

THE EMERGING ROLE OF LAITY

Tensions And Opportunities

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CHAPTER TWO OF *Lumen Gentium* reminds us that the People of God are both clergy and laity. Time constraints limit this reflection to the embryonic mission of the laity; further analysis with regard to the emerging role of the clergy, is equally behind schedule.¹ This paper has four objectives: first to draw a personal view of Vatican II in the context of its day; second, to explore the proposed intent of the Council in relation to the emerging mission of the laity; third, to offer a synopsis of the contemporary tensions, particularly with regard to religious polarisation as a reaction to post modernism; and finally, inspired by the Council Popes, to highlight *one* opportunity, for the emerging role of the laity.

The Role of Theology

Theology of the 'academy', from the perspective of a pastoral theologian, can at times appear to be frustrating esoteric theorising; too far

removed from the reality of 'ordinary life'. By contrast 'ecclesial theology' does appear more relevant, but too often, this may be characterised by a certain authoritarian nervousness, which inhibits open dialogue and has the potential to restrain human development and growth. One of the tasks of pastoral theology is to act as a conduit between cryptic intellectual theorising and what *Lumen Gentium* refers to as 'ordinary life'. In the context of ecclesiology this requires utilization of the social sciences, sociology and psychology, in order to gain substantive empirical awareness of both the human person and our socio-cultural milieu. The study of God (theology) cannot be separated from the study of human beings (anthropology, psychology and sociology). And therein lies the first difficulty: how should one study theology and ecclesiology in a traumatised world, a world of 6.47 billion people, characterised by 5 billion people in destitution. The Pastoral Cycle sheds light on our dilemma (see next page):

The Pastoral Cycle is a theological tool; in this framework it represents a fourfold action plan:

- (i) *Experience*—the starting point is the present concrete situation, the more or less routine existence of every-day life; within this context, a tension is discovered which demands a response. It is no longer possible to go on as before.
- (ii) *Analysis / Exploration*—of the concrete reality—what is going on: the facts.
- (iii) *Reflection*—information by itself does not give answers; it only indicates issues and responsibilities; there are other matters that need to be taken into consideration: personal and communal, beliefs and values with regard to the challenge of the contemporary reality.
- (iv) *Action / Praxis*—Grows out of the whole process on the basis of informed decision and appropriate initiatives. On completion of stage iv the process begins again.

A World Characterised by Destitution

In the light of this concrete reality, characterised by destitution, immediately one begins to discuss any ecclesial or theological issue, one is struck both by the relative vainness of the topic and the opportunity to highlight the true potential of the laity in a temporal context. The statistics are part of the problem; it may be possible to relate to the death of one child from hunger and related causes, although I doubt it! Consider the following mass death list of children:

- One child every five seconds
- Sixteen thousand children every day
- One hundred and twelve thousand every week
- Four hundred and forty eight thousand every month
- Five million, three hundred and seventy

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six thousand each year

In context, I can picture 16,000 people in a football stadium, but beyond that the statistics become virtually meaningless; until one recalls six million people died in the Holocaust. These statistics point to an annual child holocaust in a world with surplus food; the grim reaper is silently redefining 'biblical proportions'.³

Biblical Inspiration

The concrete reality is powerfully illustrated in *The Last Judgement* of Matthew's Gospel: feeding the starving, healing the sick, giving water to the thirsty, visiting the imprisoned, in an Australian context this could include those in detention camps who have committed no crime, and it must include of course, the children of Africa who die of starvation, as I stand here and talk. Perhaps it would be apposite to say little and simply illustrate with unspeakable pictures of dying black children in Africa, and play melancholic music in the background, appealing unashamedly to your emotions and surplus sentiment. Pictures of mass starvation are an incredible late twentieth century phenomenon. Pictures speak louder than words—so I am told—but they remain haunting statistics nevertheless. And what makes this different from the past? Today—we know it is happening!

'All Things Bright and Beautiful'

Pictures and statistics of the Second Vatican Council may also seem quite dramatic; in a 'bright and beautiful' world away from the one I have just described. Picture a full to capacity Roman Renaissance Palace, thousands of honoured bishops and cardinals in flowing silk gowns, surrounded by priceless treasure, the palace adorned with the most exquisite Christian art the world has ever seen. Yes, an impressive picture! I imagine it is easy to appear 'lefty', in a sort of Paddington and down town Manhattan, or up town Mumbai, 'Champagne Socialist' sort of way. The wealthy educated, the 'chattering classes', critiquing the world from our cosy dinner-party table? The evil bourgeoisie Church nobles and Howard/Bush on my right and the heroic destitute proletariat on my left, a black and white world;

Marx in his heaven and the poor man at his gate, 'the lord made them high and lowly and ordered their estate'. Or so Marx and the Victorian hymn would have it:

All things bright and beautiful all creatures

great and small

All things *white* and wonderful the Lord God made them all.

