

THE MISSION OF THE LAITY

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In some past centuries it might almost have seemed that the laity had no mission. The Lord, it was said, had assigned the mission to evangelize the world to the apostles and their successors. Since the word *apostle* means someone sent, a herald, an emissary, it might seem that persons not in the apostolic succession could not be sent. Throughout the Middle Ages and early modern times, lay people were active in the world, but ordinarily played a rather passive role in the Church. Saints like King Louis IX and Thomas More applied their faith admirably to the world of politics, but did not meddle in ecclesiastical affairs. Other lay persons were scholars and apologists for the faith, but official documents of the Church did not speak of them as having a mission or ministry, terms that were commonly applied to the Church and to the clergy but not to the laity.

The Lay Apostolate

Sensing the advent of a new situation, the Popes at the beginning of the twentieth century began to involve the laity in the ministry of the Church. Pius X established Catholic Action, and Pius XI assiduously fostered its growth. In 1928 he wrote: “Catholic Action has no other purpose than the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy.”¹ But Catholic Action made no provision for the laity to exercise an apostolate of their own.

With Pius XII (1939-1958) we see a further positive development. In an address of 1946 he declared: “The Faithful, more precisely the lay faithful, find themselves on the front lines of the

Church's life; for them the Church is the animating principle for human society. Therefore, they in particular, ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church. ... These are the Church.²

Pius XII modified the statements of his predecessors about the dependence of the lay apostolate on the hierarchy. That dependence, he said, admits of degrees. It is strictest in the case of Catholic Action, which is an instrument in the hands of the hierarchy. But other works of the lay apostolate, he observed, could be left more or less to the free initiative of lay persons, while of course being conducted within the limits allowed by competent ecclesiastical authorities.³

Here in the United States, Catholic Action had only limited success, except perhaps in the well-attended Summer School for Catholic Action, which drew large crowds of students until the time of Vatican II. The period between the two world wars nevertheless witnessed a prodigious growth of lay activity on the part of Catholics. In 1917 the National Catholic Welfare Conference set up the National Council of Catholic Men and the National Council of Catholic Women. Also in 1917 David Goldstein, a Jewish convert to Catholicism, took to preaching on the streets as a lay evangelist. Several years later he and Martha Moore Avery established the Catholic Campaigners for Christ. Likewise in 1917 Thomas Wyatt Turner, a lay professor at Howard University, organized the Federation of Colored Catholics, which eventually blended into the Catholic Interracial Council. In 1924 Michael Williams founded the lay Catholic magazine *Commonweal*. In 1933 Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day launched the Catholic Worker movement. About 1940 Catherine de Hueck established Friendship House, while another group of lay Catholics founded the magazine *Integrity*. Pat and Patty Crowley started the Christian Family Movement in 1947. Thus there was no lack of vigorous Catholic lay movements.⁴

The Second Vatican Council did much to bring official Catholic teaching abreast of the de facto situation, but the Council can hardly be said to have made revolutionary changes in the theology of the laity. Its treatment of the laity in the Constitution on the Church and in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity reflected predominantly the work of Yves Congar, whose classic work on the Laity had been published ten years earlier.⁵

The Council wrestled with the question how to define the lay faithful. From a canonical point of view, they were baptized Christians who had not received the sacrament of orders. Seeking a more positive definition, the Council Fathers taught that lay Christians were incorporated in the Body of Christ by virtue of their baptism and therefore shared in their own way in Christ's threefold office as priest, prophet, and king. As a result they partook in the mission of the Church. What was specific to the laity as such, according to the Council, was their secular calling - namely, to engage in temporal affairs, seeking to order them according to the plan of God. "They live in the world," said the Council, "that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven" (*Lumen Gentium* 31). From this it followed that they "are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative where only through them can she become the salt of the earth" (LG 33).

As a general description of what the lay faithful are to do, the Council selected the term *apostolate*, perhaps because it had been used in the documents on Catholic Action. It defined the apostolate as the sum total of the activity whereby the Mystical Body spreads the kingdom of Christ and thereby brings the world to share in Christ's saving redemption (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 2). Vatican II made an important further advance, in the spirit of Pius XII. It stated

that while lay persons can be called to participate in the apostolate of the hierarchy, as is the case in Catholic Action, this is not their sole way of exercising the apostolate. Prior to any mandate from the hierarchy, they already participate in the saving mission of the Church through their baptism and confirmation. Through these sacraments the Lord himself commissions them to the apostolate. Far from being merely passive recipients of the ministrations of the hierarchy, all the lay faithful have a positive role to play; they are called to make their own contribution to the growth and sanctification of the Church (LG 33; AA 2-3).

