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The Laity in the Life of the Church

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Notes & Comment

The Laity in the Life of the Church

The emphasis in recent years on the doctrine of the Mystical Body has served to focus attention on the place and role of every Christian in the Church. Moreover, the disruption caused by the recent wars in the social, economic and religious life of many, and other revolutionary social changes, have made Christians keenly aware of the urgency of the problems facing the modern man. The modern Christian finds himself challenged to prove the value of his faith and beliefs. It is gratifying to note that more and more of the laity are seriously asking what role they should play in the Church's attempts to answer the problems of today.

These notes aim at a closer examination of the role and function of the layman in the Church. First let us attempt to define the real theological meaning of the term "layman". We can start by eliminating those meanings which it certainly does not signify. First, a layman is not a person who is totally immersed in the profane order and completely passive in the sacred order. That he should be considered as such by many can be explained by the fact that when the distinction between the terms "cleric" and "layman" became formally fixed the description "lay" connoted inferiority, and later on, with the attempt of the Reformers to suppress the divinely-instituted prerogatives of the hierarchy, there was a tendency to emphasize the subordinate role of the layman. Secondly, a layman is not the so-called "secular" man who has no interest in religion, nor is he the ignorant man who knows practically nothing of his religion and who is the merely passive object of clerical zeal and powers.

Rather, the layman in the theological sense is one of the holy people of God; he is a member of Christ. He is therefore truly one of those who are sanctified and consecrated and called to salvation by baptism and, as such, has a definite place within the consecrated sphere of the Church. The Greek word *laos* from which we get our word

laicus, "lay", used to designate the chosen people, the holy people consecrated to Jahweh. But the honorary titles of Israel have now become the right of the members of Christ's Church. St. Peter said: "You are the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the consecrated nation, his own people" (1 Peter 2:9).

And yet, the layman has very often been described in a merely negative way, as canonically distinguished and opposed to the cleric and the religious. He is defined as one who has no part in the power of jurisdiction and of holy orders. The canons of the Code that speak of the layman describe him as having the right to receive spiritual goods from the clergy, especially the helps necessary for salvation.¹

Viewed in the light of the Church's life and mission, the layman has been described in a number of ways. John Courtney Murray, S.J., has described the layman as the Church's grip on the temporal order, for he is present in, and a part of the temporal order in a way that the priest is not.² Karl Rahner explained that the layman is the Christian who remains in the world, the member of the Mystical Body who exercises his ecclesiastical function in the place where he lives in the world. Therefore he is distinguished by retaining his original position in the world and not abandoning it for a kind of life whose permanence creates a new state. His engagement in *the world* is what determines his being a layman, so that if he passes the limits fixed by his original situation in the world, he ceases to be a layman.³ Finally, Mgr. Jacques Leclercq, quoting an unnamed theologian, says that the layman is one who takes the temporal order seriously. Leclercq notes that a man who establishes himself as a butcher so that he can talk religion with his customers is not taking the temporal order seriously. This is not true of the man who recognizes the need for a butcher in a certain place and sets up shop there in order to render service.⁴

Baptized persons are members of the Mystical Body and while externally there is an inequality of function, a hierarchy, internally there is an equality of life. All are sheep in the fold of the Good Shepherd, all are in need of graces and salvation, and the merits of the simplest Christians may be greater than those of the hierarchy. It would be wrong obviously to suppose that the Church consists only of the hierarchy. Indeed, as Pius XII pointed out, the laity not only belong to the Church but they are in the front line of the Church's life. In fact, they are the Church.⁵ What then is the precise role and function of the layman in the Church?

¹ Cf. in particular canons 682 and 948.

² *Theological Studies* 5 (1944), 341.

³ "The Lay Apostolate", *Cross Currents* VII (1957), 227-228. The same article appeared in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 78 (1956), 3-32, and in the second volume of Rahner's *Schriften zur Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1955), pp. 339-373.

⁴ *Vivre chrétiennement notre temps* (Tournai: Casterman, 1957), p. 40.

⁵ Allocution to the Cardinals, 20 February 1946, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 38, 341.