..... the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate,

the Lord made them high and lowly and ordered their estate. *Etc...* (italics added)

The Vatican Council Pope John XXIII inspired, in this respect, proved Marx was mistaken. Following Vatican II, no longer could it be claimed that: 'religion is the opiate of the people'. 'Pie in the sky' was off the Catholic menu, we were going to feed the hungry and free the oppressed of the developing world. A generation of idealists proclaimed the brave new world order, defined eloquently by the UN Declaration on Human Rights, sanctioned by the Vatican, yet plagued by never ending pictures from the Vietnam War (1965-1972) and the growing apprehension with regard to the so-called Cold War about to rage across the developing world. Not forgetting still more endless pictures of starving babies in Africa. *Urgent* idealist of almost every ideology, set about the *urgent* task of 'saving' the human race; too few realised we needed saving from ourselves.

Pacem in Terris

Vatican II inspired encyclicals such as *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Pacem in Terris*, which present an unobstructed vision of the emerging role of the laity, free from the delicacies of the Council chamber.⁴ For example, *Pacem in Terris* composed by Pope John on the eve of his death from cancer and in the midst of the Council (1963), is one of the most remarkable documents in social theory to have been published in the history of the Church. It remains important because it allows an insight into the thought of John XXIII and the opportunity he bequeathed to the laity.

1965 – 2005

The 1960's were, I am told, a time of hope; long

gone the war crimes, the Nazi death camps and the US atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

JFK would deal with the Communists, starting with the dictator in Cuba. Totalitarian regimes would be no more; Castro would be no more. The US would set the world right, introducing a new form of colonialism that would ensure the starving could eat pumpkin cake on the 4th July. The marriage of free market economics and Democracy was assured; pumpkin cake would reign supreme, although Bush neglected to explain his nuanced foreign policy to the people of the Middle East. As the opportunity slips through our fingers it is too easy to become cynical or despondent and lose hope, in our not-so-brave post-modern new world order. A UN world, which looked the other way as genocide once again returned to Europe (Bosnia) and Africa (Rwanda).

The Proposed Intent

I invite you to consider the remainder of the paper in the light of the above preamble; this should illuminate the *modus operandi* and support the conclusion: that the laity must recapture the sense of hope created by Vatican II; a transcendental hope that will empower the laity to challenge the status quo, which allows MDS to be a non-issue. Vatican II taught us that salvation is concerned not solely with saving souls but also with saving the whole person—body and soul. This holistic view encapsulates Catholic social teaching; it is not enough to passively await God's Kingdom in the next life. We are also called to make that Kingdom present now, by working as God's instruments to remove starvation from our midst.

I do not intend to appease secular or ecclesial polarisation; on the contrary, polarisation is an incalculable luxury of the 'chattering classes', fostering tension and resentment, more importantly stifling opportunity. Adversarial politics and ecclesiology has become a costly sideshow, focusing activist attention away from the most important issue of our time: the necessity to eradicate MDS. Obviously we have further col-

lective concerns, the spread of AIDS and other deadly diseases, exacerbated by drug companies' contempt for human suffering in the developing world. Our world is also decimated by war, earthquake and tsunami; but I suggest, our first cause is the most basic, the most symbolic for the emerging role of the laity: the necessity to eradicate MDS—the observable fact of millions of people dying because they do not have bread should be particularly abhorrent to our Eucharist community—bread is more than a symbol of life—it is literally 'the bread of life'.⁵

Martyrion, Diakonia and Koinōnia

The Council's teaching in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, together with chapters II and IV of *Lumen Gentium*, regarding the apostolate of the laity and the People of God, may be suitably summarized under three captions: witness, ministry and fellowship. These three terms are strongly biblical; they appear in the Greek New Testament.⁶ Pope Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, undoubtedly inspired by the Council, shares the same concern for justice found in Pope John XXIII's *Pacem et Terris*. Pope Paul writes that: 'above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness' (no.21), enhanced by sharing and solidarity. Furthermore, 'witness is a silent proclamation of the Good News... the Church is in duty bound to proclaim liberation... from famine of human beings', 'she has the duty of helping this liberation' (no.30). For Pope Paul it is a matter of restoring justice, he believes the lay vocation places the laity in the midst of the temporal crisis, and therefore uniquely located to restore love, which he considers to be 'a very special form of evangelization'. (no.70)

The Lay Apostolate Has Been In Existence For Two Thousand Years

Vatican II stirred great hope and enthusiasm in the world Church, the laity became convinced that they too could play an important part in the life of the Eucharistic Community; the *sensus fidelium* had come of age.⁷ Far from

canonizing the past, or even consecrating the present these documents courageously embrace the future. Martin H. Work reminds us that: ‘although a lay apostolate has existed in the Church since the days of our Lord in Jerusalem, it was not until the Second Vatican Council that the Church’s official teaching on the matter was stated in a Conciliar Decree’.⁸