The Council was quite aware that its “secular” characterization of the mission of the laity was not a rigorous definition: it did not apply to all members of the laity nor exclusively to them. Together with lay persons, some priests and religious were engaged in the temporal sphere, and thus were doing what the Council depicted as proper to the laity. Nevertheless, said the Council, Christians in sacred orders were by their particular vocation chiefly and professedly ordained to the sacred ministry. Religious, for their part, were called to give striking testimony to the transfiguration of the world in the spirit of the beatitudes. Thus the clergy and religious were distinguished from the laity by their specific vocation (LG 31).

Conversely, it could be said that some members of the laity were working in ecclesiastical rather than secular tasks, but since they did so without ordination, they remained laymen. In seeking a strict definition of the laity, therefore, one had to fall back in the end on the negative marks of not being ordained and not being vowed religious.

At various points in its documents, Vatican II sought to clarify the respective competences of the hierarchy and the laity, making several important distinctions.⁶ All Christians, it taught, are called by virtue of their baptism to be active in extending and sanctifying the Church, though

always under the supervision of the hierarchy. The laity in particular are called to make the Church present and operative in secular environments where it is difficult for clergy and vowed religious to penetrate. Over and above this general call, some members of the laity receive a special mandate from the hierarchy to cooperate in a more immediate way in the apostolate of the hierarchy, as did the co-workers in the gospel to whom Paul refers in his letters (Rom 16:3ff; Phil 4:3). Catholic Action, I suppose, would fit into this category. And finally, a few may be commissioned to supply for certain sacred functions ordinarily reserved to the clergy because of a shortage of priests or some persecution that prevents priests from performing their tasks. Lay persons cannot of course perform functions reserved to the ordained by divine law, such as saying Mass and giving sacramental absolution in the sacrament of Penance. But they can receive the deputation, for example, to baptize, to witness marriages, to preach, and to distribute Holy Communion.

Lay Ministry in Authoritative Teaching

In the documents of Vatican II the distinction is often made between the sacred ministry of the ordained and the apostolate of the laity. With its predilection for the term *apostolate*, the Council applied the term *ministry* only rarely to lay persons, but these instances, though few in number, are significant in view of later developments. The Constitution on the Liturgy speaks of servers, lectors, commentators, and choir members as performing a true ministry (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 29; cf. 35, 112, 122). The Decree on Christian Education speaks of religious instruction carried out by lay persons as a true ministry (*Gravissimum Educationis* 7, 8). The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity characterizes missionary work, whether performed by clergy, religious, or laity, as a ministry (*Ad Gentes* 26). It speaks of the ministry of those who

without ordination perform works proper to deacons such as teaching catechism, presiding over communities in the name of the pastor, or practicing charity in social or relief work (AG 16). The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World uses the term *ministerium* rather loosely to indicate any kind of service, including work on behalf of peace, justice, and the defense of human life (*Gaudium et Spes* 38, 51, 79), which are normally the task of lay persons.⁷

The question of terminology is important because it has become a matter of controversy. The Holy See in 1997 published a document forbidding laypersons to assume titles such as *pastor* and *chaplain*, but not excluding a discriminating use of the word *minister*.⁸ Some, going beyond this instruction, contend that the terms *minister* and *ministry* should be reserved to the ordained and never applied to laypersons. Others object that the term *ministry* should be restricted to the exercise of an established office in the Church. But neither of these positions seems to be warranted by official Catholic teaching; still less by Scripture and tradition.

Biblically, the term most closely corresponding to ministry seems to be *diakonia*, which is translated into Latin as *ministerium* or *ministratio*. This term has a range of meanings extending all the way from service to office. So, likewise, the term *diakonos* or *minister* can mean a servant, a helper, a minister, or a deacon. In First Corinthians, chapter 12 - a passage that is of great interest for our purposes - Paul speaks of varieties of charisms (*charismaton*), ministries (*diakonion*), and activities (*energmaton*), all proceeding from the same God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In his first list of gifts, services, or works, Paul mentions healing, miracle working, prophesying, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues, which do not seem to require any office, but a little later in the chapter he mentions the offices of apostle, teacher, and administrator as forms of *diakonia*. Thus biblically the term most closely corresponding to

ministry embraces both official and unofficial activities dedicated to the upbuilding of the Christian community.⁹

In official Catholic documents since Vatican II there has been a growing tendency to apply the term *ministry* to lay activities, where the Council would probably have used *apostolate*. *Ministry* is used in particular for services intended to build up the Church from within, whereas *apostolate*, to the extent that it is still used, connotes activities directed outward to the world.