Perhaps we can start with what is commonly accepted by all. It is generally held that every Christian layman has his work defined for him by his situation in the world—his profession and work, the circle of his friends and acquaintances, special circumstances arising from his particular place in the world. This much at least is implicit in the constant teaching of the Church and her spiritual writers. The layman, in the metaphor of the Scriptures, is to be the leaven helping the growth in spirit of the temporal milieu in which he finds himself. Just as Christ came into the world to redeem not only the souls of men, but men—men with their bodies and their souls—and the whole material creation together with men, so the layman who in his own way is helping to bring about the fulfillment of the kingdom envisioned by Christ is placed in the world to help transform it by the vital living of his Christian life and by the dynamic impulse implanted in his being by the divine love through baptism and confirmation. Because of his situation in the world, the layman has limitless opportunities to show forth in his life and in his dealings with people the faith which he possesses and lives by. In this effective, vital Christian existence there is no essential need for any direct appeal by means of propaganda or persuasion to the unbeliever, although this may sometimes be called for. The essential need is for that real, genuine competence which shows itself in sincere involvement in temporal affairs calculated to improve the temporal lot of men. We may note that the tremendous scope of this temporal involvement presupposes a truly genuine vital inner Christian life which should flow into every action of the layman. This then is the fertile field for the layman's apostolate, arising primarily from the divine love that urges every Christian to show forth the fruits of his love. This is where the layman is destined to find and fulfill his spiritual perfection and sanctity.

Jacques Leclercq points out that the spiritual character of Christ's kingdom is not to be achieved by abstracting from the human body and the conditions that surround it. Christ addressed His message to men who remain men; who live a physical, intellectual, social life in accordance with their condition as men. This necessarily involves material and temporal elements. It is for one to determine which of these elements are necessary for the spiritual life and compatible with it, and which are opposed to it.⁸ The layman will achieve his holiness not by separating himself from the human condition but by sincere involvement in it, and by injecting into it the transforming and redeeming grace which he has received from Christ.

So far so good; the differences in opinion arise when one considers the apostolate that goes beyond the particular, original situation of the layman in the world. Karl Rahner maintains that the apostolate which the layman meets in his ordinary situation in the world, which he terms the "action of Catholics" (as distinguished from Catholic

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

Action), is the one and only object of the lay apostolate. Thus he asserts that the Christian whose apostolic endeavors exceed the limits demanded by his original and particular place in the world (for instance, the catechist whose main function in life has become to teach religion, so that by his profession he has changed his original status in the world) is no longer doing what belongs strictly to the apostolate of the laity, but has rather taken upon himself part of the hierarchical apostolate. Such a person, to be sure, is not ordained, but nevertheless he is no longer a layman.⁷

This opinion of Rahner is contradicted by what seems to be the more common teaching of theologians, and it is certainly at variance with what Pius XII taught in his address to the Second World Congress for the Lay Apostolate.⁸ Pius XII defined the lay apostolate as consisting in "the assumption by laymen of tasks deriving from the mission which Christ entrusted to His Church." He further taught that this apostolate always remains a lay apostolate and does not become a hierarchical apostolate even when it becomes the main function of the layman, and even when it is carried out under the mandate of the Hierarchy. This, Pius XII would call the lay apostolate in the strict sense, contrasting it with what he calls the apostolate in a wider sense, namely, the apostolate of prayer and of personal example, or, as others term it, the witness of the full Christian life, or finally, as Rahner puts it, the action of Catholics. Thus, all the organizations that go under the name of Catholic Action are, in the more common teaching, included in the lay apostolate.

What is the obligation of the ordinary layman to join any of these organizations engaged in the lay apostolate? Clearly, on the level of intercession for the world, of spreading the fruits of charity and of faith implanted in our lives by means of the Church, it is for each one to use whatever gift he has received, to be generous in responding to the call of grace, and to be faithful to the demands of his personal vocation.⁹

We now turn to a closely related question which has to do with the combination of sacral and temporal roles in some priests and religious. The problem may be posed thus: Is there sufficient justification for priests and religious to engage in secular endeavors which are really proper to the laity?

Among recent writers, Jacques Leclercq has perhaps taken the strongest stand against priests engaging in secular endeavors. In his work cited above he seeks to determine the true character of the lay

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 240.

⁸ *Second World Congress for the Lay Apostolate* (Rome, n.d.), I, 20.

⁹ On the binding force of directives of the hierarchy entrusting lay people with a share in their mission and office, see the interesting discussion in Rahner, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

spirituality.¹⁰ Christ has declared that His kingdom is not of this world and yet it is a kingdom whose members are men, immersed in the conditions of men. Leclercq shows how the attempts to reconcile the spiritual and temporal elements have resulted in two tendencies in the development of lay sanctity. The first tendency is that of complete withdrawal from the world; the second, an attempt to irradiate material life with the Christian spirit. The historical results of these tendencies have not been too felicitous. Many of the laity thought that their holiness consisted in imitating religious, and never quite got away from the mistaken notion that they could not be completely Christian if they remained completely laymen. On the other hand, many churchmen got so immersed in temporal affairs that they were unable to extricate themselves from them.

The real solution, according to Leclercq, must be based on the perspective of the Incarnation. The spiritual kingdom is addressed to men who remain men and immersed in the conditions of men. The answer is not to abstract from the human body and its human elements but to work on these elements and determine which are necessary for the spiritual life and compatible with it. In the practical order, the priest must form the layman so that the layman can transform the world, for the layman can transform the world only if he is genuinely Christian. Leclercq laments that one of the tragedies of Christianity has been the historical failure of the laity to fulfill their task. But, he asks, could this not have been the result of another failure, the failure of the clergy to fulfill theirs?

