

Church and laity

Give and take

Cathy Molloy

AT THE OUTSET I ACKNOWLEDGE THE DIFFICULTY many people have with the use of the term 'laity'. However, it is the language of magisterial teaching and includes here all the baptized who are not set apart by vows. I write mainly, but not exclusively, out of the experience of the post-Vatican II Irish Church, having lived in England and Belgium for extended periods, and having spent many years studying and teaching theology with people from all continents. I am convinced that over-emphasis on who does what around the altar is obscuring the fact that real change will come from the sharing of the theological enterprise with all the baptized. This I believe is required by the Church as a communion.

Era of the laity

Hailed as the dawning of the era of the laity, the early post-Vatican II period looked as though it would indeed be a time when lay men and women might begin to believe that they *were* the Church, that their call to holiness based on baptism may have radical consequences in the future. It was not surprising that the experience varied greatly according to the degree to which local church leaders were willing to engage with the new ideas and to begin the shared journey on which their meaning would unfold, but there was a sense of excitement and anticipation that has not been equalled since.

It must be hard for younger people today to imagine that the Church, and one's place in it, was a lively topic of conversation, and that people in the streets and market places, in schools and in pubs, were drawn along on a tide of new hope and a sense of discovery about what it meant to be the People of God. All kinds of people wanted to get involved. Whether it was the novelty of a parish-based Bible study group, or discussion with members of other churches, engagement with new forms of liturgy, or discussions about traditional and new ways of living out Christian life, faith and church-talk were the stuff of everyday conversation. Everybody had an opinion and it seemed that everybody's opinion counted.

Even before lay people were able to grasp their content fully, documents such as *Gaudium et spes* and *Lumen gentium* presented possibilities of a new way of being Church. The universal call to holiness, the participation of the laity in the threefold mission of Christ, not by concession of the hierarchy but by baptism, the 'rightful autonomy of earthly realities' (GS 36), the rediscovery of the dignity of marriage, human love and sexuality, all conveyed a sense of the life of the lay Christian being drawn in from the edge towards the centre of the Church as the People of God. Once the initial flush of enthusiasm died down, what became of the new insights regarding the role of the lay person? As things turned out, excitement about the new possibilities for laity was quickly overtaken by the crisis of identity of priests and religious which was itself caught up in the beginnings of change for women brought about by feminism and the resultant male identity crisis.

Missed opportunity for laity or necessary discovery for clergy and religious?

The pre-Vatican II formation regime for aspiring priests had been heavily weighted in favour of the academic over the affective. In the midst of the changes and experimentation that ensued there was an irony in that it seemed Vatican II was the signal for many clergy and religious to get out of what they sometimes refer to as 'head theology' and into the heart, and no doubt this was necessary to some degree in the interest of balance. They did this with great gusto, as instanced by the surge in charismatic movements, and many lay people happily swayed and sang along with them. However, this new breath of the spirit did not pause to notice that most lay people had never had the opportunity to be 'in the head' with theology in the first place. For the most part they had never been encouraged to engage critically with the tenets of their faith; for the most part it had been a matter of unquestioning acceptance, a take-it-all or leave-it approach. Now for the first time there might have been the possibility of doing this, and it seemed that it was snatched from them and what was being encouraged was a feel-good approach to faith.

I remember having my hopes raised by the invitation to join a parish Bible study group, and how they were dashed when this turned out to be just another homily by the priest, with no encouragement of the lay people present to contribute. Sadly, many young people quickly drifted away when it became apparent that their interest and talents (perhaps with the exception of musical, as instanced by the rash of folk-groups)

were not really wanted. The unmet expectations of laity, in terms of real participation in church matters, were compounded by the *Humanae vitae* fiasco, described as 'a pastoral and catechetical failure',¹ which subsequently dominated the talk, and led to a massive discrepancy between the rule on the means of regulation of fertility and its observance, resulting in the credibility gap we have today.

