

# THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE LAITY

By G. VERHAEGEN

**T**HE recent emphasis on the priestly function of the laity is but one aspect of the evolving awareness the Church has of her own nature. It is partly a return to the practice and doctrine of the early Church, partly an adaptation to typically twentieth century situations and ideas. The last five centuries have witnessed a progressive secularisation of every branch of life. For reasons too complex to develop here, the Church reacted with a clericalisation of her own structure. The Church became the affair of the professionals, the clergy; the role of the laymen became largely passive: to obey, and to receive the sacraments. This is not intended as a criticism, but as a simple statement of fact; perhaps there was no alternative. In Catholic countries a wall was built, not only between the secularised world and the Church, but also between the clergy and the laymen who work and live in this secularised world. Everywhere there was a great impoverishment of the concept of the Church and of its life. The Church was considered no longer as the community of the faithful, but as the hierarchical church. The organisational and juridical aspects prevailed over the charismatic and prophetic.

As far as the anglo-saxon countries are concerned, there is evidence of rapidly growing discontent among the laity. Daniel Callahan, associate editor of 'Commonweal', has made a thorough analysis of the position of the layman in the U.S.A., in his book 'The Mind of the Catholic Layman'.<sup>1</sup> The central problem is summarised thus:

... What is the self-image which the layman has of his present position in the Church? The educated layman is, first, sharply aware of the discrepancy between the ideal of an active responsible laity and the concrete possibilities of realising that ideal. The Church, as he sees it, is simply not organised or structured in such a way that the full utilisation

---

<sup>1</sup> New York, 1963.

of his talent and zeal is possible. He feels, second, that a gulf exists between him and the hierarchy and clergy. Not only do they not know of his deepest needs and desires, but they are for the most part so inaccessible as to make it impossible for the layman to make his own views known.

Third, he believes that the Church is not at all clear on the layman's potential contribution to the Church; and it sometimes seems to him that the teaching authority in the Church is far more intent on preserving the rights of the clergy than it is in defining the rights of the layman. He believes, fourth, that he is not in fact (despite what the Popes have said) considered to be a full and active member of the Church; if trust, confidence and clear mandates for action are criteria of an active role in the Church, then his present state shows those conditions to be unfulfilled.

The self-image which emerges here is, broadly speaking, one of some degree of repression, frustration, disenchantment, mild cynicism and thwarted zeal and intelligence. The layman cannot speak when he wants to, cannot be sure anyone will listen when he does speak, is not consulted even when his thinking and experience could be of profit to the Church.<sup>1</sup>

In the British Isles one can point to the growing number of outspoken Catholics who feel that they must use the national press to make their voices heard, or to a recent article in the *Clergy Review*:

We become what one writer has called '*émigrés de l'intérieur*'. In effect, it seems to me, we are saying to the ecclesiastical authorities: 'All right. You say that the Church is yours. Fair enough. You run it, but don't expect us to help you to do it. We shall pay our dues, as you demand, and in return we shall receive the sacraments at your hands. But further than that we do not wish to be involved'. This is not, I think, an unfair characterization of the kind of attitude I have found myself adopting sometimes and have noticed in my friends. It is my impression that the number of these '*émigrés de l'intérieur*' is really enormous; I derive this impression from having

<sup>1</sup> The author answers the objection that this represents the thinking only of 'a negligibly small, overly critical or ambitious segment of American Catholics' by pointing to the fact that these problems have been raised in such a wide variety of periodicals as *America*, *The Commonweal*, *The Sign*, *Ave Maria*, *Cross Currents*, *Jubilee*, *Perspectives*, and many diocesan newspapers. *Op. cit.*, 117-118.

noticed the Catholics who were my contemporaries at Oxford and from watching Catholics pass through to graduation in the Universities of Edinburgh and Keele.<sup>1</sup>

The acceptance of this gulf between clergy and laity implies, on the part of the clergy, paternalism, clericalism and complaints about the passivity or rebelliousness of laymen; among lay people it produces indifference, minimalism, purely negative and sterile criticism. It must be said, of course, that attempts are constantly being made to bridge the gulf. Some priests have taken on laymen's jobs and have become priest-scientists, priest-politicians, priest-workers: a phenomenon nearly as old as the Church under some form or other. They fulfill a useful, and probably lasting, function, mainly by introducing into the clergy as a group values it is always in danger of losing.

