

# THE CHURCH AND THE LAITY

By MICHAEL BOSSY

IT HAS BEEN SAID that one of the more revolutionary teachings of Vatican Council II is that every one of God's people, whether he belong to the hierarchy in its various forms, to the religious or to the lay state, is called to the one holiness of Christ.<sup>1</sup> The Council Fathers were unanimous in this universal vocation of all christians to holiness, a call which derives from their baptism. Karl Rahner has gone so far as to describe this unanimity as 'a prodigious event in the history of the Church'. Though students of spirituality will regard statements such as these with the suspicion which generalizations and over-simplifications arouse in the historical mind,<sup>2</sup> it is a fact that the evangelical call to all who are 'baptized in Christ' to his own holiness is a truth that has been lost sight of for several centuries in the western Church.

Beginning, then, from the strong and clear re-affirmation in its conciliar documents, that holiness is the basic vocation of all the members of Christ's body, we wish to deal here with the specific vocation of the layman in the Church, and to ask what the Council has said of the lay state as distinct from that of the cleric and the religious.<sup>3</sup>

The Council is explicit and consistent about the area in which the layman exercises his mission: 'The laity by their very vocation seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs . . . They live in the world, that is in all and each of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life'.<sup>4</sup> The world, human society, the life of the earthly city, the

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<sup>1</sup> The order of the chapters in *Lumen Gentium* is significant here: the chapter on the people of God precedes that on the hierarchy; and the chapter which treats of the universal call to holiness precedes that on the religious state.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between perfection and salvation - the former being the 'state' of bishops and religious, the latter implying a lower standard of holiness, is a comparatively late 'western' innovation, and has always had its opponents.

<sup>3</sup> The main sources for the thought of the Council Fathers on the specific mission of the layman in the Church are: *Lumen Gentium*, ch IV (30-38); *Gaudium et Spes*, 33-45; and, of course, the decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

temporal order: here are some of the descriptions of the field of specific lay activity. More precisely, the Council refers to the elements of the temporal order as 'the good things of life and the prosperity of the family, culture, economic affairs, the arts and professions, political institutions, international relations'. It is an area largely closed to religious and clergy: 'The laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can she become the salt of the earth'.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the temporal order, then, that the laity exercise their mission of sanctifying, teaching and governing: the mission of Christ himself as priest, prophet and king.<sup>2</sup> The Council leaves us in no doubt that the laity are called to share in the royal office of Christ, as it meditates on the words of St Paul: 'he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor 15, 25ff). Christ is lord over all things; and the laity share in this lordship in three ways: first, by establishing Christ's rule over their own lives, freely submitting themselves to him by prayer, self-denial and a holy life; secondly, by bringing others to acknowledge his own reign; thirdly, by bringing all created values, the world and the temporal order, into subjection to Christ'.<sup>3</sup> To further this mission, the layman must attain genuine competence in his own field of secular activity, and must learn to respect the values of the created order; he must refuse to substitute what he considers to be directly religious values for professional skill and competence.

*Gaudium et Spes* clarifies and deepens this teaching on the value of creation and its temporal order, and the layman's role in it. It insists first on man's developing mastery over nature, and his increasing desire for the unity of all men. This pastoral constitution shows us how man's growing competence and increasing awareness of human solidarity depend from the incarnation and are to reach their fulfilment in him who shares this royal office in a special way with the laity in their wordly activity. Basing its teaching on Genesis, the constitution states that all human attempts to control the powers of nature and the universe are in accordance with God's will: it follows, in fact, from God's command to till the earth and to subdue it. To master nature does not set man in conflict with God: God's

<sup>1</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> This mission is especially referred to the role of the father of a family: cf Burke, T. W. 'As Christ loved the Church', *THE WAY* (April 1964) Vol 4, 2, pp 138-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 36.

design is that the world should be developed, explored, controlled and unified by the activity of men; 'it is the task of the lay christian to commit himself with sure confidence to his task of building up the temporal order'.

