

AROUND THE FAMILY TABLE

What Do the Laity Really Want?

Oonagh Walker

IF YOU WERE TO REPHRASE Freud's famous question, 'What does woman want?', and ask, 'What do the laity want?', you would get many answers, some of them predictable and some at odds with each other.¹ Yet I believe that there is one overriding desire among lay people who are practising Christians, and that is, in the phrase adopted by John Henry Newman, *pastorum et fidelium conspiratio*, 'a breathing together of people and pastor'—that sense of 'being in full accord and of one mind' (Philippians 2:2), that 'fellowship with one another' (1 John 1:7) that was the charism of the early Church.²

There have been times throughout the history of the Church when there has been a surge of apostolic energy among the laity—moments when a Pentecostal spirit seems to be abroad and lay people have felt empowered, even emboldened, to move out of their customary role as passive recipients of the gospel message. Sometimes it has been charismatic individuals who have taken an initiative and then gathered like-minded companions around them. (Many of the founders of our great religious orders began as such lay men and women.) Sometimes small groups have come together to answer a local need; while at other times whole communities have been fired by a common purpose.

Often what characterized such initiatives was a burning desire to return to the life of the early Church as recorded in the Acts—when 'the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul' (4:32)—and in the letters of St Paul, where he delights in the diversity of gifts in the small scattered communities of the infant Church. It is true that such singleness of purpose and unity in diversity sometimes failed. Paul constantly admonishes his communities that they avoid factions and be

¹ Sigmund Freud to Marie Bonaparte, quoted in Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* (London: Hogarth, 1955), volume 2, 468.

² See John Henry Newman, *On Consulting the Laity on Matters of Doctrine* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006 [1859]), 104, also 65, 72.

united in fellowship and partnership. *Koinonia*—which is the fruit of our ‘adoption as children of God’ (Ephesians 1: 5)—is the overriding concern in all his letters.³ And throughout the centuries, it has been an ideal to which groups within the Church have longed to return.

The Community of the Children of God

In the war-torn city of Florence in 1944—with the German army beating a destructive retreat, with resistance fighters in the surrounding hills and with the Allies’ incessant bombing—a small group of devout women in the heart of the city committed themselves to an apostleship based on Christian love. Their first leader, a Dominican, gave them a warlike name, typical of religious groups of the time: the Militia Regni Christi (the Militia of the Reign of Christ) and committed them to being ‘at the Divine King’s disposal for His battles against our anti-Christian world in ruins’.⁴ But these unlikely soldiers were searching for a deeper spiritual formation. The Dominican was transferred elsewhere and was briefly followed by a Carmelite but, when he was dispatched to the missions in China, they managed to persuade a gifted, if unconventional, secular priest, Fr Divo Barsotti, to be their new chaplain. Under his guidance, they were to become the Community of the Children of God.

Some decades before Karl Rahner’s well-known statement, ‘the devout Christian of the future will either be a “mystic”, one who has “experienced” something, or he will cease to be anything at all’, Divo Barsotti was pondering how to live a monastic life of prayer and contemplation while nevertheless living in the midst of the world.⁵ He was drawn to the Russian Orthodox form of monasticism, which was simple, poor and close to the people. Throughout his years in the very traditional seminary of the times, Barsotti had been a trial to his superiors. The dominant tone in such seminaries was *fuga mundi*—an escape from the world—but Barsotti saw such a flight from the life of the world as an obstacle to union with God. Instead, he promoted the idea of a *fuga immobile* (immobile or stationary flight), meaning by this paradox not an escape *from* but an escape *to*: he escaped to God while nevertheless remaining in the midst

³ The Greek word *koinonia* has meanings including fellowship, association, community and communion.

⁴ Bona Batti, *Storia delle origini della Comunità dei figli di Dio* (Florence: Comunità dei figli di Dio, 2003), translated in Serafino Tognetti, *Divo Barsotti: Priest, Mystic, Father* (London: St Paul’s, 2013).

