Comment

Sixteen lay people on the laity

Hundreds of groups and individuals participated in the consultation of the laity about the laity carried out in England and Wales by the General Secretariat of the Bishops' Conference as part of the preparations for next year's Synod. What did they say? In place of the usual editorial, we are this month publishing a slightly shortened version of one of the texts sent to the bishops. The product of a series of regular weekly meetings, it was written by the group of sixteen lay people living in Oxford who have signed it.

Following the title of the Synod, we will proceed to consider the aspects of Laity in the World and Laity in the Church.

Laity in the World

The spheres of Church and world should not be separated, as though the one was the realm of the clergy and the other the realm of the laity; this suggestion that the layperson's place is in the world can be as oppressive and discriminating as the parallel statement from male-female relations, 'the woman's place is in the home'.

Nonetheless we found ourselves continually returning to the Christian's apostolate to the marginalised and outcast, as if to a base position. This is not just a good work that can result from a Christian commitment: it is rather a basic way in which we meet Christ—in the needy and oppressed, in those who thirst for justice, in those who are poor and powerless, in those who are 'outside the camp':

> So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp, and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come. (Hebrews 13.12—14)

By going to those outside the gate we can discover the truth that 'the kingdom of God is in the midst of you' (Luke 17.21), for the wilderness outside the gate will become the privileged place of God's salvation (cf. Isaiah 41.17—20). There are many ways in which the laity can work among the marginalised: some among us had experience of social work, Samaritan work, marriage counselling, probation work, work among Australian aboriginees, etc.

As an example of work among the marginalised, we looked in particular at the situation of prisoners, with the help of a Catholic prison governor. He spoke of youngsters who have been in care all their lives and for whom there seems no future in life at all—isolated from the outside, with no contacts, letters, visits; he spoke of people who die

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1986.tb06528.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

lonely in prison and around whose grave are to be found no one but the prison staff, who are paid to be there anyway. He also spoke of the families of prisoners as among the most deprived groups in the community. In the long experience of this governor, the hundreds of thousands of pounds spent every year in his prison alone on experts and training makes no dent in the regular recidivist rate of 68%. The only people who manage to break away from the pattern are those in whom there has been some kind of spiritual awakening, which happens through the influence of one person on another.

There is a desperate need for more Christian people, perhaps with a home and family, and a faith to sustain them, to come into the prisons. But the Catholic Church has lagged far behind, despite this need, despite the disproportionately high number of Catholic prisoners, and despite the revival in prison chaplaincy work by other denominations. The statutory requirements of masses and confessions are provided, but the Catholic laity, in this governor's experience, 'does nothing, but nothing'. There is so much they could be doing, as catechists, as prison visitors, coming in individually, coming in in groups, providing hostels for ex-prisoners, making links with parish communities, and above all keeping on coming back when everyone else has given up.

Part of the blame for this lies in a condescending attitude often found among Christians in regard to charitable works. So long as the emphasis lies on attention to the poor as a dreary duty, in which we are always the ones to give, then it will be difficult to build up much enthusiasm for it. But when the focus shifts from what we are giving them, to what they are giving us, to the encounter with Christ outside the gate, and to the richness of experience offered us among those who are right at the bottom, then the option for the poor assumes a central place in the Christian life and the lay life, instead of remaining at the periphery.

We fully endorse the statement, in the Preliminary Paper for the Sixth Symposium of European Bishops, that the laity 'often seem predominantly passive and security-seeking' (*Briefing*, 11 October 1985). There is a fear of commitment, an unwillingness to get too involved, and a desire to keep such problems at arms' length, which betrays an inward-looking and self-centred approach to the community. At the same time this apathy cannot be blamed entirely on the laity, because it is largely derived from the self-image that the layperson has been given. An active, adult lay apostolate would raise many questions about the role of the clergy as leaders, but maintaining the laity in their present, childish condition is as damaging to the clergy as to the laity themselves. The laity should learn, in the words of canon law, to undertake 'apostolic action by their own initiative' (can. 216), and yet even on this one limited question of work for the imprisoned, several members of the group had experienced discouragement or hindrance from the clergy, in terms such as 'Are you sure you are the best person to be doing this?' or 'If you had been in there you would know it was not really the kind of place you would like to go'; there were delaying tactics, promises of action without

follow-up, and an excessive attitude of caution about the dreadful effect those awful people in there would have on these poor, dear people outside.