Leclercq points out how historical circumstances brought about developments that were to affect adversely the development of a truly lay spirituality. From the early years of the Church the intellectual life became centered in the monasteries; schools and universities were ecclesiastical establishments. There was no training and no intellectual life for the laity. Theologians, of course, considered temporal problems; but their primary concern was the spiritual, the salvation of souls. The development of penal law and the movement for social reform in the nineteenth century are noteworthy examples. Until the French Revolution the theory and practice of penal law was characterized by great brutality. Then a reaction more in conformity with Christian sentiment set in; but it came chiefly from anticlericals, for among the Christians there was not an intellectual class willing and able to apply the Christian spirit to temporal problems. The theologians continued to discuss the question but, as theologians, they treated it from the viewpoint of its religious implications and thus, in effect, really ignored the temporal aspect of the problem.¹¹ Another example was the nineteenth-century industrial

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 37-64. This section also appeared as an article in *La Revue Nouvelle* 19 (1954-1955), 449-468.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

revolution. When the capitalistic economy resulted in circumstances which tended toward a de-Christianization of the workers' milieu, the Church intervened and popes often condemned the contemporary materialism and avarice of the economic process. But here again, many of the priests who stepped into the Christian social movement were mostly inspired not by social reform in itself, but by the salvation of souls.¹²

And so once more we see the sore need for highly trained laymen who will take a truly serious interest in the temporal order; who will apply their intelligence to the temporal order in itself and for itself because this order has values not only as a means to a higher order but in itself. Unfortunately the ordinary layman did not have the necessary formation to approach temporal problems with Christian originality. The good Christian always had the impression that he could not be a completely good Christian if he took the temporal order seriously.

What lesson does Leclercq draw from all this? It is an arresting one, whose gravity must needs make one pause and reflect. He says that as long as priests believe that they ought to engage in temporal affairs and as long as the laity believe that their holiness consists in imitating religious, the Church will never accomplish her work.¹³ The work of the Church has two stages: to transform souls by giving them grace; then to transform the world through those who are living in grace. The first step is the work of the priests; they must form the laymen. The second step is the work of the laity, who, formed in the divine life of the Church, accept their peculiar responsibility. It is the layman who must show the value of Christianity to the world for the world will never see it otherwise. But the layman can do this only if his dedication to temporal affairs is that of a genuine Christian who is living the supernatural life and impregnated with Christian values. For what concerns the temporal must be solved according to the proper requirements of the temporal order; and this in practice may be very difficult and may test the layman's virtue and competence to the full.

Leclercq gives two reasons why so many zealous priests are still attached to the idea that the priest ought to go to every place where Christianity ought to be present. The first is that there are not enough laymen capable of carrying out their temporal responsibilities. The second is the prestige which this brings to the Church. But he remarks that it would be difficult to find a priest who could accomplish for the Church what a Maritain, a Claudel, or a Chesterton has done in the field of letters, or what a de Gaspari or an Adenauer has done in the field of politics. There are exceptions, of course, but

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

priests require exceptional supernatural virtue if they are not to lose sight of their supernatural vocation.

What are we to think of this argument? It is a basic teaching of the Church that a man is ordained a priest not for himself primarily but for others. The priesthood is a social office. The priest is mediator between God and men. Thus whatever a priest possesses of holiness, of culture, of learning, is not really his nor for himself alone. By his consecration everything in him is now ordered for the glory of God and the redemption of mankind. And so without contradiction or paradox even the interior life of the priest, his learning and accomplishments, become a part of his public function and of his social ministry. It will be well to keep this in mind as we follow the priest responding to his vocation, which is both the call of God and the call of men.

We may readily admit with Msgr. Leclercq that the work of the Church has two stages: first to transform souls by giving them grace, and then to transform the world through those living in grace. The first is the work of priests, the second that of the laity. The problem is that this clear and simple formula breaks down when applied to historical, practical circumstances. It will often happen that in certain areas these two stages of the Church's work must be attempted simultaneously, and, especially in missionary lands, only the priest may be there to do both. It is a constant assumption of papal social teaching that the economic conditions of people are to be raised to a level worthy of the dignity of men if the gospel is to be preached to them fruitfully. What is the priest to do who is faced with people who are not only in need of spiritual instruction but also need to be taught how to improve their temporal life? Obviously he has to do his best and use all the training and abilities, sacred and secular, at his disposal. He may have to be a priest-farmer, if only to convince his people that their methods of farming can be improved. This is precisely what missionaries are doing in some parishes in Mindanao and in the Carolines. But is this not the exception rather than the rule? Granted; but it shows nevertheless, that the priest may step in and do what he can in the temporal order if laymen are lacking who are capable of carrying out their temporal responsibilities, or if they are still in process of formation for such responsibilities, perhaps even by the priest himself.