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Council Fathers decided to make this existence a practical and pastoral reality for the third millennium. The final Decree (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) is the product of more than five years intensive work on the part of the pre-conciliar Commission and the actual Council commission itself. And of course the Decrees cannot be read in isolation from all the other preceding documents of the Council, for they are irrevocably intertwined, one building upon and giving justification to another. For example, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* grows out from *Lumen Gentium*; in addition the Decree finds its *raison d’être* in *Gaudium et Spes*, also in the decrees on Ecumenism, Missionary Life, Christian Education and the Liturgy. All speak to the emerging role of the laity within the Church. Cross-referencing with other documents is of course inevitable because the laity is involved in some way in the total mission of Christ.

Vatican II Foundation Stones for Today and Tomorrow

- There will ever be left and right, conservative and liberal; polarisation is concerned with power, not with building the Kingdom. We must learn to recognise this and move beyond. A realistic historical perspective is necessary, for nostalgia is a significant psychological phenomenon, it is also an aging relative of truth.

- Politics can be a soul-destroying occupation, as the Mark Latham diaries indicate, but this must not deter Christians from engaging in politics. It is the realm of the laity, and provides a considerable opportunity to work for the restoration of justice.

- The Church of the ‘good old days’ served an important purpose—religion of the exterior

was the way forward. Today the post-modern Catholic consciousness is complex: education, pluralism, technology, space travel, the atomic bomb, the holocaust and clerical abuse (sexual and hierarchical duplicity) have reshaped the 21st century religious consciousness. The People of God are in search of spirituality, not a fourth century pageant; spiritual riches cannot be preserved in the museums of the mind.

- In a world often characterised by post-modern voids of confusion, a sense of homelessness and loss amidst material plenty, the Church must appeal to the inner consciousness—to support the faithful in the construction of a personal and community based call to spirituality, what *Lumen Gentium* refers to as the call of the whole Church to holiness.

- Educated laity cannot be uneducated, they can be tutored in humility, guided and inspired by example—in turn the laity should take key leadership positions based on meritocracy rather than ecclesial patronage. Leadership to those who can lead is a prerequisite for the future wellbeing of the Church, we should begin with the sexual abuse scandals and face the consequences. Mercifully Australia seems to have escaped what the *Tablet* refers to as ‘Ireland’s Shame’.⁹

- Collegiality, transparency and consensus take true courage and ability; we must move away from leadership based upon intimidation, duplicity and mediocrity. The Church is crying out for Christ-like leadership, not of the soldier-general but rather of the pastoral shepherd. Example remains the greatest teacher.

- The original work of the Council, awe-inspiring in its day, representing the authentic voice of the world Church, should not be undone. Attempts to rewrite history, to emphasise or replace a particular paragraph will undoubtedly expose the whole mosaic to a harsh post-modern light of relativism. Vatican II remains a unique opportunity for all those who love the Church to insist that it remains relevant to a universal consciousness.

Beware of Red Herrings

The debate regarding the reception of the emerging role of the laity is just beginning; in reality to use a racing metaphor: ‘we are not yet out of the blocks.’ Any discussion with regard to the laity cannot take place in isolation from the clergy; further tensions prevail in this regard. At this stage in the discussion it is necessary to be clear what the real issues are. It is possible to talk about the emerging role of the laity as a consequence of the crisis within the priesthood, but in our context, I think this is a red herring. Vatican II has ensured that the emerging role of the laity is a significant ecclesial event in its own right and should be treated as such. Too often the topic is treated as an appendage to other issues and agenda. The apostolate of the laity requires its own formulated theology and ecclesiology – the time for this is now.

Opportunities

From the beginning, to avoid misunderstanding in the future, it is necessary to emphasise two points with regard to opportunities: first: the emerging role of the laity is a serious discussion within its own right; and second, by laity I denote women and men, my daughter is equal to my sons; both in terms of their Father’s love and their God given potentiality to bring Christ into the world. *Lumen Gentium* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* together with *Pacem et Terris* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* testify to the apostolate of the laity, affirmed by our Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation, least we forget the true significance of the sacraments of initiation.