⁵ Karl Rahner, ‘Christian Living Formerly and Today’, *Theological Investigations*, volume 7, translated by David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 15.

of the world.⁶ *Gli altri* (the others) would always be essential to him in the journey of salvation, as was the need to merge one's own life with the life of all: 'a soul is only alive if the entire universe lives in it'.⁷

Such views had been incomprehensible to Barsotti's seminary teachers. As a priest, he was an even greater trial to his patient bishop, who attempted to fit this very square peg into many round holes—three different parishes within one year! When he was ordained, he had had a passionate desire to be a great missionary, but the war put an end to such dreams. Eventually, after many attempts had been made to find a suitable posting for him, he was humiliatingly sent back to his family home—'parked' as he put it—for five years, the entire duration of the war. These years, however, were a time of intense prayer and study, and can be seen as part of the first stage in his spiritual life—the 'purgative' stage—but also the beginning of the next, 'illuminative', phase, when the call became clearer.

The many rejections he had suffered had humbled him, but were also a source of clarification and purification. Since he was now convinced that the only purpose in human life is to be a saint, he was willing, as he put it, to be 'a saint of failures'.⁸ When he arrived in Florence in 1945, he



Divo Barsotti

was already at the next stage in his spiritual life, deeply aware of a closeness and friendship with God, which made him open to other friendships. He was particularly appreciative of the confidence and freedom of the Florentine laity who, he said, expressed their religious values 'not because they have been drummed into them by the clergy, but because they have internalised them and constantly affirm them in their own special form of liberty'.⁹

So, although he had never thought of founding a new religious

⁶ Divo Barsotti kept a spiritual diary throughout his life. 'La fuga immobile' was the title he gave to one of his diaries, which covered the years 1944 to 1946.

⁷ Tognetti, *Divo Barsotti*, 398, quoting from unpublished diaries, 1934.

⁸ Tognetti, *Divo Barsotti*, 398.

⁹ Tognetti, *Divo Barsotti*, 90.

order, he discovered a rich soil for some of his dearest ideals in the eagerness and openness of the very determined women of the Militia Regni Christi. Longing for a deeper spiritual commitment, they welcomed his vision of a lay monasticism which, unlike many religious associations, would have no active charitable role but would be an indirect apostolate. In no way would this be a self-absorbed spirituality: through personal sanctification the women were to bring sanctity to others. Their new chaplain told them, 'Our sanctity consists of remaining where we are but as complete Christians ... our sanctification is our place of work'.¹⁰ Above all, he regarded holiness as 'the perfecting of love', and in the life of the laity he saw 'an enormous arena for exercising this love'.¹¹ This was a remarkable insight, echoing St Paul's appreciation of the many gifts of the ordinary Christians of his time. It was certainly a fresh and unusual view of the laity in the mid-twentieth century and it completely won over his initial disciples.

Seeing the dedication of these first women, Barsotti proposed a form of consecration that would be as total and lifelong as that undertaken by priests, monks and nuns. When the first four women were consecrated, Fr Barsotti was consecrated alongside them. This remains an important feature of the Community: all, regardless of ecclesiastical or social rank, have the same consecration whereby they dedicate themselves to seeking God in their everyday lives and, in so doing, revealing God to the world. The women were also happy to abandon their warlike name and adopt the gentler, more scriptural name of the *Comunità dei figli di Dio* (Community of the Children of God).

From the beginning there was a family spirit in this new movement which soon attracted other members, lay men and women, and also priests. Consequently, the community was structured in four 'branches' according to the level of commitment each member could undertake. (The use of the word 'branches' rather than 'levels' again avoided any hierarchical element.) Barsotti's plan was that members of the community would live as 'monks in the world' in a spirit of fraternal love and would eventually be supported by small houses of sisters and brothers. And that is how

¹⁰ Tognetti, *Divo Barsotti*, 107.

¹¹ From a series of interviews between Fr Barsotti and Andrea Faggioli, of *Toscana Oggi*, published in *Don Divo Barsotti: il cercatore di Dio*, edited by Andrea Faggioli (Florence: Fiorentina, 2008). The quotation is from the seventh interview, entitled 'Santità' (sanctity).

the Community now operates: the sisters, brothers and ordained monks give spiritual guidance but exercise no other authority. All are equal. Consecration commits every member to a clear programme of daily prayers, meditation on the scriptures, the divine office and other spiritual writings, daily Mass if possible, and weekly local formation meetings at which members study the Bible and also some of the extensive spiritual writings that Divo Barsotti produced over the course of his long life.¹²

