

# MISSION AND LAITY

By AUSTIN WINKLEY

**T**HE VATICAN Council's decree on the Apostolate of the Laity was an unfortunate document. Let us hope that there will be no need for its like again. The dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, gave us an inspiring description of the Church and her Mission, which applied as much to the laity as to the clergy; but in finding it necessary to produce a separate document addressed exclusively to the lay-apostolate, the Council fathers made a terrible admission of attitudes prevailing at that time: that there is something inferior and second-class about the role of the laity.

I have tried for many years now to overcome this attitude which was impressed upon us for so long. More alarming perhaps, is the very poor quality of so much of the Church's mission activity. Soon after the Council, various Commissions were set up, and pastoral councils at diocesan and parochial level. Questions of immediate and far-reaching concern were raised, and also many irrelevancies. People serving on these forums found themselves involved in ever-expanding areas of discussion, often needing specialist knowledge, of which they had less and less understanding. It is hardly surprising that their enthusiasm became defused, the more so because they have had virtually no part in the decision-making in the areas of their concern, a situation which reveals a lack of trust on the part of those responsible for setting up these bodies. Equally, for the millions of other lay people of God, the order of the day has been a minimum of information and involvement, and very little spiritual animation. There are, I admit, immense difficulties. The people at large are ignorant and unskilled in matters of theology and the workings of Church strategy (which, incidentally, has become an art in an institution as complex as ours). However, if consultation is recommended so strongly by the Vatican Council, who can be called upon? At first it was very much 'the experts' (God help us! I was considered such a one!): people with some experience in specific fields or the organized lay apostolate. It is interesting to note here that the provisional Laity Commission was in the main drawn from members of two organizations — the Newman and the Jocist (intellectuals and workers, to put it plainly). But the Laity Commission proper, five years later, was then considered to be ready for a much more democratic membership; and for the people involved it has probably been a most formative time, if they have used it well.

The need, now long overdue, is for a positive formation and a power-sharing programme for all committed catholics. Either our bishops must follow the lead provided by the Commissions or speak out on the shortcomings of recommendations which they cannot accept and provide the formation needed to improve standards. For my current view of our Church is of a people ignorant and oppressed by an institution which pressures its members to worship a God who is remote. The ignorance is closely tied to our traditional way of religious instruction. We were drilled in the doctrines of the Penny Catechism, in a situation where little attention was given to informed adult formation. This forced childishness is reflected in the sad situation of much of christian theology. Theology has become a science, where wise men spend years on matters quite beyond the grasp of the mass of people whom they are supposedly serving. It is surely one subject which, of its nature, is not for the personal satisfaction and consumption of the theologians themselves; their responsibility is to extract the living essence and make it comprehensible to the people. Due to this lack of adequate christian formation, people seem to have become split broadly into two groups: 'the quietly devout' group and the 'I don't see the relevance' group. Both groups constantly fail to sense the presence of Christ in the here and now: the first putting up with the daily cross and concentrating on the joys of a kingdom in the after life; the other finding no link with day-to-day life.

The Church is indeed a complex institution, needing specialists for certain jobs; but it is important that these are not seen as the essence of our faith. The essentials are simple to grasp — if difficult to live; and the complexities of today's Church have so often crowded out this fact. We need to rediscover the essentials, so as to build up greater confidence in the hearts of the people of God. Surely the main work of our Church is to foster a strong awareness of Christ's presence in each other, and to activate our creative potential in the living God's kingdom on earth. The formation needed to develop such awareness has been touched on in earlier papers. All I wish to point out is that the Church should not remain oblivious of the secular educational developments. Christian growth is directly a part of personal human growth. The mere acquisition of scriptural, doctrinal, spiritual information is not adequate for developing the potential of the committed christian. Our formation must be more closely linked to discovering and extending our commitment to christianity, and less with the old concept of rule-learning. For that is a method which perpetuates someone else's selective ideas, and is to that extent allied more to brainwashing than the free discovery

of reality. An experience which is one's own can be shared and related to the joy of others in ways that inherited facts can not.

Some modern catechetics impress me as being orientated in this way; they produce an impressive, informed simplicity among the young. Among adults it is less apparent, but it has existed in our Church for several years in organizations which can be roughly equated with those using the 'see, judge and act' method; and both before and since the Council it has proved valuable in forming a steady trickle of apostolic christians, who have been invaluable members of commissions and parish councils, providing awareness of local, national and global needs and resisting strong tendencies to parochial self-interest.

At the same time, even among the apostolically formed, as well as among the members of the Church at large, there are many forms of oppression. With some, it is clearly recognized and reacted against. With others it is meekly accepted, as imposed by superiors, who are thought to know what's best. Inevitably, apart from secular institutes, these superiors are clergy, who have for many hundreds of years held all decision-taking positions in our Church. This unfortunate situation is largely the result of lay-people having unrealistic expectations of the clergy; but it is also true that there are too few laity with the experience needed to run an institution as extensive and complex as the Church. Here again there is the need for education as lay people take on responsible roles in the institution; they have to be aware of the apostolic dimension of their work; not struggling to become clerical, but serving the people of the institution and the world for which it exists.

