

LAY PEOPLE AND THE CHURCH

By LEONARD DOOHAN

1. *Meanings of laity*



WHO OR WHAT are the 'laity'? What sense—ecclesial, spiritual and practical—are we to give to 'laity'? Sometimes, even in the Church, this word is used to express passivity if not incompetence. But Jesus preached to the laity of his day and picked his disciples from the laity, passing over the Sadducees, Pharisees, and their lawyers and scribes. Moreover, Jesus did not establish specific offices or structures of Church or ministry as we have today, rather such developments come from the early Church. In fact, our present terms laity, office, ministries, hierarchy, priesthood, diaconate, and religious have no immediate counterpart in Jesus' mission. Moreover, in early New Testament times, all the faithful shared in decision-making, mission priorities, and ministry. Early Church documents show that the laity chose their own community leaders who then celebrated the Eucharist, and laity were actively involved in liturgical celebrations and in evangelization.

The Greek translations of the Hebrew bible generally used the word *laos* to mean the chosen people in contrast to the pagans around them. Early Christian writings picked up on this usage, referring to the community of the Church as 'the People of God' (*laos theou*), a term frequently complemented by references such as 'the elect' (*eklektoi*), or 'the holy ones' (*hagioi*), or 'disciples' (*mathetai*), or 'brothers and sisters' (*adelphoi*). These positive descriptions of the faithful are common in the first two centuries of the Church, with only five or six possible exceptions in which the word *laos* describes the simple, inferior(?) people in contrast to their leadership. The term 'laity' (*laikos*) derives from this rather negative use of *laos*. Clement of Rome (c. 96) in his letter to the Corinthians (40) is the first to use *laikos* in a way that suggests the incompetent masses of the people. This use is also found in Origen (*In Jerem.*, hom. XI,3), and especially in Clement of Alexandria ([d. 215] *Strom.* III, 12, 90, 1; V, 6, 33, 3; *Paed.* III, 10, 83, 2). By the time of Tertullian (*De Praecr.*, 41, 8; *Corp. chr.*, I, 222) and Cyprian (*Ep.* 45, 2; *Ep.* 52, 1) the word

'laity' is used to refer to a distinct group of common believers in contrast to the clerical hierarchy. Jerome's Vulgate translation uses 'lay' to refer to the profane in contrast to the sacred (1 Kings 21:4; our 1 Samuel 21:4).

This consideration of laity as the 'plebs' of the Church is intensified due to three developments in the life of the early Church: Neoplatonism's influence on several Church Fathers, the growth of monasticism, and the development of the clerical dimension of the Church. All three movements gave laity the image of second-class citizens because of their involvement with the material world which was thought to make them profane, the equation of holiness with monasticism thus introducing a minimalist approach to lay spirituality, and the introduction of a grading or ranking of Church membership that left the laity subordinated and powerless. By the fourth century, Church structures were similar to political ones, the notion of priesthood previously used only for Christ and the community was then used for the presiding minister contrary to the explicit teachings of some of the Fathers. Thus, the subordination of laity became a firm part of Church life; 'lay' meant profane, and in the liturgy laity were separated from clergy by the construction of solid screens dividing the sanctuary from the people (Antioch as early as 390, and Sancta Sophia, Constantinople, in 570), of which the altar rails were merely a remnant.

Our present-day distinctions in the Church are neat and clear-cut, especially in their canonical form, but such artificial distinctions are hardly faithful to the dynamic interrelationships between the community and its chosen hierarchy in the first three centuries of the Church. With the arrival of the emperor Constantine and his support of the Church there developed a political community that esteemed rank, and the Church soon mimicked this, establishing ranks for those who served the community. These community leaders extended their control to the laity's loss, eventually producing a two-tiered Church in which even minor ministries were brought under the power of the priesthood. Thus, we gradually pass from an ecclesiology of communion to an ecclesiology of power (Congar). The passivity of laity increased in feudal times, and medieval councils further consolidated it. Eventually, the Council of Trent legitimized the separation between clergy and people. Laity were then excluded from all active participation in the life of their Church, clerical control reaching such proportions that in the minds of most people 'the Church' came to mean the hierarchy.¹

2. *Changing understandings and experiences of laity*

Three developments of Vatican II reversed the downward trend in the life and role of laity that began at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth century. The ecclesiology of Vatican II, reinforced by the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, stressed the Church as a communion (*Lumen gentium* [L.G.], 31.1), in which 'each individual part of the Church contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church' (L.G., 13.3). This return to an ecclesiology of communion and co-equal discipleship (L.G., 40.3) is linked to the Council's affirmation of the universal call to holiness (L.G., 40.3), and its declaration on the autonomy of earthly realities (*Gaudium et spes*, 36). These three core convictions are united in the Council's theological evaluation of lay life (L.G., 31) which avoids any split between clergy and laity, acknowledges that laity share in the responsibility for the entire Church while not holding office in the organization, and affirms that the earthly ordering of temporal society is the specific way in which a layperson seeks the kingdom of God.