On the other side of the fence, many laymen are taking on priests' jobs, by working in Catholic Action under a special mandate from the hierarchy. This has produced organisations such as the Legion of Mary, Opus Dei, etc.; but it has also sometimes clericalised typical lay organisations like trade unions, political parties, and newspapers. The name clericalist laymen has been coined for them, a little unfairly it seems, because they too fulfill a useful and lasting function in the Church. It must, however, be emphasised that such attempts to close the gap from either side represents a true solution to our problem. Both are good, provided that they remain exceptions.

A third way of reacting against this split consists of bitter, disillusioned criticism of the Church, an all-out condemnation without adequate knowledge and without that childlike love which alone justifies our criticism of Mother Church.

The only radical solution lies in a correct understanding of the proper function of layman and priest. This is what a number of laymen are fighting for, and it is what made Abbot Butler welcome the revolt of the laity as a sign of the growth in the Church of 'an educated, articulated body of laymen'.

The theological basis for the priesthood of the laity has been expressed by Pope Pius XII in his Encyclical *Mediator Dei*: 'By reason of their baptism Christians are in the mystical body, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Donald Nicholl, 'The Layman and Ecclesiastical Authority', *Clergy Review*, July 1964. The author is Senior Lecturer in history at the University of Keele.

become by a common title member of Christ the Priest: by the 'character' that is graven upon their souls they are appointed to the worship of God, and, therefore, according to their condition, they share in the priesthood of Christ Himself'.<sup>1</sup> The full theological explanation of this text and of its implications for the role of the laity at the sacrifice of the mass, for the authoritative teaching of parents and of religious teachers and for the spirituality of laymen in their daily life has been carefully and repeatedly explained in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Here we shall limit ourselves to the implications of the doctrine as it affects the relations between the clergy and the laymen, and to one aspect mentioned by Fr Congar but not sufficiently developed: the dynamic link between the sacrificial and prophetic functions of the laity.

The essence of the priestly function is sacrificial. This is true of the priesthood of laymen as well as of priests. The task of laymen is determined by their situation in the world: 'by their natural commitment to the work of the world . . . they have to give glory to God, not by withholding themselves from that work, but in it and through it'.<sup>3</sup> Their proper function is to consecrate themselves and the world around them to God. This the layman will do, first of all, by his constant willingness to love and serve God in every one of his actions, words or thoughts. By so doing he takes into his mind and heart the world in which he lives: the food he consumes, the car he drives, the books he reads, the city he lives in, the people he lives with, and consecrates it all to God: that is, by this very act of loyalty, love and gratitude, he makes it return to its Creator.

Every single christian act can be said to have a sacramental structure, fundamentally the same as the structure of the sacrifice of the mass, in so far as it is an expression, in words and deeds, of man's hunger for God, and a channel through which God allows man share in his divine life. The sacramental movement is, however, not complete until it is incorporated into Christ's sacrifice; and this is done by offering the mass. Here we see that the sacrificial functions of the priest and the layman are complementary. The priest alone can offer mass; but the mass would have little meaning without a christian community incorporated into the sacrifice of Christ.

<sup>1</sup> 92.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Yves Congar, O.P., *Lay People in the Church*, (London 1959), and his shorter work, *Laity, Church and World*; cf also M. de la Bedoyère, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Yves Congar, *Laity, Church and World*, (London, 1960), p 68.

The christian does not perform his sacrificial duty as a lonely individual, but as a member of a community. All his actions, even the most individualistic, have a social aspect; his whole life is a witness to the truth he holds. The world will know and judge Christ through the life of christians; therefore, our love of Christ, to be complete, must be apostolic, must contain the desire to see others share the same willingness to love and serve God. Here again the specific task of the layman is not primarily to make converts, to increase the membership of the visible organisation which is the Church, but rather to persuade his fellowmen to adhere to the same moral and, if possible, religious values from which visible membership may, or may not, result; 'to influence the temporal order towards God and in the ways of God',<sup>1</sup> to make the community in which he lives Christ-oriented, ready to receive the fulness of the gift of God in his Church.