The sense of missed opportunity is still acutely felt, and it is not just that the emptying churches reflect the many who have given up hope of any sense of connectedness between their life today and the institutional Church. There is the ongoing sense of missed opportunity amongst those who have remained. The failure to appreciate, develop, and actively foster in an organized way the perspectives and participation of women was reckless. This represents not just missed opportunity and an omission the depth of which we will never know, but real hurt, rejection, and even insult meted out to so many women in its wake. Another example of a missed opportunity is the position of former priests and religious. For the most part they are a resource and gift to the church whose knowledge and experience is scandalously wasted.

Such examples have been counterbalanced somewhat by raised awareness in the area of social justice, and many lay people, young and older, work alongside clergy and religious in the service of justice throughout the world. Work previously done almost exclusively by priests and religious is shared by committed and idealistic people who, even if they do not have a vocation to priesthood or religious life, have nonetheless been at the forefront of the new way of being Church.

The Church as communion

For almost forty years the words of *Lumen gentium*, *Gaudium et spes*, and later John Paul II in the encyclical *Christifidelis laici*,² have been proclaiming the equality of dignity and the call to holiness of all the baptized. They point to a new way of being Church that provides the widest possible basis for inclusion in the mission in which laity share, not by hierarchical concession but by baptism. It is this fundamental fact that has been as hard for lay people to appropriate, and act upon, as it has for many clergy to give it real, rather than notional, assent, and act accordingly.

More than thirty years on it is still largely a clerical church, and efforts to encourage the role and vocation of the laity are frequently impeded, either by the fear of particular clerics in the face of change that they cannot cope with, or by instructions from Rome, such as that

on lay participation in the ministry of priests. Indeed the very title 'Instruction on certain questions regarding collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests' has all the connotations not just of clarifying legitimate distinctions but of reinforcing a clericalism many hoped had been left behind. The content too, while clarifying some issues, served to dishearten many people, for example in the instruction that lay men or women serving as hospital or prison chaplains should not be named as such and that the title chaplain belongs to bishops or priests only.³

At the theoretical level, *Christifidelis laici* represents a real breakthrough in developing understanding. Specifically, the notion of the Church as a *communio* is explained by John Paul II: 'Communion speaks of a double life-giving participation: the incorporation of Christians into the life of Christ, and the communication of that life of charity to the entire body of the Faithful.'⁴ He describes the Church as a *communio* with its inseparable dimensions: the communion of each Christian with Christ and the communion of all Christians with one another. And further, 'the reality of the Church as Communion is, then, the integrating aspect, indeed the central content of the "mystery", or rather the divine plan for the salvation of humanity.'

Understanding the People of God in this way has many implications. One thing is clear. If we really accept this, really believe this fundamental fact of our being as Church, then we can have no doubt about the rightness of working together, lay, cleric and religious, as equal participants. There can be no doubt that the responsibility for carrying out the mission of Christ belongs to all the baptized, and, if this is so, then all the baptized must have the possibility of exercising their responsibility fully. This has implications for the distribution of power in the Church. To have real responsibility, but with an input that is merely consultative, leads in the end to frustration and disillusionment, as too many people are painfully aware. There can be no degrees of belonging, no hierarchy, no 'golden circle', no élite group set apart from the rest, in a *communio* so described. The gifts and talents of one must be truly at the service of all. The implications of the church as *communio* are awesome, both for our internal relationships and structures and for our relationships with other Christian churches and the world.

In his Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (6 Jan 2001), John Paul, looking to the future, returns to this theme of *communio* and urges that a spirituality of communion be promoted before making practical plans, making it 'the guiding principle of education wherever

individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained'.⁵ A spirituality of communion means thinking of our brothers and sisters in faith as 'those who are part of me'. This implies relationships not of complementarity, but rather, of interdependence and mutuality, between lay, cleric and religious, between men and women.