On this question of lay-clerical relations it is now necessary to turn to laity in the Church.

Laity in the Church

Models of the Church

The role of the laity in the Church is greatly affected by which model of the Church is operative. Even today the hierarchical model is over-influential. There is a need for hierarchy and authority in the Church. The Church has an urgent mission—to preach the gospel to all creation—and for that we need efficiency and order, and therefore structures of authority. Nonetheless the hierarchical model of the Church is of secondary importance compared to more basic models such as body of Christ, *koinonia* or community, or people of God.

The body of Christ, with its corresponding theology of diverse charisms according to the will of the Spirit, forms the basic image of the Church in Paul's writings (Romans ch 12; 1 Corinthians chs 6, 10 & 12; Ephesians chs 4 & 5; Colossians ch 1). The move from this model to talk of offices in the Church came in the pastoral epistles, as a response to a new situation and in order to protect the Church from real problems that were arising such as false teaching. What this tells us today is not that hierarchy and office are inauthentic—far from it—but that they are a response to actual needs, and should be organised according to those needs, while the underlying model of the body of Christ corresponds rather to the eternal and unchanging mystery of the Church. To identify the hierarchy and offices of the Church with the eternal mystery of the Church would be contrary to the approach of the New Testament. The world of religion, clergy and cults is necessary to this life, but we do not expect to find the offices of bishops, priests and deacons in heaven, and if we did it would be a somewhat depressing prospect.

We welcome the achievement of the Extraordinary Synod (and our own bishops' role in it) in bringing the concept of *koinonia* to the front of the Church's self-understanding. It is a concept helpful alike to the laity and to other churches, for it looks positively at what is shared rather than at what separates. The implications of *koinonia* for Church structure have not yet been explored but it is evident that 'structures and relationships within the Church must reflect and express communion. They must protect the unity of faith and charity. They must promote pluriformity'. (English-Language Workshop — A, Synod, p.3).

The people of God is an image that Vatican II made central to its Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. As the Extraordinary Synod has reminded us, the Church as 'The People of God' (ch 2) should be read in the light of chapter 1 ('The Mystery of the Church') and chapter 3 ('The Church is Hierarchical'). Nor must we forget chapter 4 on 'The Laity' and chapter 5 on 'The Call to Holiness'. The 'radical

equality' (can. 208) of the people of God thus became rightly seen as the starting point for the Church, from which everything else flows.

The priesthood of the laity

In the Bible the idea of the people of God is often linked with the idea of the common priesthood of all the faithful. 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'. (1 Peter 2.9, cf. also Exodus 19.5—6; 1 Peter 2.5; Revelation 5.9—10)

In the New Testament, priesthood language is used in a Christian sense only of one individual, Christ, and of his once-for-all sacrifice (1 Hebrews 7.23—27); otherwise it is used not of individuals, but of the whole people of God. Priesthood belongs first to Christ and then to the *laos* taken as a whole. The ordained priesthood is derived from the common priesthood, rather than the other way round. (This is not to say that the priest only receives his authority from the particular, local community where he serves: the *laos* of which we speak is the universal Church, throughout the world, past and present, the entire body of Christ, and it is this which the ordained minister represents.) This is indeed only what would be expected when one remembers that in sacramental theology the church is always the middle term between the individual and Christ (the *res et sacramentum*).

The task that confronts the Church now is to bring about the priesthood of the laity as an effective reality.

