morning with some surety that because they were good *Catholics*, if they kept their souls safe from sin, they were, *de facto*, good mothers, fathers, plumbers, nurses and citizens. A

growing number of lay women and men sense that because they are good and faith-filled *persons*, they are also good parents, plumbers, nurses and citizens; consequently, they are good Catholics.

As believers discover spiritual relevance within family life and societal missions, development of faith occurs through these activities, aided by sacraments and spiritual practices. Encounters with God, who is perceived to have the same freedom of setting as the lay believer, happen within a variety of these settings. Resources within the church community are sought for discerning the deeper meaning of these encounters with God in daily life and the directions to which they point.

The early twentieth-century lay theologian, Friedrich von Hügel, spoke of the Seeker and the Sought. The human person seeks God as God seeks the human person. *Both* are seekers, *both* are sought. Keeping this twofold dynamism alive seemed paramount to von Hügel and seems to characterize contemporary spirituality.

Danger signals emerge if a believer attempts to sustain a vibrant Christian life without ongoing spiritual means to nurture this twofold perspective of seeking God and being aware of being sought by God. At the core is the intimate love relationship between God and believer. Continued educative opportunities are also crucial in order to deepen the believer's broader understanding of Christianity. The desire to live in any *particular* Christian way, e.g. discipleship, consecrated life, commitment to a vocational goal of parenting or of ministry, has the potential of moving interiorly into fear or resentment if provisions to sustain spiritual intimacy and vitality are lost.

Today a believer who has access to a process of spiritual depth, such as the Nineteenth Annotation Ignatian retreat, is apt to speak, at the end of the formal experience, of surrender to God's overwhelming love, of experiencing the indwelling of Christian depth and mystery. Mature Christians speak of God's abiding presence as *active*, of an ongoing need for personal prayer, of discerning where the Spirit is leading. The focus is 'we' – not just God and myself, but we in the community, in the world. These spiritual sensibilities avoid a naïve focus on the believer, on measuring one's own effort apart from God's effort. 'Consecration', a somewhat static concept unless maturely discerned, may suggest individualism, dependency on self, on functional accomplishment in the form of result rather than on fruit-bearing brought into being by the Spirit in co-operation with the believer. When the perspective is one of *mutuality* rather than fealty, credit for the bonding between believer and God and for the fruit-bearing of mission and ministry goes to God.

A look to the recent past discloses that, during Vatican Council II, the Dominican theologian M. D. Chenu questioned how consecration fits into the lay schema. Chenu critiqued the generalized meaning of *consecratio mundi* in *Lumen gentium*, IV, 34: 'And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God'. Chenu's difficulty was the long association of the word with a narrowly technical meaning: 'set apart', 'separate'. Regarding the laity, he claimed that the term had a 'wavering usage; its meaning is sometimes expanded, sometimes restricted, sometimes taken as rigorously conceptual, sometimes surrendered to oratorical exhortation'.<sup>1</sup> Resurgence of the term might engender unstable usage.

In 'the laity consecrate the world', Chenu saw a potential sacralization of natural realities of the world, already consecrated through creation by God. In addition, nuances that accompany 'set apart', e.g. 'above the world' or 'against the world', threaten the societal, world-constitutive identity of those designated lay by the institutional Church. The risk in identifying lay *Catholics* as special conduits for consecrating the world to God jeopardizes another significant conciliar insight – Catholics working as partners with other Christians and those of other traditions for the common good of all.

### *Timeliness*

Of equal importance is whether the term 'consecration' is timely, premature, or past its prime. One way to consider this question is to reflect on terms that have been embraced by the laity since Vatican Council II. 'People of God', for example, found an enthusiastic response immediately after the Council. According to Yves Congar, '*Gaudium et spes* speaks of the People of God and the human race in whose midst it lives rendering service to each other. . .'.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, a shift to internal church issues such as liturgical reform and celibacy which stressed lay/clergy divisions dissipated the unity inherent in the term 'People of God'.

The 'call to holiness', on the other hand, continues to reverberate among Christians. For example, according to sociologist Pierre Hegy, in the United States the generation currently in its mid-thirties and forties is less committed to organized religion, yet articulates three religious needs: spirituality, enlightenment regarding faith, and a sense of mission.<sup>3</sup> In forums sponsored in the States to hear the laity in preparation for the Synod on the Laity in 1987, spiritual development came up again and again as an expressed need.