In the years since the Council, we have seen several different theologies of laity, often due to a separating of one of the three conciliar developments from the other two. I addressed these different contemporary understandings in a previous article in *The Way Supplement* (no. 60, Autumn 1987, pp 23-32). The decade of the eighties has witnessed the growth of collaboration, with its accompanying need to clarify roles in the Church. The new *Code of Canon Law*, published in 1983, gave an unprecedented list of rights for all the faithful, specifically for laity as members of the Church. Unfortunately the new Code's ecclesiology, hardly that of the Council, reinforced the hierarchical, centralized power of the Church more than any previous document of Church history. The 1987 autumn issue of *The Way Supplement*, 'Lay Christians: A Variety of Gifts', contributed to the worldwide preparations for the Synod on the Laity held in the same year. First announced in 1985, the Synod on Laity stimulated a worldwide reflection on the roles of laity. It ended with a 'Message to the People of God', and its recommendations were the basis for Pope John Paul II's *Apostolic exhortation on the laity* (*Christifideles laici*), published on December 30, 1988, and distributed in February 1989. This apostolic exhortation is a positive and affirming document in which he speaks respectfully throughout of the lay faithful, presenting a positive vision for them, based upon a common dignity in baptism and a basic common call to holiness,

while exercising functions distinct from clergy and religious. The Synod on Laity restates the best of the Council's synthesis of lay life when it claims that the vocation and mission of laity is to be the communion of the Church, and their ministry is to serve primarily in secular situations.

Complementing these theological understandings are the experiences of laity in recent decades. They have become more aware of themselves as the People of God, many have realized their own responsibility to participate in the life of the Church, all experience a different approach to their weekly liturgy in which they are called to be actively involved, and increasing numbers feel challenged to dedicate themselves to ministry. Lay faithful see new structures developing in their local churches: diocesan pastoral councils, parish councils, laity accepting responsibility for the financial, administrative, educational, and spiritual ministries of the parish. Laity now witness other laity in key leadership roles in the Church as consultors, theologians, diocesan or national administrators, directors of religious movements both national and international. Moreover, believers recognize and appreciate other believers' leadership roles in politics, business, education, health care, and other professions—what some call lay ministry in the marketplace. Increasing numbers of the lay faithful evidence the greatest insight of all, namely a profound appreciation of the religious value of the ordinary circumstances of their daily lives, and they now approach their family life, social and civic involvement, political responsibilities, and professional development with a new sense of Christian values.

While it must be acknowledged that many laity have been totally uninfluenced by post-Vatican II developments—as have many clergy and religious—nevertheless many have been profoundly influenced, and now see the Church and their own role in it in a new way. They value the Church as the People of God, their own baptismal vocation, the charisms of everyone, co-responsibility, individual involvement, participatory or collegial government, the universal call to holiness and ministry, and an appreciation of the importance of the world and temporal realities.

3. Christian faithful in a lay-centred Church

History shows that at one time or another the various vocations have exercised a leadership, or dominant role in the Church. During the period of the flourishing of monasticism, men and women religious wielded great power, even utilizing the ministries of

clergy—priests and bishops—who were subordinate to them. At times in the Middle Ages, lay dukes, princes, or monarchs controlled the Church, often using the hierarchy only as chaplains. More recently, the hierarchy has exercised a dominant role. The Church ought to be, and is, a lay-centred community in which all the vocations must move forward together, for we all share a common life. We have a common calling in our baptismal vocation, a common source of life-giving grace in the sacraments, a common community in the People of God, common charisms in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, common ministries in the priesthood of all the baptized, and a common discipleship in the local foundational Church. For too long the 'Church' has been equated in the minds of many believers and non-believers with the hierarchy. The following points are offered as areas of needed continued emphasis in a lay-centred Church.

Recognition of the dignity of lay life. The special vocation of Christianity is baptism which makes each one a disciple of the Lord and a member of the community. Through the resulting gifts of the Spirit and participation in the threefold mission of Jesus—priestly, prophetic, and servant—the lay faithful become active, responsible members of the Church. Christianity used to be inherited but is now the result of a personal choice, a commitment made after an awareness of what the responsibility of baptismal dedication implies. Lay life cannot be characterized by passivity but by the maturity and responsibility that the rite symbolizes. All other vocations in the Church, whether lay, religious, or clerical, minister to this baptismal dignity.

Respect for the rights of laity. Lay faithful are integral parts of a community in which there is theologically no inequality, for all share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ. The 1983 Code of Canon Law recognizes rights for all the faithful, specific rights for laity, unprecedented rights and privileges for laity, and acknowledges their right to exercise diocesan offices. However laity's most fundamental rights are not granted by anyone other than the Lord and result from the obligations of discipleship, ecclesial participation, responsibility for evangelization, active communal worship, and ministerial outreach—none of which are delegated.