This personal consecration to God and this public witnessing to the truth do contain an authoritative teaching, a true development of the deposit of faith. The layman's testimony is not simply to put into practice what he has been told by the clergy, a mere particular application of an unchanging general principle whose formulation pertains exclusively to the clergy. His testimony is given to a unique and fresh truth: the life of Christ as lived by this particular christian, in this particular community here and now. This is indeed the application of a general principle, but with a new emphasis; for these principles have themselves been formulated as the result of different circumstances, in different communities. One has only to think how the Church under pressure of changing circumstances has changed her teaching about private property, interest rate, social justice and marriage, to appreciate the importance of these developments. As revealed by Christ – 'love one another as I have loved you' – these principles are obviously unchanging and universally valid, but their adaptation by the Church to particular problems is limited and changing. These changes are happening all the time, in spite of the gap between lay people and clergy; but the changes would take place more quickly and more smoothly, and the apostolic force of the Church's testimony increased, if the function of the laity was properly understood and practised by laymen and clergy.

The laymen are the first to feel the changes, and the possible irrelevance of the principles as formulated in the past, because they, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Congar, *Laity, Church and World*, p 50.

only they, are fully exposed to the winds of a continuously changing world; only they are fully immersed in and impregnated by the stream of new facts, new social relations, new ideas. They, too, have the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, who teaches them how to react 'in Christ'. One individual can go astray, because of sinfulness or human limitation, but a really fervent christian community is a clear guide as to which way Christ wants his Church to go.<sup>1</sup>

We have already mentioned the community aspect of christian witnessing. This must find its expression in all sorts of movements and associations which will reflect the whole variety of professions, classes, regions, social groups, etc. In them the laymen try together to adapt Christ's teaching to the new values of our world. In them Catholic consciousness, still largely expressed in terms of a culture of the past, must be brought to face the consciousness of modern man, who largely ignores christianity and whose values are totally different from the values as traditionally proposed by the Church. But modern man's values usually contain a positive element of progress; to discover it and to integrate it into christian values – this is the difficult challenge offered to the laymen. To meet the challenge they must be given full freedom and responsibility.

The role of the priest should be that of an adviser, of an expert in theological and spiritual matters, rather than that of a universal director. Even when this role is filled, there is still a gap between clergy and laity. A certain tension between the two is inevitable and healthy. It reflects the very nature of the Church, the body of the Word made flesh, stretched between Christ, the divine head, and the body of sinners: between the soul of the Church, the Holy Spirit, and her human body and organs, between faithfulness to her tradition and incarnation in the modern world. But this tension must be in harmony, as between two complementary elements, not as between two enemies. 'The complete evangelist', wrote Cardinal Suhard, 'is not just the baptized christian, not the priest by himself;

---

<sup>1</sup> It may be interesting to compare what Fr Congar writes about the christian faithfulness of the laity: 'A very useful study could be made of this idea of Christian faithfulness, what the Gospel calls with such deep insight 'keeping the Word'. It is not merely a matter remembering; if it were, a book or a gramophone record would be more useful for the purpose than the soul. But it is precisely to our soul that Christ's word is entrusted. It has in the first place to be 'kept' by putting it into practice, and finding the motive force of faithfulness in this loving obedience; and not just faithfulness, but a living faithfulness that makes use of what Christ tells us in all life's various situations, demands, and needs. By so doing the faithful not only keep the Word, they also contribute to its development' (*Laity, Church and World*, p 41).

it is the christian community. The basic cell, the unit of measurement in the apostolate is a kind of organic composite, the inseparable pair – priest and laity'.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays this fundamental difference between laity and clergy has widened to a large chasm. The split which, according to C. P. Snow, divides the 'two cultures' of our modern world runs right through the Church. While the training of the clergy is still exclusively confined to the humanities, often in a narrow scholastic way, an ever-growing number of laymen enjoy a scientific training. Especially as a group and among the higher ranks, the clergy is bound to suffer from the resulting lack of communication with the 'other culture'.<sup>2</sup>