Three terms that have perdured among the laity give evidence of their timeliness: 'community', 'ministry' and 'mission'. The desire for

community in local church does not abate. Perceived as a scripturally based concept as well as a practical need in increasingly fragmented cultures, community, when not found in local church, has been sought elsewhere – in movements such as Charismatic Renewal, Marriage Encounter and Cursillo; in alternative worshipping communities; in small-group processes.

The staying power of the term ‘ministry’ comes as no surprise. The conciliar call to participation was welcomed by a laity who for too long were confined to a passive role within the Church. When placements for participation emerged – from voluntary ministries such as lector and parish council member to professional ministries such as director of religious education – they were embraced readily. Organizing what was seen as inherent in the baptismal call was effectively accomplished in local settings where pastors encouraged the conciliar concept because the Church is experienced in managing ministry. Implementation reinforced and enhanced the concept of lay ministry among many Catholic believers who did not initiate the process, but who responded to the initiatives of their pastors.<sup>4</sup>

The timeliness of ‘mission’ is another story. Because it appeared to be an overall theme of Vatican Council II, many lay believers who had not read the documents seemed to have a general idea that Vatican Council II was about the Church’s mission within the world. Word also went round rather rapidly that this mission could not be accomplished without lay effort and dedication. As a result, the concept of mission heightened the significance of lay identity within a primary responsibility of the Church itself. As an individual, the lay believer may have lacked clarity on how he or she was called to carry out mission, and may not have found help in that discernment, but the idea of mission related to ‘world’, the setting where the lay believer is immersed, caught on and continues to evoke vitality.

Without popular reception, a concept lies fallow. If it is not considered suitable terminology and lacks the quality of timeliness, most lay adults ignore it. ‘Community’, ‘ministry’ and ‘mission’ caught the attention of the laity, who continue to struggle to integrate within their faith and their lives meanings engendered by the concepts. Would ‘consecration’ earn the same accolade? If its introduction came across as an intervention made by ‘ecclesial insiders’, suspicion might be one lay response. For example, does the application of ‘consecrated’ infer that current lay commitment is in some way faulty, in need of repair by borrowing a concept most laity link to vowed religious life?

If this seems far-fetched, consider the fate of another concept strongly encouraged in the postconciliar Church – ‘evangelization’.

Programmes established to encourage greater individual lay evangelizing in neighbourhood and workplace, along with exhortations within documents and from the pulpit, were often politely disregarded. Perhaps the reason was that evangelization seemed to be a style linked to fundamentalistic denominations. Whatever the reason, it took hold minimally among the laity with the exception of participation in the popular Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

*Who are the lay people becoming?*

Lay leaders today might argue that the laity is currently in such creative flux that the first call is to perceive *this* reality and reflect upon it. Rather than defining by adding new terminology or by reworking an ancient term that for so long meant 'set apart', they would argue that what is needed today is a procedure:

- \* that exercises careful, non-judgemental observation of how post-conciliar lay identity is evolving;
- \* that notes transforming change and movement;
- \* that includes the participation and voice of the lay women and lay men.<sup>5</sup>

A generation has passed since the Council. Exactness about the development of the laity is hard to come by, however, as little thorough attention has been paid to changes in lay identity since Vatican Council II. Referring to the collapse of certain church structures and a revitalized laity, Congar used a Chinese saying: a tree falling makes a great noise, but when a new forest grows, no one hears or notices anything.<sup>6</sup> To the laity, the time to notice and hear is long overdue.

Who has studied the postconciliar evolution of the laity in procedures akin to those described above? Who is engaged in what one might call 'layology' as distinct from ecclesiology? Pastors care about lay adults in their parishes; bishops do the same in their dioceses, but reflections on changes in lay identity seem scant. National lay associations are concerned about particular facets of lay life. Few theologians seem intrigued by the scope and challenge of developing a layology. Sociologists within the field of religion seem to be the group most interested in what lay people believe today and how they act on these beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Their findings are significant but, without collation, without studies of more rigour and depth, surveys run the risk of facile interpretations. Wisdom dictates a more adequate response to the evolving identity of lay people, a response with a focus, not only on problems, but also on progress, a focus on the fruit-bearing that is unfolding within actual, lay-oriented lives rather than a focus on

passing trends that are force-fed through short-lived programmes instigated at times by lay leaders as well as clergy. The serious decline in church attendance necessitates open-ended, rigorous study of contemporary laity as well as the development, with lay leaders, of a theology of the laity.