Jesus as layperson and Mary as priest

When we speak of Christ as the once-for-all priest, we should remember that this language was not used of him before the epistle to the Hebrews. In the gospels Jesus is nowhere seen as a priest. The priesthood clearly existed in the gospels, and Jesus had nothing to do with it. Priests, on the contrary, appear as those responsible for having Jesus put to death. The Consultation Document recommends Mary as a model for the layperson (39). While this is good we should not forget that Jesus too can be seen as layperson, and is the greatest model for the lay life.

And just as we gain a valuable new perspective by regarding Jesus not just as a priest but also as a layperson, so too we can image Mary not just as a layperson but also as a priest. Mary's role at the crucifixion has been described as that of a priest or deaconess, because she stood there and offered her son.

An essential difference?

There are many ways in which lay and clerical roles have converged in recent times, and in which the previous rigid barriers between the two groups are being broken down as laity take on more responsibility in the apostolate. Non-ordained ministries of many types are emerging and should be encouraged.

This newfound co-responsibility of cleric and layperson is beginning to be expressed in liturgical practice, for example through communion under both kinds, in fidelity to the instruction of Jesus at the Last Supper: 'Take this, *all*

of you, and drink from it...' At the same time many unnecessary symbols of separation remain. Should Catholic clergy have 'the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues' (Matthew 23.6)? Should they 'go about in long robes, and have salutations in the market places' (Mark 12.38)? Should they be called 'father' or 'master' or 'good' (Matthew 23.8—10; Mark 10.18)? The vigour and vehemence with which Jesus condemned such attitudes and practices must indicate that he was saying something of permanent relevance to religious authorities, extending far beyond the scribes and Pharisees of his own day.

The convergence between clergy and laity, however, must not result in a dissolving of all differences between the two. The distinction that should remain has sometimes been described as a difference of essence rather than of degree (*Lumen Gentium,* 10). To understand this essential difference we need to consider those acts that may never validly be performed by a layperson—some sacramental acts, in particular the confecting of the eucharist and the absolving of sins.

To draw attention to this difference is not to undervalue the importance of the priest's ministry of the Word—it is simply to realise that that part of his work may, to a large extent, be fruitfully shared with the laity (cf. can 225), though disagreements and sometimes considerable tension remain over the exact line of demarcation. Nor is it to deny that offering the eucharistic sacrifice and forgiving sins are functions of the whole *laos:* clearly they are, and are only functions of the individual priest by being first and foremost an act of the entire Church. The need for an ordained priest to perform these acts precisely emphasises the link with the universal Church, because the priest is present as representative of the universal Church, rather than as a private individual.

When understood in this way, an 'essential difference' between clergy and laity can be upheld. But unfortunately in most people's minds talk of an 'essential difference' suggests something much more wide-ranging, Consequently many other differences are clung to, which are non-essential, and which in fact obscure rather than highlight any essential distinction. Among these might be listed manner of dress, celibate status, deference rather than the mutual respect due among equals, a clerical workforce running the administration of the Church *en bloc,* separate facilities for the study of theology, and so on. These can hinder the growth of that intimacy, trust and understanding upon which a truly complementary partnership depends.

Looking for new structures

There is always a tendency for new ideas from the laity to lose their freshness and become safe and tame if they have to be mediated through clerical channels before they reach a communicable form. For example, the National Pastoral Congress was the most important event for laity in this country in recent years—a time of great excitement and renewed energy; but despite the attempt to capture its insights in an episcopal document, *The Easter People,* that momentum has now been lost.

In the same way, there seems something odd about a body called together to advise the Pope being composed entirely of bishops, especially when the

topic on which they are to advise him is that of the laity. What assumptions of lay inarticulacy and helplessness are conveyed by the process of asking bishops to consult the laity and then report back, instead of—in one way or another—allowing the laity to speak to Rome directly for themselves?