The importance of the lay condition. All the faithful share a common dignity and mutually respect each other's rights. However, the primary mission of the ecclesial community is not to serve itself but to serve the world, and the prime protagonists of this mission to the world are the lay faithful whose condition immerses them in the

ordinary circumstances of daily life—a secular condition which becomes their ecclesial mission. This secular calling does not exclude laity from roles of responsibility internal to the Church community, including participation in ministries within the Church, but the calling to serve and to evangelize in secular circumstances remains the defining characteristic of all lay response.

Celebration of the interdependence and mutuality of all vocations. The interdependence of the various vocations is part of God's plan for the Church. Forming together the mystery of the People of God, the faithful assist and complement each other. They should appreciate and promote each other's vocation in collaborative communion. The vocational variety in ecclesial unity manifests the richness of the Church, and actualizes an ecclesiology of communion. Development in Church life will not be attained by one vocation taking precedence over another but by all the faithful moving forward together in mutual availability.

Acknowledgement of ministries specific to lay life. The secular condition of laity permeates every dimension of the lay faithful's responsibility in the Church. This helps integrate religion and daily life. In inner Church matters it is appropriate for the maintenance of good order that delegation and accountability be institutionalized. However, the major ministries of lay life include: (1) evangelization by the quality of their Christian lives, by the sharing of the Lord's word, by dialogue, and by study of the faith; (2) bringing a Christian spirit to the world of social, civic, professional, and political life; (3) charitable activities on behalf of the needy wherever they are identified; (4) fostering family life—its spirituality and ministry; (5) social criticism and outreach in prophetic challenge to the world's injustices. These primary ministries are essentially lay and require no authorization or delegation but result from the obligations one accepts in baptism.

A vision of the Church as a communion of the People of God. The model of Church by which one lives conditions understanding and interactions. The vision of the Church as a communion of the People of God implies educating oneself in the values of communion, combating individualism, searching for solidarity, and identifying the specific services to which each member of the Church has been called. This vision is lived out in the concrete conditions of the local Church for values and vision no longer filter down from somewhere high up in any organization, rather they percolate up from the grassroots. This is where laity have the prime influence on Church life and will have even greater influence in the future.

Sacramental life as the source of the call to ministry. The sacraments of initiation empower Christians to minister in the name of the Lord Jesus and his Church. These faithful are nourished by the Eucharist and strengthened by the sacraments of vocation. The sacraments give rise not only to charism and authority in a common mission but they are the source of the Christian spirit and values, maintain intimacy with the Lord, and are the prayerful context for the development of initiatives on behalf of the Lord's kingdom. As communal expressions of the faith of believers they are the source of community, of hope, of collaborative approaches to life, and of friendship in faith.

4. *The way to the nineties*

As we make our way through the nineties, journeying with the Lord in the Church, we will need to focus prudently our priorities, otherwise the Holy Spirit's call in the Second Vatican Council and in the renewal fostered since then could be weakened or lost altogether. This issue of *The Way* stresses four of those critical priorities: rootedness, holiness, ministry, and leadership. To these I add a few others for consideration.

Structures for a lay-centred Church. The relationship between laity and hierarchy continues to be the fundamental problem in the Church. It is easy to pass this off as a narcissistic concern with internal Church structures when the main task of the Church is ministry to the world. Nevertheless the rift between the two parts of the Church continues to grow as increasing numbers of the faithful see the hierarchy and its values as unimportant to their lives. Some move from one Christian tradition to another, many do not attend Church as frequently as they used to, others do not take the hierarchy's teaching authority seriously—as one social observer suggested, the hierarchy continues to exist but our belief in its efficacy does not. In the present structure used by Church administration and supported by their canon law, laity are passive recipients of the hierarchy's ministry. We need a model of Church that is reflective of contemporary theology and that has a lay dynamic to it. The Catholic Church is 98% lay with only 0.5% clergy, and 1.5% religious. It needs to have structures that are centred on the laity. This does not mean lay-controlled, although there is no theological reason to exclude laity from key leadership roles in the Church. Structures and their facilitating of Church life need to have a lay dynamic to them.

Faith in the laity. In the past the cleric was often a leader in the local community and one of the most educated persons in a region. This is no longer the general case. Yet certain Church administrators continue to think they know what is best for the laity. The latter are excluded from decision-making even in issues that directly relate to them. They have no deliberative voice in major Church meetings, including the Synods on family and laity. Presumed to be represented by their local leaders they have no voice in the election of their leaders, whether local pastors or bishops. While early Church councils recognized the laity's right to elect their leaders, we have recently witnessed a series of appointments of bishops who seemingly were not chosen because they were the best people for the local Church but rather because they were thought to be the best people to represent the Roman centralized administration. This warped approach to Church life is based on shoddy theology and a faithless view of laity and their contribution to Church life. I have seen Churches all over the world where enthusiastic, visionary, and dedicated laity are worn down by constant rejection and remain instead the object of an irrelevant ministry performed by generous and well-wishing, but threatened and outdated clergy whom bishops cannot move or retire because they have no one to replace them.