No one winced at one time when interchangeable with the term laity was the phrase 'people in the pews' or the adjective 'ordinary'. In liturgical parlance we had Ordinary Time as a season and in ecclesial parlance we had ordinary folk in the fold. Today resentment is often an interior lay response to hints that the function of the laity is to pay, pray and obey. Lay women and lay men have discovered their *dignity*, and within this the desire to define themselves with a vitality of voice unknown in the past.

Who are the lay people becoming? Although it is a hazardous endeavour, I will posit five models that seem to be emerging regarding contemporary lay identity.

#### *The conventional Catholic*

Of the five models this lay identity most comfortably straddles preconiliar and postconiliar concepts. Conventional lay Catholics have fused their spirituality with sacramental offerings within a local church. Mission is perceived generically as 'love of neighbour' spelled out in acts of charity. Ministry and community have not become internalized though they may be experienced as such from time to time. Being 'a good Catholic' is a privatized endeavour.

#### *The voluntary lay minister*

Although too broad and uneven to qualify as a category for lay identity, since it ranges from occasional liturgical leadership such as lecturing to almost full-time voluntary work within a local church, some lay believers embrace this participatory designation as a central sign of who they are in the Church. In addition to parish-based laity engaged in voluntary ministry, in recent years volunteer corps have attracted young lay Catholics to a year or more of service that sometimes becomes a faith-transforming experience.

#### *Leadership within service on the border of Church and society*

Leadership is a natural fruit of mature adulthood and calls for a variety of outlets to tap its potential. World-wide, since time immemorial, adults have led families, have led others in learning crafts and businesses, have led in civic discernments whether around campfires or

in national parliaments. This model and the one that follows provide a significant identity for a growing number of mature lay Catholics.

Today lay women and men are found in service and leadership in parish outreach to the larger community, in other-than-parish church institutions, and in service-oriented, societal organizations. In Catholic hospitals, nursing homes, elementary and secondary schools, colleges and service organizations such as Catholic charities, lay persons associated with these institutions often perceive their ecclesial identity as linked to these settings. Included within this model is participation in social justice outreach, such as in shelters for the homeless or for battered women, and in political advocacy on behalf of peace, for example, or the poor. These activities may or may not be under the Catholic umbrella but they provide an internalized spiritual identity for the women and men who participate in this leadership and service. In this inventory I would also include lay Christians who *initiate* projects that lie on the border between Church and society. For example, several years ago in Boston a Catholic doctor who specializes in surgery for disfigured children began each year to donate a month of his time and expertise to such children in Latin America. Out of that emerged *Por Cristo*, a lay-led organization that is now developing diocesan ties. Greater ecclesial recognition and affirmation of these lay mission labours is surely needed.

For some lay people commitment to a Third Order identity within a religious congregation absorbs significant attention and energy and influences how lay identity is perceived.

This flux and vitality is not often noted by conventional Catholics nor recognized by ecclesial leadership even though the service offered and the leadership exercised in particular border apostolates may be vibrantly shaping lay identity. In dioceses resistant to multiple forms of organized lay-led outreach, lay adults with strong service and leadership potential sometimes, in frustration, drift away from the Church.

#### *Mission within family and secular institutions*

In the mid-eighties, a preparatory schema for the National Consultation on the vocation of the Laity in the World stated:

We have been accustomed to keeping our religion in church, but we know from our faith and experience that God's grace and love are present in our world – in our work and in our intimacies . . . Our Church has paid too little attention to the religious nature of our worldly vocation.<sup>8</sup>

In the decade that followed, a scattering of programmes and literature emerged that were pertinent to the world of work and the life of family.

(In contemporary western cultures where family life has broken down, the latter assumes a mission stance.) However, on the front lines of lay mission, clarity remains elusive for several reasons. The straddling here is not between preconciliar and postconciliar; it is between the challenges of society and the role of local church in enabling lay adults to meet the specificity of those challenges through mission. Development of lay leadership in the mission of family, work and civic life is, at best, in puberty, perhaps because the Church is still learning how to include lay persons as *adults* within its institutional framework.<sup>9</sup> The Jesuit John Coleman points to another difficulty. Although Catholicism presents a strong social sense of the individual person within communities and institutions as well as a substantial acceptance of the common good, Coleman claims that 'the very notion and category of citizenship is quite undeveloped in Catholic social thought'.<sup>10</sup>