Where they are is the communion that is Church. We are rightly encouraged to see this communion in the materially or spiritually poor and destitute, and they must remain a primary concern. But a Church striving to be an authentic *communion* will see it also in the comfortable and careful, in the partying and in the passive, in the complacent and the smug, in the doubters and the disaffected, in the bravely cut loose and in the fearfully attached. The emphasis on the distinctions within the Church has dominated for so long that, while not overlooking their legitimacy, it will take real, and prolonged, and co-ordinated, effort to truly live, and work, and pray together out of this fundamental principle. That said, I believe the principle of communion is the most hopeful, and even exciting, indicator of how we will be in the future, and I say this mindful of the serious problems besetting the Church today.

Difficulties with communion

The handling of the scandal of clerical sexual abuse by the hierarchy; the more recent hurts in the area of ecumenism; the scandal caused by the perceived, and often very real, harsh treatment of people in second unions after marriage breakdown; gay and lesbian Christians treated as objects of pastoral concern, rather than subjects, active in and for the Church; the refusal of further public discussion on the question of women's ordination: these are some of the factors that make the possibility of communion within the hierarchical Church very difficult for many people. The problems are not limited to the relationship between clergy and laity. Within the laity too are many articulate groups who loudly profess polemical views on particular issues, and whether it is the intolerance of fundamentalists or the illiberality of liberals, the challenge to be the communion we say we are is ever present.

But can we find instances of the communion we profess to be? Have we any intimations of the Church to come, for example as Karl Rahner described it, 'a Church of the grassroots', a 'listening Church', a 'declericalized Church'?⁶ When, for example, I hear a bishop speak out or stand in solidarity with travellers in the face of tough and unpleasant

opposition, or publicly reach out to those on the edge because of their marital situation, the experience is different. Sometimes, when meeting with women and men, lay, priests and religious, working together for justice, solidarity, education, peacemaking, receiving as they give, learning as they teach, respecting and loving as they are respected and loved, my experience is different. Sometimes, when relaxing together, when praying together and celebrating the faith we share, I know and experience that the Church *is* communion. In these situations this *communion* is not just a vague possibility, a nice idea of the document writers, but is something real. Such experiences allow me some notion of the implications of communion for our future as Church. In these experiences I know that such concepts, and indeed realities, as hierarchy, authority, power and control, cease to occupy the positions of exaggerated importance that are frequently afforded them, and instead are reduced to the dimensions proper to them. From here, looking far into the future, it is possible to make out dimly a Church whose institutional aspects are genuinely at the service of all the People of God. But is this simply a mirage? Will it happen?

Pope John Paul, in the Apostolic Letter referred to, describes the '*Petrine ministry*', and '*episcopal collegiality*' as '*specific services to communion*'. The Roman Curia, synods and Episcopal Conferences are described as instruments of communion. Bearing in mind all that has been said about communion I wonder whether they can ever be truly, and not just notionally, its instruments, with so many of the communion automatically excluded from participating in them? Or is it simply obvious that, if we really believe in the Church as communion, and seek sincerely to live it more fully, then some of the present ways of doing things must be radically revised in the light of new understanding and the desire, or indeed the demands, for authenticity?

Right relationship will lead to right structures

In a strongly critical consideration of the Church and the clericalism that has so often beset it, Rémy Parent discusses relationships and structures.⁷ If we are in right relationship then right structures must follow. I believe the Church as communion can be a powerful motivating concept here. If we are indeed in communion with Christ and with one another, then our striving must be for the best expression of that communion that we can achieve, and we cannot lightly continue with fundamentally unjust structures or systems. This surely applies equally to gender, inter-church and inter-faith relationships. Parent

points out that often priests, bishops, the pope even, use a vocabulary of service and at the same time behaviour patterns of power.⁸