Reconciliation. Present problems and unmet needs of laity offer serious concern in the Church and in many places are increasingly giving rise to anger and resentment. Where laity are challenging false structures, clergy and religious are often responding angrily at the loss of their vocational priority. Thus, there is far less interest in the roles of laity today than there was ten years ago, and the era of the laity, or the age of the laity, never came. Mutual blame, typical of political communities, is now common in internal Church government. Divisiveness and polarization are more common than reconciliation and Christian love. All vocations need to return to the basics of the faith, hope and love they profess. The credibility of the Church may well depend on whether this next decade will be a period of renewal in reconciling love.

Participation and involvement. Jesus preached to a non-vocationally distinct audience, and the early Church had neither priests nor religious. In fact, it took between one hundred and two hundred years for some of its structures to develop—some of them the result more of political developments than theological. The faithful's participation in Church life was presumed to be necessary: they were travelling evangelists, catechists, theologians, originators of forms of

spirituality, organizers of local house churches, financial supporters of church development and expansion. They chose their own leaders, including their eucharistic presiders, participated in Councils, and were involved in the formulation of teachings and doctrine. History has not been good to laity who became not only serfs to their local secular leaders but also to their local church leaders. Nowadays, fidelity to original insights and teachings demands that we return to intensified participation in co-equal discipleship.

Control to service. It is inspiring to look at Church history and see the wonderful developments of the faith. Often, however, positive developments can have negative side-effects, and this has frequently been the case with the lives and contributions of laity. Undoubted goodwill has often also produced more and more controls over lay life, leading to inauthentic relationships internal to the Church. In Mark's Gospel Jesus condemns those apostles who want to control the lives and ministries of others (Mk 9, 38-40). If laity are to regain their place in the Church we will need to see widespread conversion to the servant leadership that Jesus modelled and insisted had to be present in his Church (Mt 20, 24-28). There is no such thing as autocratic servant leadership.

Spirituality for laity. There is no need for theology of laity, or spirituality of laity. Rather, we need to focus our basic Christian spirituality for laity. Marriage, sexual love, work, civil and political service, education, social criticism and challenge—all need to be integrated into spiritual commitment. Church authorities have often used saints as a means of controlling life-styles, offering models that embody official teachings and practices. Most saints are celibate, 85% are bishops, few are lay, none are married couples. Models of spirituality that the Church administrators propose are not relevant to most laity in the developing countries today.

Look again at Church teachings. Serious commitment to reassess the roles of laity in the Christian Church will imply an honest re-examination of Church teachings. Some teachings claimed to be of divine right or originating in Jesus (such as the place of the hierarchy) are very human and their constant repetition is their main justification. Certain structures and offices that some claim are traceable to Jesus (such as the bishop or priest) are not. Political developments and power plays of history (such as the power of the Roman curia) should not be justified with religious rationalizations. Practices that are simply disciplinary (such as the celibacy of clergy) should not be presented as theological and foundational for Church life. More

important than the above is the need to rethink teachings to purify them of their male dominance, clerical and celibate biases and circular reasoning. Not all teachings are equally important, and doctrinal renewal with the need for a hierarchy of doctrines is as much needed for internal health as it is for ecumenical openness.

The roles of lay faithful have changed a lot during the history of the Church, from the maturity and responsibility of New Testament times to the passivity of an ecclesiastical feudalism, and in our times to the challenging call of Vatican II's co-equal discipleship. We can rejoice in contemporary renewal but must not hide from the critical problems that remain. Many laity seem to be teetering between hope and despair. All who love the Church will make sure this decade leads to a consolidation of hope.

NOTE

¹ Ideas in this section are taken from my article, 'Theology of Laity' in the *New dictionary of sacramental worship*, and can be found in more detailed form in that article.

READING

- Doohan, Leonard: *The lay-centered Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984).
 ——— *Laity's mission in the local church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).
 ——— 'Theology of the Laity', in Fink, Peter (ed): *The new dictionary of sacramental worship* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), pp 636-644. See this article for a more detailed development of the section on the 'Meanings of Laity'.
 Downey, Michael (ed): *That they might live: power, empowerment, and leadership in the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1991). See also my contribution to this collection of articles, 'John Paul II's Vision of Collaboration and Empowerment', pp 60-76.
 Parent, Remi: *A Church of the baptized: overcoming the tension between the clergy and the laity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).