Personally, I believe that many more levels of decision-taking could be shared confidently among all concerned members of our Church. It would certainly make for a more mature Church. Because the laity are ignorant and oppressed by the institution, they lack confidence. We were expected to grow by concentrating on our weaknesses. For years, the virtual equating of practising the faith with searching out and recognizing these weaknesses has generated among catholics a low opinion of their christian stature. It has been argued that this 'humility' was our strong point; but I suggest that it has held us back from developing a confidence that should rightly be expected of a people with faith and a mission to love everyone.

The ignorance is a lack of familiarity with the nature of the Church and the layman's role of bringing the gospel to the temporal order. Incredibly few workers and professional people are able to speak with vision about their place in the world, a place to which only they have the opportunity to bring the good news. How much of our resources

are directed at countering this state of affairs? Theology in these areas appears rudimentary, probably because we lack lay-theologians who have a first-hand knowledge of the industrial and professional milieu, and only a small number of chaplains or worker-priests who have managed to come to terms with mission in these fields. Priests I have known who enter these laymen's territories rapidly get caught up in the injustices to be found there, often making great sacrifices, but failing to motivate the laymen to be Christlike in ways that include justice, but going beyond to a broader sense of his presence in people and places.

Here, I would in fact identify the field of work as the one in which we should make greater efforts to clarify our mission. For myself as an architect, I find many fellow-catholics who, knowing that my work includes church design, assume that this must be the area of my apostolate. Although I would not exclude it, I prefer to see my christian commitment in terms of architecture itself, an art but also a service by means of which, in working closely with people who are users, clients and builders, we should make a better environment. Ideally all work should have a creative dimension; but this is not inherent in most people's work. How then do the gospels apply to secular work? Unlike the Koran with its clear directives, even on how to run a state, all we have are the two amazing precepts of love. Maybe what we are called upon to do is take and imbue ourselves so strongly with these that they pervade our every action and offer us directives for our working life.

If this is so, then we are undoubtedly brought into the field of politics: not necessarily the party variety, but any forum where human problems are turned over and worked out in hope. No christian can be exempt from this process, whether in one's own neighbourhood, or at the national and international levels.

The true place of learning and growing in our christian life is initially the family. It is in the family that we can find the strength and weakness of close human relationships through which christian symbolism overflows into our sacramental system. In marriage, birth and death there are rich moments of experience which can illuminate the faith; but in the growth of a family, the day-to-day joys and sorrows can provide limitless manifestations of Christ's presence and his absence. It is here that feelings run high, and young and old alike develop in the sight of others by their responses to those feelings. This matter of feelings is crucial for our time; and it is most disturbing to observe how little theology is involved with feelings in its consideration of the apostolate. Only recently I found my hackles rising as I read in a parish newsletter the words, 'mere feelings': a most universally active God-given faculty,

and we are warned to mistrust it! This neglect is obviously linked with so many weaknesses both within our Church and in the world in general. Our relationships and our conscience are inextricably bound up with our feelings which, if properly identified, are not right or wrong but simply are. What we do about them affects ourselves and those with whom we live, and while for most of us most of the time our intellects fail to rationalize to a point that gives us confident responses, our emotions are the spring of our behaviour. For an effective mission within and beyond our Church, there is great need for us to ensure that all apostles, and particularly spiritual animators, are well versed in the nature of emotions and acquire the ability to empathize.

It is with a clear display of feeling that my seven-year-old daughter says that she is bored by the regular Sunday Mass in our church: the so-called children's mass as much as others, though a small group mass that has been introduced after the programmed services has caught her interest to a comforting extent. For those committed to the mission of the Church, a participation in and concern for liturgy is central; but my daughter's view is, I suspect, disturbingly widespread. Here again the words ignorance and oppression sum up my view. I have long observed that we Catholics are expected somehow to have an ever-widening intellectual grasp of our religion despite the futility of that expectation. We have talked of *celebrating* mass, certainly since my childhood; but with the exception of those who can see through the formal structure of our liturgy, few could easily recognize the goings-on as a celebration. It may be a historical format for celebrating something, but it is not surprising that the younger generation have difficulty in feeling part of it.

The rites for celebration with children are, however, quite promising; they seem to be closer to the expression of worship than most of the other new formularies. Otherwise I believe the emphases in worship are considerably off-course. We still seem to be more concerned that liturgies should be legally or accurately framed than that those sharing in the worship have a creative experience, one that feels right as a gathering. We must not be made to feel ignorant, but be led to joy and a real sense of renewal. This can only come from a greater involvement of the whole person: physical, bodily involvement and an emotional as well as an intellectual sense of sharing. Through regular contact and relating to one another, Christian worship may happen. The presidential role of the celebrant will come to its natural status when it has virtually nothing to do with facilitating the occasion, not carrying it nor seeming to perform a solo. Despite congregation

responses and the statutory lay reader, we have a long way to go before the creative shared liturgy can be seen as a free expression of our spiritual life. I feel it is time to re-think our programme. Weekly Sunday Mass may be all very well as a gathering-point, but how much real learning and growth goes on? I have felt for some time now that we would get far more from one whole Sunday a month as a day of worship, learning, praying, talking, laughing, singing, eating, meeting, dancing: one whole day committed to the spiritual dimension of our lives.