The existing cultural gap only increases the urgency of the need for a permanent dialogue on the institutional level between those in authority and the frontiersmen in parish, diocesan, national, and Roman councils. If left to personal goodwill and initiative, the dialogue would be exposed to too much human susceptibility and weakness. Moreover, only an institution could give proper expression to the priestly function of the laymen in the Church. Truly independent lay movements together with continuous dialogue will transform the layman from a lonely fighter, whose religious experience is largely alien to the Church's life, and who asks of her not much more than the sacraments, into a member of a dynamic, apostolic community, where he finds the sustenance for his whole christian experience. The image of the Church will then change from that of a monolithic and authoritarian organisation, whose official teaching often seems esoteric and irrelevant, into a community of faithful whose conscience reacts quickly to the various problems of the modern world. The image of the Church will no longer be heavily coloured by the particular experience of one small, rather separated group, the clergy; it will reflect the wide variety of professions, classes, races of the christian community. The Church will also better be able to catch up with the breathtaking speed of change, technological, social, and cultural. It will break free from its western capitalistic cocoon and become truly Catholic, appealing

<sup>1</sup> Cf Louis and André Rétif, *The Mission of the Church in the World* (London, 1962), p 133.

<sup>2</sup> There is a growing awareness of the need to adapt clerical training to the twentieth century, and steps are being taken in that direction. Cf P. Fransen, S.J. 'The Teaching of Theology on the Continent' in *Theology and the University* (London, 1964), pp 88–89. A recent survey among French rural clergy, covering 500 priests, revealed a profound dissatisfaction with their 'too bookish, narrow and dull formation' (*Catholic Herald*, July 31, 1964).

as well to people whose values are marked by socialism, or whose culture is vastly different from the western culture.

About the necessity of keeping pace with this fast changing world Cardinal Suhard wrote in 1948:

To-day the Church asks two things of us: broad-minded thinking and rapid thinking. Broad-minded: our thought is to be as wide as the world. Do not be content to follow others, take the lead. Do not be disciples, be masters. It is not enough to imitate, you must be inventors. But if you are to do this, and here I use all the emphasis I can, you must think quickly. The times are gone when culture was distilled drop by drop in the alchemist's cell or in the peaceful libraries of the cloister. We have discovered speed, but it has broken away from us and now we have to run after it. We have started a movement and we do not know when nor where it will stop. The only thing we are sure of is that it becomes faster and faster and that its dimensions alone take our breath away.<sup>1</sup>

This dialogue does not mean that laity and hierarchy would deliberate on equal terms. The Church is not a truly democratic society and it would be wrong to claim a deliberative function for these councils. The ultimate authority in matters of faith and morals has been given by Christ to the apostles and their successors. They must have the last word, but the last word but one belongs to the experts, whether laymen or priests. Baptism and confirmation have conferred upon laymen a definite responsibility and, accordingly, an authority different from, but not opposed to, that of the clergy; a complementary authority, based equally on the nature of the mystical body; an authority which is derived not from any mandate given by the hierarchy, but from membership of the Church, although always exercised in constant dialogue with and ultimate submission to the hierarchy.

Some matters do not require any official pronouncement; they could be left entirely to the responsibility of the groups concerned – trade unions, employers' associations, Y.C.W., etc. Thus different groups of christians may have different, equally valid, interpretations. The christian experience of an industrialist and his interpreta-

---

<sup>1</sup> *Semaine des Intellectuels Catholiques*, 1948, quoted in Louis and André Rétif, *The Mission of the Church in the World* (London, 1962).



tion of *Mater et Magistra* is likely to be different but no less valid than that of a workman. Both bear an authentic witness to christian charity and justice; both should be, and should be seen to be, equally at home in the Church.

Other matters may require an official pronouncement, but this should not be made without prior and sincere consultation with the experts. Not only will the official pronouncement benefit from the christian experience of experts (and ultimately from God's guidance through them) and be better adapted to the mind of the modern man, but it will also be more easily accepted by the experts, even if it differs from their own opinion.

Theological considerations have led us to the conclusion that laymen should have a certain autonomy and authority, not only in christian associations and movements but also within the organisation of the Church itself.<sup>1</sup> A sociological approach will produce similar results.

Recent sociological research claims to have isolated two factors which are decisive in determining whether a man is a good director of men: the ability to listen to his subordinates, and the capacity to make his mind clear to them. In trying to circumscribe the root cause of the failure of some hospitals to keep their personnel, Professor Revans discovered that they were inferior in every field; that this was due ultimately to the fact that every superior (consultants, matrons, nurses) behaved towards his or her inferiors in an authoritarian fashion, treating them as irresponsible idiots. In good hospitals, consultants were balanced enough and felt secure enough to listen to matrons, and so on down the ladder; and the efficiency was incomparably higher.