But what about the many priests who are at present engaged almost exclusively in the different natural and physical sciences, in letters, in economics and other fields? When there is so much to do which only a priest can do, can a priest afford to spend his life in a laboratory among test tubes? Was he not ordained for the things of God?

Yes; but the things of God happen to be deeply embedded in the things of this world. Moreover, the things of God are to be fulfilled and accomplished in and by men who remain deeply immersed in the temporal concerns of men. The priest who is in any of the various spheres of so-called secular endeavor is there as a witness. He is witnessing there to Christ in a way that no one else can. If he is a good scientist, and a good priest at the same time, then he presents the best answer to the ever-recurring charge that a man cannot be a good scientist and a good Christian. There is much truth in the words of Pius XII when he told the scientists of the Pontifical Academy of Science that they were the "discoverers of the intentions of God." Just as an artist leaves a trace of himself in his work, so God, the Artist of the Universe, has left traces of His power and grandeur and glory in the world He created. It is the office of the scientist to understand the intricate workings of the material universe in order that by such understanding all may acknowledge the source from whence all this magnificence comes.

There is of course the practical apologetic value of the existence of priest-scientists. It belongs to the office of the priest to attempt to bring the men who enjoy great influence to an understanding of the Faith. But, as Father Janssens, the General of the Jesuits, once wrote, the priest

will attempt this task in vain who is not himself outstanding in the same branch in which they excel. These people may not respect a theologian, but they do look up to a historian, a mathematician, an astronomer who is their peer... We can go a step further: the Church herself will come to shine in the eyes of the more learned... only when, besides the splendor of truth and charity, the brilliance of science commends her to them.

The truth is one, but it often needs a person well versed in the science of the material universe as well as in the science of God to show that this is so.

The manifold spheres in which the work of God is waiting to be done beckon to all the faithful of Christ—priests, religious, and laity. It belongs to the wise administrator, the bishop, the religious superior, to use all human prudence, while earnestly seeking divine guidance, to decide how he can best use the men at his disposal.

We may conclude these notes by bringing to a single focus the roles of the different groups in the Church. The specific function of priests is to distribute the means of salvation and to govern the community in its religious life according to the measure of the powers given to them. Priests are the bearers of hierarchical powers entrusted to the Church by Christ. The specific role of the religious is to show by their lives the value and importance of Christian perfection. They express and manifest in a historical and visible way the Church's world-transcending origin and destiny. The laity's role is in the world, there to prepare, promote and continue the sanctifying action

of the Church that this grace of sanctification be more readily, more deeply and more widely received and made effective.

Priests, religious, and laity, therefore, have distinctive roles and functions in the life of the Church. They are all sent forth together with tasks which are different but complementary. Each group has need of the others, and the Church needs all.

The priest has a task which he alone can do. The religious is in the Church to witness to its world-transcending origin and destiny. To the laity belongs the tremendous responsibility of transforming the temporal order and bringing it to the feet of Christ. If they fail in their task, who shall do it for them?

PEDRO C. SEVILLA, S.J.

First Asian Conference on Legal Education

About 100 delegates from Asian and Southeast Asian states gathered at the University of Singapore from August 27 to September 1, 1962 for the first conference on legal education in Asia. Representing the Philippines were Dean Vicente Abad Santos and Professor Bienvenido Ambion of the College of Law, University of the Philippines; Professor Enrique M. Fernando of the Code Commission; Dr. Jorge R. Coquia of the Office of the Solicitor General; Dean Crispin Baizos of the Institute of Law, Far Eastern University; and Dr. Enrique P. Syquia of the College of Law, University of Santo Tomas.

Among the prominent participants of the Conference were Dean L. A. Sheridan and Vice Dean L. C. Green of the University of Singapore; Justice T. S. Fernando and Professor T. Nadaraja of Ceylon; Justice S. A. Raman and Professor A. T. Markose of India; Solicitor General A. V. Winslow of Singapore; Dean Hadinoto of Indonesia; Judge M. Komatsu of Japan and Professor S. Z. Rahman of Pakistan.

Educated in either British, American or European legal institutions, the delegates, composed of law professors, justices, government lawyers and practicing attorneys, discussed such common problems of law school development as standards of admission, curriculum, teaching methods, and the language of instruction. With the exception of Japan and Thailand all the states represented were former colonies of western powers, hence the legal concepts expressed in the conference were predominantly those of the West. More particularly, many of the delegates came from states which were former British colonies and thus reflected the English common-law tradition. The Philippine delegates, on the other hand, represented the Roman-Spanish law and