But in fact the temporal order is subject to sin. Man's attempts to master nature have so often led to a pride that denies any dependence upon God. Man's self-love, self-aggrandisement, constantly brings about the fragmentation of human society rather than the development of its solidarity. The 'world', in its biblical usage, so often means that which is locked against God's love, and as such is subject to vanity.

Despite its own autonomy, then, the temporal order cannot reach its own fulfilment except in relation to Christ. Without Christ and the Spirit of love that he sends forth into our hearts, the kingdom of truth, justice and love cannot be founded. And so, though the grace of Christ and the life of the Church is primarily to direct man towards God, the temporal order itself is renewed and reaches its own natural fulfilment only in Christ: that is to say through the Church and in particular through the lay christian.

We are not however to expect the perfect completion of the temporal order in this life. Because it depends upon the grace of Christ, the perfection of the created order awaits his final coming:

We do not know the time for the consummation of the earth and of humanity. Nor do we know how all things will be transformed. As deformed by sin, the shape of this world will pass away. But we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling place and a new earth where justice will abide and whose blessedness will answer and surpass all the longings for peace which spring up in the human heart . . . For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in his spirit, nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured.<sup>1</sup>

Without dilating further on the Council's teaching concerning the laity's share in Christ's mission as king, priest and prophet. I would like to examine more in detail the theological principles of that authentic christian humanism which insists so strongly on the

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 39.

value of the temporal order and human activity in its relation to Christ. It must be remembered, however, that the problems which have faced the Church in the west during the past five hundred years have effectively prevented theologians until comparatively recently from developing the implications of sacred scripture concerning the relationship of the created order to Christ, and through Christ, in the Spirit, to the Father. It is for the laity themselves to accept the theological task which the Church, through the documents of Vatican II, has declared unhesitatingly to be theirs, and to study the principles particularly as set out in *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. They may be stated simply as follows:

- 1) The created order, simply because it is created by God, is good.
- 2) God has given us a command to gain mastery over nature: it is in gaining this mastery that man manifests his likeness to God and grows closer to him.
- 3) Sin has led to the natural order tyrannizing over man, revealing itself in the fragmentation of human society, culminating in decay and death.
- 4) Christ became true man. He entered fully and completely, without reservation or make-believe, into the temporal, secular order. He became man in a particular historical, cultural, domestic and economic situation. He was truly man in that he accepted the fundamental human situation of death. However, he rose from the dead as head of a new humanity, with new potentialities, communicating God's love to us in the strength of the Spirit.
- 5) This regeneration of human life is completed in Christ. In the rest of humanity it is, however, only inaugurated; it will not be completed until the end of time, when Christ returns and hands over the kingdom to his Father.
- 6) This leaves christians with a task: the task of receiving God's spirit more and more fully into their lives, of conforming themselves more and more to the death and resurrection of Christ through God's sons in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

The Church is the sign and reality of Christ's salvation, that is to say, of his incarnation, death and resurrection. Man must be enabled to see, in the Church and in every christian, that the created order is good; that commitment to its values is a sign of Christ's incarnation. At the same time, man must be brought to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Rom 8, 18-23.

understand that the values of the world are values only in so far as they are under the sign of death and the cross which are the essential prerequisites of the new creation, whose source is the risen Christ and his Spirit. This new creation will be fully consummated only when he comes again; when the effects of his resurrection are complete. Meantime, we have a pledge and foretaste of that consummation here and now in the life of the Church. Applying this teaching to the life of the christian in the world of today, the Council says:

Christ is now at work in the hearts of men through the energy of his spirit. He arouses not only a desire for the age to come, but by that very fact, he animates, purifies and strengthens those noble longings by which the human family strives to make its life more human and to render the whole earth submissive to this goal. Now the gifts of the spirit are diverse. He calls some to give clear witness to a desire of a heavenly home and to keep this desire green among the human family. He summons others to dedicate themselves to the earthly service of men and to make ready the material of the celestial ruler by this ministry of theirs.<sup>1</sup>