The Catholic Church has something to learn from other Churches in expressing this partnership in terms of structure and in Church government. But we must not devise too elaborate and cumbersome attempts at participation. Simply to equate the ministry of the laity with involvement in Church government, to the extent that we divert lay attention from the really important things in the world, would be a mistake. It would be systematically to turn lay persons into ecclesiastical persons, and then the 'clericalisation of the laity', of which Rome so often speaks with such alarm, would indeed be a danger to be avoided.

Changes in the Church, particularly structural changes, or changes that involve a reassessment of our expectations of the roles of clergy and laity, are frightening and threatening, and liable to be resisted by those in authority, afraid of things falling apart. There is need for trust in God, who regularly breaks up our expectations just when we want to settle into a secure and comfortable pattern, God demolishes our idols, and there is real danger today, as there always has been, of making our ecclesiastical structures and our hierarchical offices into idols.

We must speak not only of the pain of unwelcome change, but also of the pain of frustrated mission. Many in the Church today, particularly women, suffer acutely because they find it so hard to exercise the apostolate to which they feel called. Some seek ordination, but are debarred by sex or married status; others wish to remain within the lay ranks, and to discover the reality of the lay apostolate there. It is hard for clergy to understand the acuteness of the pain that some people suffer in this struggle.

The lay apostolate needs to become a reality, for many reasons. The Church and the world need this apostolate; the laity need to give it; and the fact that the old clerical network is running down through lack of manpower gives added urgency to the task.

Responding to the crisis

We wish to draw attention to the grave situation facing the Church today. Numbers of priests are dropping at a dramatic rate, a large proportion are becoming elderly, and practically nothing is being done in any organised or planned way to channel lay talent into gaps created. We are embarked on a catastrophic policy of retrenchment by default (cf. Alex Cosgrave, *The Tablet,* 20 July 1985), and we urgently call upon our own bishops of England and Wales to make realistic provision for the future.

We suggest that funds be found. or if necessary raised, to train lay ministers and pastoral workers in sufficient numbers to ensure that, even allowing for expected drop-out rates, the number of those ministering in the Church should at the very least not decline any further. We ask that those laity working in such full-time ministries be paid, not lavishly but according to their just needs and those of their families (can. 231). We urge that the standard of training for laity be of a high level, not only theologically but also pastorally

and spiritually. And we recommend that this pastoral planning and training policy be organised at a national rather than a diocesan level, in order to ensure the best possible formation, and in recognition of the fact that laity, unlike clergy, can change diocese at will.

We point out the appalling wastage for the Catholic Church when lay theologians have to be employed by other churches (in Anglican theological colleges, for example), because no money is made available to use their talents for the benefit of their own Church: such a policy, apparently based on economic realism, in fact shows tragic shortsightedness. We press for better information to be made available, at both diocesan and national level, concerning competent lay experts in diverse fields: the compilation of a directory might help towards this.

We also draw attention to the pastoral need that could be filled by having at least one layperson working at the diocesan or the deanery level with special responsibility for the laity—a sort of ombudsperson for the laity who could, by listening and discerning, assist the bishop to respond to those in genuine pastoral difficulties. Too often the laity who have been hurt simply drift away from the Church because they feel their case is hopeless; more could be done to reconcile them if laity are used to help laity.

We also regret the absence of laity in not only the advisory but also the administrative and decision-making structure of the Church at every level, from the chairing of parish councils, through the diocesan administration, to the Vatican curia. We urge that, so far as the competence of our clergy and bishops extends, appointments be made to remedy this, and that such appointments be made according to ability and talent rather than safeness and docility.

Centuries of over-emphasis on the clergy have resulted in a grave and culpable diminishment of the apostolic work of the Church. Neither one group nor the other is wholly responsible: laity are apathetic, clergy are cautious, and there is a vicious circle of assumptions and expectations. But the signs of the times now call us to action, to change, and to a new era of lay apostolate.

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