The oppression to which I refer is manifest in christian practice — the imposed obligation to attend Sunday Mass: surely something that is only continued because our Church has got itself into such financial straits. The attire expected to be worn by priests on seemingly every occasion: there is nothing more destructive to creative liturgy than the set-up for house-mass, where full vestments are worn by the celebrant and attempts are made to make a mini-church (in the misleading building sense of that word). The positions of standing or of kneeling prevail, while sitting or dancing might be more natural. Bread must not evidently seem to be bread, women must not be celebrants; so that the basis of our mission is heavy with dead wood. Finally our buildings, if not oppressive, are depressive, especially those with the old order shabbily re-arranged for celebration facing the people. These cry out for correction: we need to think hard on what our churches are for, and realize that long-standing makeshift arrangements are powerful symbols of decay. To do nothing about them is actively to frustrate apostles in what should be their inspiring meeting-place.

The oppression can also be recognized in the enormous financial burden to maintain much of our plant. Often lay-folk, because they are so uninvolved, feel little responsibility for providing the money; and big plant gets the clergy into enormous financial debt. Who is to get them out of it? Ultimately, the laity. To discuss the question of church plant in detail is perhaps getting a little off the point; but no realist, looking at the mission of the Church, can dismiss our need for buildings of some kind. Several misconceptions have been developing about this. It is undoubtedly true that we need to work at our worship, our group-meetings and relating together in houses, where development around the symbolic hearth can provide for much-needed growth. However, the need of small groups to share their experience and resources with others points to the need for larger places of assembly. Traditionally our Church buildings have been such places, consisting chiefly of a large worship-room made to meet the requirements of people attending Sunday Mass.

If we look at the needs of, say, a charismatic renewal group\* which may meet once a month for a full day's gathering, we have a brief for a building more like a modern synagogue than the church as we know it. It is a building-complex with worship-room, group-rooms, kitchen, dining facilities and recreation spaces. Pressured as we are by economic considerations, it is often thought that a multi-purpose hall can provide all that is needed. While much can be achieved by a vigorous community in such temporary provision, one has only to reflect on the situation of a school-hall used for dining, gym, drama, assembly and as a chapel, and compare the difference between such a hall and the well-designed specialist rooms for these activities in a purpose-built comprehensive school. Then the point about designing or altering existing churches to fit clearly defined needs of a worshipping and apostolic community today can be seen to need more complex requirements, a stage far removed from the types of churches of the past.<sup>1</sup> The plant we need should not only provide a place for worship and perhaps some recreation, but should reflect the outward-looking priorities of a caring community, enabling them to complement the Social Services, meet third-World commitments, and provide for the apostolic formation of all the members.

Where the institution has oppressed us, a variety of organizations have provided many directions for the individual to move out from the pew. It is impossible to assess their individual merits, weaknesses and points of recent growth. But there is one characteristic on which I would like to comment. There are several organizations which provide commendable apostolic formation, and among these several have rather formal enrolment procedures. These may be commendable from some points of view, but what has concerned me is the general lack of graduation or passing-out procedures. Rather than let people drift away or reluctantly reduce their commitment, it should be possible to devise a symbolic celebration of a new free commitment to the mission for which the organization has prepared them.

At a more significant level, it might be considered appropriate to drop the Sunday Mass obligation for those who are confirmed: a recognition that those who have been accepted as candidates for the

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<sup>1</sup> This is an appropriate place to warn against the disturbing trend towards building elaborate church clubs which have only a vague social purpose. Quite recently a Midland parish opened a club with three bars, each having a choice of eleven draught beers, a games-room with half a dozen one-armed bandits, all got up in the Costa Brava style and turning over £2000 per week. This surely is an excess, the product of a distorted pastoral strategy which requires no further comment.

sacrament have made a mature commitment to mission. We are concerned with personal decisions of prayer and worship which are expressions of freedom, and equally of support in the living out of love of God and one's fellows. Our motivation must change from fear of punishment and guilt frustrating our efforts.

Some organizations have helped to foster prayer, familiarity with the gospels and social commitment. Surely these essentials should be the hall-mark of all our organizations (as indeed they should be the work of every parish). And let those organizations that proudly claim to be only social alliances stop using christian labels. Our pastoral strategy must now be brought close to that of our mission. Once all christians are aware that we are not divided into the cared for and the caring, but that all share a measure of these needs and responsibilities, we shall all be more alive in Christ, and shall indeed be on the way!