Pope Paul VI in 1972 established the offices of lector and acolyte as lay ministries. In so doing he declared: “Ministries may be committed to lay Christians. They are no longer regarded as reserved to candidates for the sacrament of orders.”¹⁰ When establishing these two ministries he invited episcopal conferences to submit requests for other official lay ministries to be acknowledged. This papal invitation has been generally ignored, probably because laypersons find the concept of installed ministries too clerical for their taste. But the Pope’s declaration that ministry should be open to lay Catholics has been gladly accepted.

Several years later, in his Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization, Paul VI taught: “The laity can also feel called, or in fact be called, to cooperate with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community, for the sake of its growth and life. This can be done through the exercise of different kinds of ministries according to the grace and charisms which the Lord has been pleased to bestow on them.”¹¹

Pope John Paul II spoke of lay ministries on many occasions. For example, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* he devoted four paragraphs to the ministry of evangelization and catechesis carried out by Christian parents. “The ministry of evangelization carried out by Christian parents,” he wrote, “is original and irreplaceable” (FC 53).

In his Apostolic Exhortation on the Laity, published in 1988, Pope John Paul expressed satisfaction with the progress made since Vatican II in achieving greater collaboration among priests, religious, and lay faithful in the proclamation of the word of God, in catechesis, and in the great variety of services entrusted to the lay faithful, including women. In a special section on lay ministries the Pope strongly urged pastors to “acknowledge and foster the ministries, offices, and roles of the lay faithful that find their foundation in the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation” (*Christifideles Laici* 23). But at the same time he cautioned against “a too-indiscriminate use of the word *ministry*,” which is sometimes overextended to include merely casual or occasional activities. The Pope also warns against “clericalization” of the lay faithful, which would overlook the distinction between their functions and those of the ordained.

In his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, published at the close of the great jubilee of the year 2000, John Paul II stated that in addition to ordained ministries, “other ministries, whether formally instituted or simply recognized, can flourish for the good of the whole community ... from catechesis to liturgy, from education of the young to the widest array of charitable works” (NMI 46).

The United States Bishops on Lay Ministry

Here in the United States, the Conference of Catholic Bishops in its annual meetings of 1980, 1995, and 2005 has published three significant documents on lay ministry. The first of them, entitled “Called and Gifted,”¹² recalled that the Second Vatican Council encouraged the laity to use their gifts both for the service of humankind and for building up the Church, that is to say, for ecclesial ministry. The document noted that lay ministries of this second kind were relatively new in the Church. The development was to be welcomed, said the bishops, not least

because it permitted the Church to avail herself of the manifold talents of women, some of which had not been sufficiently utilized in the past.

The 1995 document, titled “Called and Gifted for the New Millennium,”¹³ distinguished still more clearly between the two areas of lay activity: their witness and service in secular society and their service to the Church, calling only the latter *ecclesial lay ministry*. Lay ministry, it stated, is not just a job but a true call from God, and is vitally important for renewing the Church as a community. The study also pointed out the many varieties of lay ministry being exercised today in parishes and other settings, such as marriage tribunals, schools, shelters for the homeless, peace and justice networks, and health care facilities.

The 2005 statement, much longer than its two predecessors, bears the title “Co-Workers in the Vineyard” and the subtitle “A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry.”¹⁴ It is called a *lay ministry*, says the document, because it is founded on the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist) rather than the sacrament of orders, which grounds the sacred ministry of the clergy. It is *ecclesial* because it is approved and supervised by Church authority and because it aims at building up the Church. It is a *ministry* because it is a participation in the threefold ministry of Christ as prophet, priest, and king.

“Co-Workers” deals at some length with four main points: the call to lay ecclesial ministry and its discernment; formation for such ministry; the authorization, appointment, and induction of ministers; and finally, the workplace in which ministry is conducted. Justly described as a “landmark document,”¹⁵ it should greatly help to assure that lay ministers are competent, that their ministries are duly authorized, and that their functions are not confused with the sacred ministries reserved to the ordained. Without making a class out of lay ministers, it does give them the kind

of recognition they so richly deserve.

Lay Ministries since Vatican II

A recent study, *Lay Parish Ministers*, published by the National Pastoral Life Center here in New York City, impressively documents the exponential growth of lay ministries in Catholic parishes in the United States.¹⁶ Outnumbering priests, those who work more than twenty hours a week now number more than 30,000. Ninety-three percent of them are paid for their work, while a little over six percent are volunteers. About 80% are women, 20% men.