But we have many instances of behaviour that empowers and includes, and the religious are often at the forefront. A particular instance is found among the new associations of lay and religious. Men and women, lay and religious, gather around the vision of the founder of whatever congregation, to be together, to pray and work together in close association. An important part of the initiative has been the developing of a spirituality of communion before making practical plans, just as John Paul II calls for in his recent letter. Here women and men, religious and lay, discover together what this call to be a new kind of Church involves. This is far from the feared 'clericalizing' of the laity. There are instances of lay groups taking initiatives amongst themselves and sometimes inviting clergy and religious to join them. Now the prophetic and the courageously innovative, usually associated with the edge, are beginning to claim their place at the heart of the *communion* which, as Parent holds, rather than simply tolerating difference demands the emergence of originality.⁹

Of course all the expected human problems will continue to arise. The temptation to a cosy spirituality among a cosy, if absolutely well intentioned, group has to be resisted if the mistakes of the past are not to be repeated. The ordinary problems of men and women working together as equals do not just disappear. Attitudes to the roles of men and women in Church and in society will continue to play an important part in the success or otherwise of such associations. The gender issue lurks in a thousand places, and ongoing critical engagement with the theology and reality will be essential to that success.

Education as central to the era of the laity

'Formation is not the privilege of a few, but a right and duty of all.' John Paul II in *Christifidelis laici* discusses the reciprocal formation received and given by all.¹⁰ If we take seriously the participation of all in the mission of the Church, then clearly theological and pastoral education for laity has a foundational role to play in the next stage in the life of the Church. The closing of seminaries and novitiates speaks its own language and we all understand it. Statistics in relation to the ordained priesthood, as we have known it, tell us *now* of what does *not* lie in front of us. If we take seriously the Church as *communion*, what *is* in front of us is what will emerge from the ground up, from within the whole People of God. But we must be properly equipped for the task ahead. The ongoing development of catechesis and faith programmes

for schools and parishes is much needed, but of itself will not be sufficient if the laity are to take on their role with competence and confidence in the Church of the future. The planning will need to include formal study of theology for lay people to the standards expected of the clergy in the past. This is happening in an *ad hoc* way already with various predictable results. Lay people educated in theology, whether or not they are also trained for pastoral ministry, have been bringing a different perspective to theological issues. The People of God, in faith, seeking understanding, arrive at some very different understandings than is the case when only clerical people of God are the recognized seekers. The most obvious examples are the area of Liberation Theology, and the impact that the insights of Feminist Theology continue to have on the whole of theology.

Lay women and men trained in ministry want to put their talents and skills to work for a parish community. The dwindling number of priests labour often under virtually impossible conditions. The seriousness of this situation was underlined in the 1997 *Instruction*, in which it was pointed out that reaching age seventy-five is not to be seen as constituting a binding reason for the acceptance of resignation of a parish priest.¹¹ Meanwhile qualified lay people wait in the wings and occasionally find ways to put their training to use. Sometimes they find a paid position, more often they are frustrated in this, and of course, the situation differs greatly from country to country.

The deployment of resources: a justice issue within the Church?

I think the importance of the context in which theology is taught and studied is underestimated. It is imperative for the future Church that laity, religious and clergy, men and women, younger and older, teach and study theology together at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Indicating the specific aim of theological studies for Jesuits in formation, Peter H. Kolvenbach writes: 'what is particularly intended at this stage is *a thorough and contextualised grasp of the faith of the Church, so as to make it one's own*, in proximate preparation for the priesthood.'¹² Surely anything less should not be considered for lay people as they approach the study of theology – notwithstanding that their priesthood is of the non-ordained variety. For all of them, the opportunity to understand the theology and reality of different vocations and life-choices at first hand is important, and their taking part together in the discernment of emerging roles and structures will be crucial for the church and theology of the future.