The four prayers that every member says each morning sum up that inner life to which the Community aspires. The first is the ‘Shema’, the ancient Jewish prayer which Jesus himself, as a devout Jew, will have said at least once every day. It is a call to listen to the word of God and incorporate God’s command of perfect love into every aspect of our daily life. The second prayer, the ‘Our Father’, with its six requests, is ‘the reply of the soul that has listened’. The third is St Francis’s ‘Lauds of God’—a joyful, ecstatic litany of divine attributes, like the canticles of the Old Testament, containing no requests, just praise. Through this prayer, Barsotti said, ‘we enter the Trinity’s mystery, in this abyss of light in which we human creatures realize now our beatitude’. And so the fourth prayer is the Beatitudes, in which we ‘anticipate now in our present lives, through certain conditions (poverty, humility, purity of heart, mercy) a spiritual perfection that cannot be separated from joy’.¹³

Joy is an important element in Barsotti’s idea of evangelization. ‘Christian joy is a joy that communicates with the whole world ... it makes the whole world a single family’.¹⁴ In *Evangelii gaudium* Pope Francis says, ‘an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral’.¹⁵ Barsotti likewise emphasizes the joy in ‘surprising’ the world with the good news: ‘I would ask you if you have surprised the world, if you have revealed to the world the true presence of God?’¹⁶ And he continues, ‘When Jesus came, he turned the life of the world into a feast of love. Everyone talks of Christianity as a religion of sadness and death. Not at all: it is a wedding-feast.’¹⁷

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¹² Divo Barsotti was a prolific writer, producing more than 160 books and numerous other writings.

¹³ All the quotations in this paragraph are taken from Barsotti’s own speeches and writings, quoted at <http://www.umilta.net/forprayer.html>, accessed 5 March 2015.

¹⁴ Divo Barsotti, *Gesù e la samaritana* (Florence: Fiorentina, 2006), 103.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 10.

¹⁶ Barsotti, *Gesù e la samaritana*, 43.

¹⁷ Barsotti, *Gesù e la samaritana*, 46.

A spirit of hospitality is a characteristic of the Community, which lives like a small family within the larger family of the Church. It now numbers more than 2,000 members in small groups found in Italy, Australia and New Zealand, Benin, Colombia, Croatia, Sri Lanka, and England and Wales. In the English-speaking world, it is now known as the Community of the Sons and Daughters of God, rather than the Children of God, perhaps to avoid any hint of infantilisation—less evident in the original Italian. Fr Divo Barsotti died as recently as 2006, so he was personally known to many current members and his memory is still fresh. Although he is regarded as the founder of the Community, he himself always insisted that Vittoria Pacchioni, one of the original members of the Militia, was a co-founder. At all events, without that determined lay impetus from three Florentine women, the Community would never have existed.

Lay Movements within the Church

The Community is just one movement within the Church, but I have written about it at length because it seems to me to express a way of being Catholic that is innovative in form but traditional in spirit. At the present time, when conservative and liberal elements within the Church seem to be openly confronting each other, there is a need for such peaceful groups as the Community, which has found a new way of living while nevertheless preserving the spiritual treasury of the great Christian traditions, both Eastern and Western—what John Paul II called ‘the two lungs’ with which the Church breathes.¹⁸

In the seventy years since the Community’s foundation, many other, very different, lay movements have come into being. It is estimated that in the late 1960s a shortage of priests in Brazil led to as many as 80,000 laity-led groups appearing, which spread rapidly across the country, working for justice and peace in close harmony with like-minded priests. Their principal aim was to preserve the faith and discuss its implications in the face of the injustices they experienced in their everyday lives.¹⁹ Challenging, but perhaps less controversial, are the new ecclesial movements. They are varied in style and presentation: some, such as the Community, are quiet and contemplative, while others are exuberant and declarative. The unobtrusive evangelizing activity of such groups as the Community may

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, n. 54.

¹⁹ See Jan Rocher and Francis McDonagh, ‘A Country of Two Halves’, *The Tablet* (14 June 2014), 17.