The activities of these parish ministers are almost as diverse as parish life itself. They may be broken down under headings such as the following. About one-quarter are general parish ministers, a category that includes parish life coordinators. About forty percent are in religious education. About ten percent are youth ministers. The rest are in fields such as music ministry, liturgy, and various kinds of social outreach. Among the kinds of work done by lay ministers we may think of ministry to the sick and elderly, evangelization, instruction of catechumens, preparation for first communion, marriage preparation, spiritual direction, and counseling the bereaved.

The Study I am summarizing records an extremely high level of satisfaction on the part of lay ministers in their work. Well over 90% describe their work as meaningful and spiritually rewarding. Eighty-seven percent say that they would encourage others to enter lay ministry. Conversely, parishioners generally report that they are content with the competence and dedication of the lay ministers. Such resistance as there might have been a decade or two ago seems to be crumbling.

Recent reviews of the current situation call attention to a number of areas of concern, both

practical and theoretical.¹⁷ Among the practical concerns, they mention the relatively low salaries, which make it difficult for heads of families to take on lay ministries. Also in this category of practical concerns, they mention the need for adequate training, especially in areas of theology, church administration, and canon law. If lay ministers sometimes deviate from sound doctrine or sound ecclesial practice, it is often because the ministers are poorly instructed and perhaps unaware of official directives. Still another concern is that some priests are not at ease in working collaboratively with lay persons. It is a difficult art to exercise authority and at the same time avoid any taint of authoritarianism.

Among the more theoretical concerns are questions concerning the proper line of demarcation between the responsibilities of the hierarchy and lay people in the Church. Two opposite excesses are possible: laicism and clericalism. Laicism so emphasizes baptism as to imagine that it confers all rights and powers in the Church, so that ordination would not be understood as giving any new sacramental and hierarchical powers. The clericalist deviation overemphasizes the value of ordination, with the result that the active powers conferred by baptism, confirmation, and matrimony are unduly minimized. Some Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century gravitated toward laicism; Catholics in the Counter-Reformation era tended toward clericalism. Each of the two errors survives to some extent and could be documented in current Catholic literature.

The Second Vatican Council showed a viable path between the two extremes. In continuity with earlier councils, it taught that the powers of presiding at liturgical worship, teaching obligatory doctrine, and governing the people of God belong by divine right to the Pope and the bishops, assisted by other members of the clergy. The laity, by virtue of their sacramental

incorporation in the body of Christ, have a ministry to build up the Church under the supervision of the hierarchy, to bear witness to their faith, and to engage in the sanctification of the world.

The Council characterized the split between faith and daily life as one of the most serious errors of our time (GS 43). To correct this error, lay persons who live in the ordinary circumstances of the world must be made conscious of their Christian responsibilities.

Pope John Paul II gave special attention to the role of the laity in connection with missionary activity, re-evangelization, and the evangelization of cultures. “Their responsibility, in particular,” he wrote, “is to testify how the Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response - consciously perceived and stated by all in varying degrees - to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society. This will be possible if the lay faithful will know how to overcome in themselves the separation of the Gospel from life to take up again in their daily activities in family, work, and society, an integrated approach to life that is fully brought about by the inspiration and strength of the Gospel” (CL 34).

Although Vatican II has led to a gratifying expansion of lay ministries within the Church, the Council’s hopes that the lay faithful would find new motivation for evangelizing the world and transforming the temporal order according to the plan of God remain largely unfulfilled. Indeed, Catholic lay organizations are perhaps less vigorous today than they were before the Council. Seeking to overcome any confessional isolation, all too many Catholics have become reluctant to support distinctively Christian and Catholic organizations.

Some authors contend that overemphasis on lay ministries is partly responsible for obscuring the secular mission of the laity, which the Second Vatican Council regarded as primary. In 1977 a group of Catholics based in Chicago issued a “Declaration of Concern” in which they

complained that lay ministry since Vatican II had come to mean involvement in Church-related activities, such as religious education, pastoral care, and liturgical functions, with the result that the responsibility of the laity to transform political, economic, and social institutions had been devalued.¹⁸ During the past few years, Mr. Russell Shaw has taken the same position in several books. The unwarranted attention given to lay ecclesial ministries, he says, in combination with other factors, has distracted the laity from what Vatican II described as their main function.¹⁹