Few pastors and bishops have been as vigorous as Cardinal Pironio of the Pontifical Council of the Laity in stating:

The laity should be the way of the world in the midst of the Church, and this presupposes that they have the responsibility to discern temporal realities and the right and duty to transmit the results of their discernments to the ecclesial community with sincerity and courage.<sup>11</sup>

Leadership opportunities have been scarce for lay adults to transmit the results of their discernments or even engage in frank exchange with lay adults in similar mission endeavours within parishes, dioceses and national church arenas. Without these opportunities, integration within lay identity can remain problematic. Use of the term 'consecrated' for the heroic mission efforts of many lay believers might provide temporary balm for some but would be perceived by others as one more patronizing gesture that avoids facing the heart of the problem.

#### *The lay professional ministerial leader*

As remunerated lay ministerial leadership, exercised by those theologically and spiritually prepared for the task, increases in the Church, it becomes a primary identity for those so engaged. A recent study commissioned by the Committee on Pastoral Practices of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops estimates that, in the United States, on the parish level there are 20,000 financially remunerated pastoral leaders who are not ordained.<sup>12</sup> In addition, innumerable lay women and some lay men are engaged professionally in campus ministry, hospital and prison chaplaincy, and the ministry of spirituality. Other countries, such as Germany and Austria, have sophisticated structures



and payment mechanisms for lay pastoral leadership. As lay ministerial leadership increases, fears about clericalization of the laity will fade as they already have in many settings in the United States. Resisting this movement of lay leadership puts the survival of the Church at risk in some regions. In a recent pastoral letter Archbishop Thomas Murphy of Seattle declared, 'A pastoral challenge exists today to call more people to use their ministerial gifts and talents in new forms of leadership'. Lay persons or deacons serving as Pastoral Life Directors 'have the responsibility to provide pastoral and organizational leadership for the community to fulfill its ministry and mission', within parishes without a resident priest.<sup>13</sup>

With appropriate spiritual formation, the fusion of lay identity with professional pastoral ministry has enabled many lay women and married men to wear the mantle of leadership with grace. As leadership becomes somewhat laicized on local levels, the generation of young Catholics now being formed may as adults expect, within equality of discipleship, expanded lay roles in governance. The lay voice beyond the local church received uneven implementation after Vatican Council II. Some European countries fostered National Pastoral Councils of elected lay members while other countries, like the UK and the US, did not.<sup>14</sup>

Qualities that cohere with the term 'consecration' can be found in certain individual lay women and lay men in each model of lay identity described above. The numbers, varieties and faith backgrounds of lay persons in each model, on the other hand, indicate that a blanket use of 'consecration' for the laity is not a wise move; reductionism of the concept is sure to follow. To select particular lay persons or one particular model of lay identity for 'consecration' would be divisive at a time when varied forms of postconciliar lay identity are still evolving.

Awareness of evolving lay identity was strikingly affirmed in the document, *Cooperation with the laity in mission*, of the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus earlier this year.

The grace of the new era of the Church and the movement to solidarity impel us to work more decisively to strengthen the bonds among all these [lay] persons and groups . . . [to] develop what might be called 'an Ignatian apostolic network'.

Regarding works in the Society, it was stated: 'Lay persons will rightly take on a greater role of responsibility and leadership', one which will 'signify a genuine Ignatian partnership of laity and Jesuits, each acting according to their proper vocation'.<sup>15</sup>

What are the needs then as one century passes into another? One need is to meet the people on the paths they are actually walking. This may necessitate abandoning preconceived notions and inherited terminology about paths and laity in order to affirm that several types of postconciliar lay identity have evolved, ones that represent diverse relationships to the local church. A second need is similar to the first: to respond to the dignity of the lay person by working to enhance concepts and terms that postconciliar laity have embraced, such as 'community', 'ministry' and 'mission', rather than introducing new concepts and terms. A third need is to create structures, on diocesan or regional levels perhaps, to enable greater clarity about lay participation and leadership in societal missions. A fourth need is to rid the Church of bias based on gender and class, by integrating lay leadership into governance within the Church. A final need is one of benefit to each model of lay identity: to implement varied processes for spiritual development. According to Chenu, traditionally, 'a consecrated person must be separated in thought and feeling, in body and dress from the occupations, work, interests and behavior of others . . .' Chenu contrasted the evocation of sacredness through consecration with holiness: 'Holiness does not relinquish its original state'.<sup>16</sup> The conciliar call to holiness resonates within many lay women and lay men; structures are needed to respond to this desire for authentic and mature means to deepen spirituality and to enhance its beauty and power.