Pope Francis before the crowds at the Olympic Stadium in Rome

be compared to the yeast in the three measures of flour (Matthew 13:33); while the animated proclamation of the charismatic groups is like the lamp high on its lampstand, giving light to the whole house (Luke 8:16). These exuberant groups may not be to everybody's taste. When Pope Francis met a crowd of over 50,000 charismatic Catholics in Rome's Olympic Stadium, he admitted that in the past he had felt uncomfortable about them, seeing them as like 'a samba school', but has now grown to appreciate that they have been given by the Holy Spirit as 'a current of grace in the Church and for the Church'. Here he shows an openness to what is good in such movements, while remaining alert to how such energies could be distorted and become self-serving. He welcomes the joy and the energy but prudently warns that they must be 'dispensers of God's grace not controllers'.²⁰ Such generosity of mind, alongside sound judgment, is in the spirit of his founder St Ignatius who, in his Rules, preferred to 'praise'—that is, to seek out the good and actively speak well of it—rather than criticize, so as to find a balance between diverse, possibly conflicting, approaches.

²⁰ 'Pope Francis' Comments and Address at Charismatic Renewal Convention', 1 June 2014, available at <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-francis-comments-and-address-at-charismatic-renewal-convention>.

The church historian Massimo Faggioli, in an interview about his new book, *Sorting Out Catholicism: A Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements*, says that these movements usually emerge informally or underground and seem to assume their right to exist long before the hierarchy eventually recognises them.²¹ They attract people of all ages, ethnic backgrounds and social classes, and have their own specialised charisms. He maintains that such movements are an integral part of what being a Catholic is today and, if welcomed by the Church, they will rejuvenate it. If not welcomed, they will take their energies elsewhere, as is already happening in parts of South America. They present, he says, huge challenges, but could have a liberating effect on Western Catholicism, long plagued by clericalism and by an exclusiveness which can distance it from the Catholicism of other parts of the world, especially Asia. There is in such groups an ecumenical emphasis, 'not as one possible option but as the destiny of the Church'.²²

Ecumenism was also at the heart of Divo Barsotti's religious life, long before it had become an important issue within the Church: 'Dialogue with the world is essential to the Church' as the only way to reveal God.²³ Common to all these new movements is a sense of belonging and partnership. Modern means of communication enable even widely dispersed groups to keep in contact, support one another and share common aspirations and ways of expressing themselves. They may not be quite the mystics that Rahner predicted but they have certainly 'experienced' something which takes them either into contemplation or proclamation. Such associations of the faithful may suggest the shape of the Church of the future, no longer a centralised, hierarchical, administrative organization but a Church consisting of many groups of great diversity but faithful to the Christian tradition.

Where will the parish figure in this possible future Church, which might seem more fragmented than 'one and universal'? Pope Francis says in *Evangelii gaudium*, 'The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it has great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and

²¹ Philippa Hitchen, interview with Massimo Faggioli, 'New Ecclesial Movements—Changing the Face of the Church?', 2 July 2014, at http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/07/02/new_ecclesial_movements_-_changing_the_face_of_the_church/1102468. And see Massimo Faggioli, *Sorting Out Catholicism: A Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 2014).

²² 'New Ecclesial Movements'.

²³ Tognetti, *Divo Barsotti*, 410, quoting from Barsotti's diary for 1967.

the community'.²⁴ But it will need all the flexibility and creativity it can muster, because the parish churches in the West are emptying.

The Family Table

The Church is now suffering from the grief known to all parents of grown-up children that is called, very aptly, 'empty nest syndrome', when the children, who have been dependent on us for so long, are suddenly gone. Strangely, although we watch our children grow taller and stronger, their departure is always a shock and a bereavement. We cannot believe they can manage without us. They may be grown up, but they are not mature; surely, they will make mistakes, misjudgments! But as the poet Cecil Day Lewis said: 'Selfhood begins with a walking away / And love is proved in the letting go'.²⁵ If the childhood experience of home has been authoritarian, neglectful or even abusive, then the walking away will be permanent. And if this is a person's experience of the Church, then the best a humble and repentant Church can do is keep a loving vigil, like the father in the parable, and hope that one day the children will be given the grace to come home. If, however, it has provided love and support, the sons and daughters, having perhaps found different families in a wider world, will still return to the family home for special occasions, bringing their own new families with them. And the parent-child relationship will have modulated into something much more equal and reciprocal. There are few greater pleasures for parents than to sit round the family table with their grown-up children. Clergy still clinging to their old authoritarian parental roles should try it sometime for, I believe, that this is what a maturing laity, in all its diversity, really wants.

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²⁴ *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 28.

²⁵ Cecil Day Lewis, 'Walking Away', in *The Complete Poems* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992), 546.