It would be a mistake, I believe, to make a sharp dichotomy between ministry in the Church and apostolate in the world, as if it were necessary to choose between them. Lay ministries in the Church, properly conducted, can greatly help to offset the forces of secularism; they can form a Catholic people sufficiently united to Christ in prayer and sufficiently firm and well instructed in their faith to carry out the kinds of apostolate that Vatican II envisaged. Only if they are thoroughly imbued with Catholic values and properly informed about Catholic doctrine can lay Catholics be expected to bear witness confidently to the gospel in the complex world of our day. Lay ministers are desperately needed to enable our Catholic schools and parishes to fulfill their mission and to give quality service to the growing Catholic population. They can help fathers and mothers to live up to the duties in the Christian family; they can help Catholics in business, politics, and the professions to understand their religious opportunities and responsibilities. Well-trained ministers are needed to produce lay apostles, and likewise to foster vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, which are in short supply.

Ours is not a time for rivalry between clergy and laity, or between lay ministers and apostles to the world, as if what was given to the one were taken away from the other. Only through cooperation among all her members can the Church live up to her divine calling. Just as

the eye cannot say to the ear, “I have no need of you,” so the lay minister and the social reformer, the contemplative religious and the parish priest must say to each other: I need your witness and assistance to discern and live up to my own vocation in the Body of Christ. Because the lay faithful constitute the overwhelming majority of Catholics, the future of the Church lies predominantly in their hands. The recognition recently given to lay ecclesial ministries should help the laity to rise to the challenges and opportunities that are theirs today.

NOTES

¹Letter of Pius XI to Cardinal Bertram, November 13, 1928, in Odile M. Liebard, ed., *Clergy and Laity. Official Catholic Teachings* (Wilmington, No. Car.: McGrath, 1978), 30-34, at 31.

²Pius XII, Address to New Cardinals, February 20, 1946; AAS 38 (1946): 149; quoted by John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, 9.

³Pius XII to World Congress of the Lay Apostolate, October 14, 1951, No. 29; *ibid.*, 88-97, at 94.

⁴Patrick Carey, "Lay Catholic Leadership in the United States," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 9 (1990): 223-47.

⁵Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957); French original: *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat* (Paris: Cerf, 1953). Congar reports that the schema on the laity drawn up by Gérard Philips, and accepted by the Council, agreed with his own thinking. See Yves Congar, *Mon Journal au Concile 1* (Paris: Cerf, 2002), 57.

⁶Louis Ligier “ ‘Lay Ministries’ and Their Foundations in the Documents of Vatican II,” in René Latourelle, ed., *Vatican II: Assessments and Perspectives*, 3 vols. (New York: Paulist, 1989), 2:160-76.

⁷Elissa Rinere, “Conciliar and Canonical Applications of ‘Ministry’ to the Laity,” *Jurist* 47 (1987): 204-27.

⁸Congregation of the Clergy and seven other Roman dicasteries, *Ecclesiae de Mysterio*; transl. “Some Questions Regarding Collaboration of Nonordained Faithful in Priests’ Sacred Ministry,” *Origins* 27 (November 27, 1997): 397-409, esp. 402-3.

⁹For a thorough study see John N. Collins, *Diakonia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Commenting on 1 Cor 12:4-5, he remarks that the ministries in question were either commissions handed out by church authorities or gifts received directly from God and recognized by the community or its leaders. Paul was not implying that anything a Christian undertook was, and should be recognized as, ministry (258-59).

¹⁰Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Ministeria quaedam* (1972) in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1975), 427-32, at 429.

¹¹Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 73.

¹²United States Bishops, “Called and Gifted: Catholic Laity 1980,” *Origins* 10 (November 27, 1980): 369-73.

¹³United States Bishops, “Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium,” *Origins* 25 (November 30, 1995): 409-15.

¹⁴United States Bishops, “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry,” *Origins* 35 (December 1, 2005): 404-27.

¹⁵H. Richard McCord, “Lay Ecclesial Ministry: An Overview,” *Origins* 35 (March 9, 2006): 625-29.

¹⁶David DeLambo, *Lay Parish Ministers: A Study of Emerging Leadership* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 2005).

¹⁷For two recent reactions to the National Pastoral Life Center Study, see: Karen Sue Smith, “The Francis Next Door,” *America* 194 (February 27, 2006): 8-11; Paul Wilkes, “A

Prediction Fulfilled,” *ibid.*, 12-14.

¹⁸Chicago Declaration of Concern “On Devaluing the Laity,” *Origins* 7 (December 29, 1977): 440-42.

¹⁹Russell Shaw, *To Hunt, to Shoot, to Entertain* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993); *Ministry or Apostolate?* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 2002); “What Should the Laity Be Doing?” *Crisis* 23 (December 2005): 23-25.