Of course, how we respond to the needs of the lay women and lay men at this juncture may depend on how we perceive what the Holy Spirit has been doing regarding the laity. Do we believe that he has abandoned the people? Or do we believe that she is reshaping the Church, in amazing ways, through the people?

'Pious' once characterized the lay woman or man dedicated to faith and God. Since Vatican Council II some lay people have drifted away from their faith, others drift within their faith. What is truly startling, however, are the number of lay women and lay men who have become *passionate* about their faith in the way Elizabeth Dreyer defines passion:

an intense form of affectivity, especially of love and desire between God and the human person. In addition to the descriptor 'intense', one thinks of 'strong', 'vehement', 'enthusiastic', 'ardent', 'zealous', . . . Further I will posit that passion is a mysterious impulse toward human wholeness and freedom. The passionate experience has the potential to open up one's personality, to lead one toward fuller self-knowledge, and to contribute to a new self. Passion functions to organize every aspect of an individual's life . . .<sup>17</sup>

We may have hoped for more peace, harmony and progress among the People of God since Vatican Council II, but, realistically, should we have anticipated more than what has occurred – the infusion, by the Holy Spirit, of passion within the people designated lay by the institution of the Church?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> M. D. Chenu OP, 'Consecratio mundi' in A. Auer et al. (eds), *The Christian and the world* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1965), pp 161–177.

<sup>2</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, 11, 3; 40, 2; 1 (emphasis mine). See Yves Congar, 'Moving toward a pilgrim Church' in Alberic Stacpoole (ed), *Vatican II revisited by those who were there* (Minneapolis MN: Winston Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Hegy, 'Baby boomers and the transmission of faith' in *America* (4 February 1995).

<sup>4</sup> *Notre Dame study of parish Catholic life* (South Bend IN: Notre Dame, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> For example, in-depth interviews of grass-roots lay Catholics, sponsored by the National Association of Lay Ministers, though a small study, reveal perseverance in a long process of integration of Vatican Council II elements within the faith lives of mid-life believers (Chanhasen MN, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Congar, *op. cit.*, 'A last look at the Church', p 352.

<sup>7</sup> See sociological studies by Hoge, Greeley, Gallup et al.

<sup>8</sup> 'The new American Catholic: the challenge of power and responsibility – a call for lay initiatives' (Chicago: National Center for the Laity, 1986). A noteworthy new enterprise in this regard is The Center for Spirituality and Work in Austin, Texas, founded by Dr Juan Lorenzo Hinojosa.

<sup>9</sup> See the author's *Pilgrims in this world* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990). See also Neil Parent (ed), *Christian adulthood – a catechetical resource* (Washington DC: The United States Catholic Conference, 1985, 1986). See also: *Called and gifted: the American Catholic laity 1980: reflections of the US bishops*; 'Adult ministries consultation', *Origins* (Washington DC: Origins NC Documentary Service) vol 14, no 36 (1985).

<sup>10</sup> John Coleman SJ, 'Communitarian lessons for social Catholicism', *Rights, authority and community*, CCIA Annual vol 13 (Philadelphia: The Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Cardinal Pironio, *The formation of the laity: twelve theses* (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for the Laity, 1987), p 12.

<sup>12</sup> Phillip Murnion, David DeLambo, Rosemary Dilli SSND, Harry Fagan, *New parish ministers – laity and religious on parish staffs* (New York: The National Pastoral Life Center, 1992). See also Pamela Thibodeau Hardiman and Madeleine Provost, *On-going formation resources use by lay ministers* (National Association for Lay Ministry, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Archbishop Thomas Murphy of Seattle, 'Pastoral care of parish communities', *Origins* vol 24, no 44 (1995).

<sup>14</sup> 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, *Cooperation with the laity in mission*, D 20, 21; *Origins* vol 24, no 43 (1995).

<sup>15</sup> For an insightful analysis of current efforts to restrict the lay voice on national levels see Thomas J. Rees SJ, 'The Bishops' Conference: more secretive, more clerical, less vocal' in *America* (3–10 June 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Chenu, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Dreyer, 1989 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality, *Passionate women: two medieval mystics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).