It can hardly be denied that there is in the Church a serious lack of communication, not only from the bottom to the top but also from the top to the bottom. Is it not perplexing that in a country where the majority of the Catholics belong to the working class, socialism is condemned out of hand by most members of the clergy? And the intellectuals are only slightly better off. It would be revealing to know how many Catholics are aware of the significance for their lives of *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in terris*. But even the relationship between lower and higher clergy suffers from the same false concept of obedience. A good many priests all over the world could probably underwrite the complaint of this french rural priest: 'The

<sup>1</sup> Cf Donald Nicholl, *art. cit.*

bishop is someone who passes by, who knows nothing of you, as you know nothing of him'.

In a primitive, feudal society authoritarianism may produce efficiency. But we live in an age in which people no longer accept authority rooted purely in status, and it is impossible to know how much apostolic efficiency is being lost in the Church through an antiquated authority-structure.

In terms of spiritual effort, such a programme would make heavy demands on both clergy and laity, and would require deep humility and a great boldness and generosity. For some it will mean giving up their comfortable security behind walls of prayers, candles, indulgences. They will have to realise that religious practices are only a means and not an end, and that they must shoulder anew the burden of Christ's love and his anxiety for all men. From the more fiery, rebel-minded characters an active obedience will demand deep humility and great courage. These temperaments often find it easier to fight a lonely battle, following the lead of their conscience, rather than to integrate themselves in the Church and to awaken her to the problems about which they feel so deeply.

Fr Karl Rahner thus develops the layman's duty:

In the first place, the layman still has in this respect a duty – an old duty, but always needing to be re-emphasised – to educate himself in religious and theological matters up to a decent level, corresponding to his intellectual level in other fields . . . He must have a deep rooted knowledge of where the fixed boundaries of his faith lie . . . He must know something about Church history, so that he is not always ready to accept the latest thing, his own period's 'dernier cri', as the end of all wisdom . . . He must have a really clear understanding of the Church's official teaching about all those matters which, because of his position in life and his personal relationships with others, concern him most intimately. Catholics who want to take a real share in the development of a public opinion within the Church must live like true Christians and make the Church's Mysteries the basis of their personal life.

Thirdly, the layman must do all he can to make his own personal contribution to the development of a public opinion within the Church, and its dissemination outside Her.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Free Speech in the Church* (London, 1959), pp 25–29.

But the effort is not exclusively to be made by the inferiors. Those in authority, too, will need humility, patience, courage. To listen to his inferiors – not only with his ears but with his whole mind and heart – is probably the most important and the most arduous duty of any superior: and *a fortiori* of an ecclesiastical superior, always torn between the need to remain faithful to the faith entrusted to him and the need to adapt its expression to new circumstances. It demands great courage, sincerity and humility to allow others, especially inferiors, to question one's own ideas. It is so much easier to repeat sternly the set formulae that one has learned once and for all and use one's power to impose them, than to accept dialogue.

Fr Congar was struck by the fact that a number of outstandingly effective priests, whom he knew, were all priests who could listen to questions and suggestions from their flock, and were in a continuous dialogue with their people.<sup>1</sup> It demands boldness to give real autonomy to Catholic bodies which may act foolishly, to allow public criticism within the Church which may turn sour and bitter, to give one's blessing to experiments which may fail and cause harm. But in so doing those in authority will show their deep concern to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, wherever he speaks. By listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, speaking through laymen and lay organisations, the clergy would restore the proper balance and harmony between the juridical and charismatic elements in the Church. In a speech at the Vatican Council, Cardinal Suenens insisted that charisms should be restored to their proper place in the Church, especially the common-place charisms of 'laymen and women . . . who we might say are in a way called by the Lord and endowed with various charisms of the spirit. Whether in catechetical work, in spreading the Gospel, in every area of Catholic activity, in social and charitable work . . . it is the duty of pastors to listen carefully and with open heart to laymen, and repeatedly to engage in a living dialogue with them. For each and every layman has been given his own gifts and charisms, and more often than not has greater experience than the clergy in daily life in the world'.

All this may sound very utopian. It would seem to demand an unprecedented number of saints. But it cannot be denied that in our day God's hand is revealed, guiding his Church. It is not foolish to hope that he will give her the strength and holiness to carry out what he is clearly demanding of her.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Laity, Church and World*, pp 84–85.