Lumen Gentium and ‘Ordinary Surroundings’

In the context of the temporal realm, *Lumen Gentium* (no.31) reminds us specifically, that the lay faithful are called ‘to proclaim Christ in their *ordinary surroundings* to bring about the extraordinary and dynamic transformation of society.’ Our ordinary surroundings are of course every aspect of one’s life—it relates

directly to a dynamic transformation of society; the call to feed the starving, the case could not be more understated. Let us examine what ‘Ordinary life’ includes: the school, the home, the family, relationships with lovers, relationships with strangers, the parish, the marketplace, the hospital, the court, the laboratory, the local and national government, the bank, the university, the UN, international trade, arms procurement, terrorism, war and the environment. It is the laity who builds the Churches. It is the laity which makes the laws of the land, it is the laity who do the killing, it is the laity’s children who are bombed, Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* reminds us, it is the laity who have the calluses on their hands, it is their innocent children who are starving in Africa. It is the laity who will feed the starving and free the oppressed; it is the laity who must work towards The Last Judgement outlined dramatically in Matthew’s Gospel.¹⁰

Conclusion

To conclude, the recent October Synod on the Eucharist represents a tragic lost opportunity for the starving tide of humanity, which is constantly breaking upon the shore of Christian consciousness. It highlights an unsympathetic leadership, ever conscious of polarisation. However, the Synod is also an opportunity for the emerging role of the laity, it presents an indisputable argument for the necessity of lay leadership within the Church. Lay leadership that will attempt to tackle seriously the most pressing issues of our age, beginning with the eradication of MDS. Again, *Lumen Gentium* reminds us, this is a call to holiness, empowered through witness, ministry and fellowship. The Eucharist community in particular, are called by definition to feed the starving; this is what we are about. I believe it is also the touchstone of our common humanity.

A preamble to a realistic vision of the laity within a post-Vatican II Church would include a Church sustained by witness, ministry and fellowship; inspired by the Gospel, at peace on the fringes of contemporary post-modern culture; and

a laity animated by a profound reflective liberty to challenge the concrete, social, political and economic injustice of MDS. Justice by definition being, ‘love distributed.’ This distinctive quality of freedom requires allegiance to no temporal reality, particularly the will to power within oneself. On the contrary, refutation of earthly power is a prerequisite to true liberty. Vatican II is an example of the Holy Spirit working in human beings; it is a stepping-stone and not a final accomplishment. The futility of polarisation within ecclesial theology diverts precious energy away from the goals of the Council. These tensions remain a distraction from this immense issue of our age—of feeding those dying from hunger. I believe it is not only an opportunity for the laity, but a duty without parallel.

Pope John XXIII recognised the significance of dialogue, personal engagement and communication, together with the obligation of taking seriously one’s duties as well as claiming one’s rights. Post-moderns may assert the issues are multifaceted and too complex; and of course one cannot solve the MDS with endless rhetoric and hyperbole. Yet there is enough food for the world to feed itself; the problems, substantial in their own right are largely structural, logistical, economic, political and personal: we need to make a serious personal commitment. John XXIII once said

that whereas some people seemed given to turning simple ideas into complicated ones, he preferred the opposite process. The Pope is emphasising the duty of the self; in an age of choice, opening upon the final stage of the pastoral cycle, I have been emphasising the simple idea of personal choice.

Recently the world celebrated the life of Rosa Parks, a black woman who made a courageous personal choice not to stand for an unjust world, she inspired Martin Luther King’s dream. And yet, *I have a fear*: ‘if those millions of babies dying from starvation and related disease were *white* the West would not stand for it. In this context, the vision of John XXIII must be allowed to resonate throughout the twenty-first century, empowering all the People of God to fulfil their duty with regard to those who suffer our crime against humanity. If we are seriously talking about the *laity* and *opportunity*, I suggest there is none more pressing than working to stop the indignity of Mass Death by Starvation. This would be a true stepping-stone in the direction of the Kingdom, a step worthy of the post Vatican II People of God.¹¹

NOTES

1. The American Bishops Conference launched (18th Nov. 2005) the first in-depth resource to support Lay Ecclesial Ministry: ‘Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord’, forty years following the publication of *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 18th Nov. 1965.

2 The Pastoral Cycle is a guide not a panacea; it serves as a stimulus to learn and discover, it encourages personal reflection and experiential methods of solving problems. It is a useful tool fostering empowerment of the individual and the community.

3. Contrast the following in terms of media coverage: Deaths from the 2004 Tsunami 275,000; deaths from the 2005 Indian Earthquake: 78,000 (on-going); deaths from MDS and related causes: 5,376,000.

4. Literature regarding the reception of Vatican II is extensive, for example see: Rush Ormond (2004), *Still Interpreting Vatican II*

5. Cf. The two haunting testimonies regarding the Eucharist community in: Boff C&L (1987), *Introducing Liberation Theology*, pp. 1-2.

6 Cf. Avery Dulles, in his introduction to *Lumen Gentium, The Documents of Vatican II*, Ed. Walter Abbott, SJ, 1966, p.13.

7. Martin H Work, in Abbott, p. 486

8. Martin H Work, in Abbott, p. 486

9. *The Tablet*, p.14. Nov 5 2005

10. Mt. 25:31-46

11. Further information can be obtained from: www.bread.org/hungerbasics/international.html and <http://www.caritas.org.au/p://whhttp://www.caritas.org.au/>