Here, the Church is resolving an age-old antinomy by declaring that the spirit of Christ leads the people of God both to a flight from the world and a commitment to it. She sees these two necessary christian attitudes expressed first of all in the life of religious and secondly in the life of the laity. The religious life in the Church witnesses to the fact that the world cannot be transfigured except through the intervention of God, and that its consummation will not be effected until the second coming; whereas the life of the laity in the Church is a life committed to working in the world, bringing it under man's control, using its goods with justice, striving to bring about the peace and unity of the human race as a sign to the world that the world is created by God's love, a love that drove him to become true man.

Though these two aspects of the christian life may be seen disjunctively, that is, in the religious life as contrasted with the life of the laity, they are to be seen at the same time as integrated parts of a whole, present in differing degrees in the lives of very christian,

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 38.

under the direction of the Spirit. For laity and religious alike, there will be the aspect of ascetical sacrifice of some worldly good and of affirmative service of some created value in the world. The religious may not reject creation as something evil. But neither may the lay christian think that ultimate success in his commitment to the secular needs of the world will be achieved through the natural structures of the world. It is the mark of the mature lay christian to preserve this balance: to work honestly and with dedication inside the laws and framework of his own profession, to bring justice, peace and happiness to the world; and yet to know that it is only by God's transforming grace that justice, peace and happiness will be brought to the world. Man will remain a victim of his own folly and sinfulness, just as death, according to the pattern set by Christ, will remain the last gateway to fulness of life.

The christian must preserve a fundamental optimism towards the world; not the optimism of the agnostic humanist, but of the believer, who knows in faith that the world has been taken radically and irrevocably into the loving care of the Father through and with and in Christ. It is an optimism that endures in and through death, disaster and sin, because the christian knows that it is in and through Christ's death that the power of his resurrection is spread over the world. The christian must be optimistic, then, but not utopian: optimistic because Christ has been raised from the dead as the first fruits of those who are subjected to God the Father; not utopian, not deluded into thinking that the inherent structures of the world can bring peace and happiness. It is a sober optimism, alert to the truth that it is only by Christ's passion and cross that we are brought to the glory of his resurrection.

It is now a platitude to remark that 'the age-old detachment of the Church from the evil world is no longer valid'.<sup>1</sup> Though the historian will quarrel seriously with the adjective 'age-old', it is necessary to insist that it is not a christian attitude to let the world go along on its own course, while christians immerse themselves in a supernatural isolation because scripture tells them that the 'form of this world is passing away'. There may still be christians who rejoice in the inability of the world to attain justice and peace. To such the Council gives no consolation. It bids us to shoulder the gigantic task of serving the men of the modern world: a task that demands fulfilment in this world. But to assert that detachment

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<sup>1</sup> Cf editorial comment in *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 (Documents of Vatican II, *ed. cit.* p 497).

from the world is no longer valid would be to throw overboard the implications of the incarnation. This world is still subject to vanity, to weakness, sin and death. What is more, its values, artistic, scientific, material, exercise a fascination over us and easily enslave us. To the christian who is bold enough, in the spirit of the council, to serve the world, detachment is doubly necessary lest what he hopes to serve becomes his master. The gifts of the Spirit lead some to witness to the grace from on high that saves the world, others to witness to its effect in healing the sinful world. The Council adds: 'Yet the Spirit frees all of them, so that by putting aside love of self and bringing all earthly resources to the service of human life, they can devote themselves to that future when humanity will become an offering accepted by God.'<sup>1</sup> Prudence and fidelity to the promptings of God's spirit within us will preserve in us that mature balance whereby we serve the world without becoming subject to it. St Paul could only express this balance in paradox: 'let those who deal with the world live as though they had no dealings with it'.<sup>2</sup> And of the authentic christian he said: 'having nothing yet possessing all things'.<sup>3</sup>