The question of how church resources are deployed in this area is tantamount to a justice issue within the Church. It can seem that there is no limit to the funding for anyone who thinks they have a vocation to priesthood or religious life; opportunities for further education and spiritual discernment are there at every level, and this is good. But if it is good for clergy and religious then it is good also for laity, whose vocation is not served by poor or no access to theological education, by haphazard or no spiritual accompaniment. Education of lay people for the Church to come is of the utmost importance if they themselves are to be confident in their new roles, which, in turn, will inspire others to have confidence in them. It cannot be that those with access to the considerable amounts of money needed for fees and so on, or the recipients of random generosity from religious congregations, should be the only people to qualify as lay theologians. And this matter of money is not for the clergy alone to deal with. The laity in the Church of the future will have to decide how it will be. Will they contribute more? If so, should they have a decisive rather than consultative role in spending the money?

With regard to the teaching of theology, the Church of the future will inevitably have more lay staff on faculty in Pontifical colleges and universities. The issue of trust in the academic sphere, around which there seems always to be difficulty between lay and cleric (the preservation of orthodoxy cannot be the concern of the clergy exclusively), in the long run must be helped greatly by shared teaching and reflection. John Henry Newman, writing about the founding of the Catholic University of Ireland in 1873, referred to the 'resolute refusal' to allow Catholic laity to co-operate with the Archbishops in the work and to 'ecclesiastics all over Europe whose policy is to keep the laity at arm's length'. Newman's advice would hold as well today as in 1873. How different might things have been had he been listened to?

You will be doing the greatest possible benefit to the Catholic cause all over the world, if you succeed in making the University a middle station at which clergy and laity can meet, so as to learn to understand, and to yield to each other . . . and from which, as from a common ground they may act in union upon an age which is running into infidelity.¹³

Lest this reflection seem to ignore the current explosion of desire for, and pursuit of, spirituality that is prevalent today I conclude with acknowledgement of the groups and movements that have been

springing up, some with staying power and obviously answering a real need in people today. But many give a false hope of something that will last. Of course we need and want to feel good, but ongoing critical reflection is needed if we are to be intellectually authentic, which is equally a part of being human and Christian. No experience of being part of a vast crowd at a papal open-air mass, or a charismatic rally, or of being part of an intimate prayer group or private healing service, will contribute to the up-building of the church and the world in the long run, if we do not experience the connectedness of a confident and reasonable faith that is rooted in the life of every day. The ways must be opened for all the baptized to play their full part in bringing this about as we endeavour to become a church that is truly a *communion*.

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NOTES

1 See George Weigel, *Witness to hope: the biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), p 334. Weigel writes that when Karol Wojtyła was elected to the papacy he knew that *Humanae vitae* 'had been a pastoral and catechetical failure'.

2 *Christifidelis laici*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on The Vocation and The Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, 1988.

3 Instruction *On certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, N47, 19 November 1997, Special Insert in Weekly Edition in English. Practical provision, article 1.

4 *Christifidelis laici*, ch 11, All Branches of a Single Vine. *The participation of the lay faithful in the life of the Church as communion*, 18, 19, 20, is the basis for most of what follows in this article.

5 *Novo millennio ineunte*, ch IV, Witness to Love, n 42–44. John Paul II develops the theme of communion emphasizing the challenge it presents. Document in full available on www.vatican.va.

6 Karl Rahner, *The shape of the Church to come* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1967), p 57.

7 Rémy Parent, *A Church of the baptized* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p 83.

8 *Ibid.*, p 83.

9 *Ibid.*, p 193.

10 *Op. cit.*, ch v, N57–63, at 63.

11 *Op. cit.*, Practical provisions, Article 4.2.

12 Peter H. Kolvenbach, 'Formation of Jesuits during their theological studies', in *Religious Life Review* 40 (March/April 2001), p 74.

13 See Michael Sharkey, 'Newman on the laity', in *Gregorianum*, 1987, p 345. Sharkey cites Cullen, *The imperial intellect: a study of Cardinal Newman's educational ideal* (New Haven, 1955), p 262.