From what source will the layman who is acting in the sphere specifically reserved to him, in secular matters, derive his christian awareness of secular life? Is initiative in bringing christian action dependent upon the clergy? In social action, in professional activity, in the economic, political, educational or domestic spheres, can he expect an answer to all problems from the priest? Must he await the hierarchy's initiative? The Council has this to say:

Laymen should know that it is generally the function of their well-formed christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city. From priests they may look for spiritual life and nourishment. Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather enlightened by christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church let the layman take on his own distinctive role'.<sup>4</sup>

This statement would appear to echo the distinction Karl Rahner makes between principles and prescriptions. By principles he

<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 38.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 7, 31.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 6, 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

means those eternally valid truths either of the natural law, e.g. 'private property is man's inalienable right'; or of the supernatural law, e.g. 'one should love one's neighbour as oneself'. Such principles are and must be preached in the Church, but their preaching and their acceptance do not necessarily imply effective and appropriate action in particular concrete circumstances of day-to-day life. Prescriptions for appropriate action are required: decisions that issue into action based on principles, but based on the realistically suitable assessment of how christian principles may be put into practice. Often it will be the layman, with his knowledge of the essentially secular conditions in which effective christianity must be practiced, who can devise appropriate prescriptions for social, economic, political and professional life. The clergy frequently lack the competence to devise such prescriptions. The gift or charism that the Church most seems to need is that of devising appropriate prescriptions for social problems of the day: housing, the old, the inadequate, education, marriage counselling and a thousand other things. Without such prescriptions christianity will remain true but irrelevant, just as theology will remain irrelevant unless it comes into contact through the layman with the secular world of thought.

It would, however, be fatal to overstress the distinction to the point where the hierarchy and the clergy seem as remote planners dealing with the world at one remove through the laity. Vatican II insists that the bishop must be in direct contact with all men, using all the media of modern communications.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that very often bishop and clergy alike will have to put their principles into practice and that lay theology will involve the laity themselves reformulating certain principles. The distinction, then, will only find its true meaning in an authentic interdependence between clergy and laity: in that 'familiar dialogue' which will achieve 'in the laity, a strengthened sense of personal responsibility, a renewed enthusiasm, a more ready application of their talents to the projects of their pastors. The latter, for their part, aided by the experience of the laity, can more clearly and more suitably come to decisions regarding spiritual and temporal matters'. It is in terms of this interdependence that the charism proper to each will be effective. 'In this way, the whole Church, strengthened by each one of its members, can more effectively fulfil its mission for the life of the world'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Christus Dominus*, 12 - 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 37.



*Charism*

There has been much talking and writing in the Council and elsewhere on the gift or charisms of the holy Spirit in the Church. A few points may usefully be summarized here:

- 1) That these gifts are ordinary and continuous in the Church and not confined merely to the early Church and extraordinary phenomena.
- 2) That they may be given to all and are not simply mediated to the laity through the hierarchy.
- 3) That office in the Church itself is a charism; one of whose functions is not to extinguish the Spirit in the Church, but to test all things and to hold on to what is good.

For our immediate purpose, then, we may say that the initiative of the Spirit reaches the layman directly, particularly in secular matters. This does not, however, exempt the layman from the hierarchy's authority. The hierarchy's function is both to test the solidity of the spirit and to order it in such a way that it operates for the good of the whole Church. Just as 'when Christ came into the world, he said, Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure. Then I said, Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God',<sup>1</sup> and as he himself said 'as the Father has sent us, even so I send you',<sup>2</sup> so the Spirit is given concrete embodiment in the life of the Church under the control of the bishops. Consequently the Council can say both that 'No project can claim the name Catholic unless it has obtained the consent of the lawful Church authority' and also 'that in receiving these charisms believers need to enjoy the freedom of the holy Spirit who breathes where he wills'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Heb 10, 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 20, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 24.