

LAITY AND THE PROMISES OF VATICAN II

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JUDGING BY Vatican II and subsequent post-Conciliar documents, the laity in the Roman Catholic Church has been promised much by way of a new, updated vision of the Church and in particular, what the new, enhanced role of the laity might be. We are now approaching fifty years since Vatican II, so the question might be reasonably asked: have these promises regarding the laity been fulfilled?

The curia of the Roman Church and its bishops have, in general, been noticeably silent about the realization of the promises of Vatican II regarding the laity. True, we did have the synod on the laity (1987) attended by bishops and some lay observers, but this was not a review of how Vatican II documents on the laity were being implemented. It was a renewed statement on the laity. This synod resulted in the pope producing a document *Christifideles Laici (CL)*¹ to which I will refer below. Other than this publication which added to the store of documents, there has not been much action.² Indeed the curial document of 1997, *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the non-ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests*, seems to be heading in the pre-Vatican II direction with fear that the roles of the laity and the ordained priest would become confused.

Sermons preached on Vocation Sunday still give the impression that ‘vocation’ means the priesthood and religious life (but mainly about priesthood). There are many courses offered in Australia at diocesan level on a variety of topics but not many on the promised role of the laity and how it could be implemented locally or internationally. One could argue that, at least on the international level, the Roman Catholic Church has been distracted by many

other issues since Vatican II.

In this article my objectives are to identify the promises regarding the laity in the documents; to ask whether these promises have been fulfilled; and to suggest a way forward with a new language, a new spirituality and reformed structures. I do not intend developing a theology of the laity from Vatican II documents as this has been adequately done already by a number of theologians.³ I will simply refer to the core statements of this theology.

Before doing that, let me mention in passing, the main church issues which have occupied the Pope and the Curia since Vatican II. I see the main issues as communism, liberation theology, feminism and inter-faith dialogue. More recently the sexual abuse cases by clergy has become all-absorbing. Without detailing all these issues I think they have absorbed much time and energy on the part of the Pope, Curia, hierarchy in general and theologians. This energy might have gone into other issues like those concerning the laity, the application of the principle of subsidiarity and co-responsibility in the church. How the Catholic Church responded to these challenges is the topic of a separate study.

Against this backdrop, the role of the laity in the post-Vatican II Church and the theology of the laity did not get much attention. A secretariat for the laity was indeed established, but this has concerned itself with associations and groups, many European, in the Church. The Pontifical Council for the Laity was established soon after the Council, in 1967. Paul VI instructed them thus: ‘Your Council’, he said, ‘must remain in an attitude of listening and dialogue, attentively discerning in the environments in which they (the laity) are living the needs and possibilities of salvation’. The

website gives 119 International Organizations of the Faithful and information on such events as the World Youth Day.

What has occupied the local Church in Australia? Other than the above issues which tend to engage the whole Church, there has been some movement by the laity towards reform. A number of lay groups have been formed around the theme of reform. *Catholics for Renewal*, *Australian Reforming Catholics* (ARC), *Catholica*, and *Catalysts for Change* which might all parallel, on a smaller scale, groups like the American *Voice of the Faithful* and *Call to Action* or the Austrian *Wir Sind Kirche* and the *Pfarrer Initiative*, 'Call to Disobedience'. The impact of these groups is difficult to judge but there does seem to be some momentum building up.

In 1998 the Vatican issued the *Statement of Conclusions* which described the strengths and weaknesses of the Catholic Church in Australia. This caused heated debate in Australia as some of the statements were challenged. Sections of this report referred directly to the laity. The document referred to the 'crisis of faith' among Catholics in Australia, but one criticism suggested that the crisis was rather inside the Vatican. Was the fact that people were leaving the Church due to a crisis of faith or due to a crisis within the Church, for example, the sexual abuse by the clergy, or the poor communication between hierarchy and laity? Another point of criticism of the Australian Church was that the role of the priest and lay person was becoming blurred in some cases. In passing one can note that this was also a point made in the more general Vatican document on the Ministries (1997) referred to above. There is a perception in the Vatican that lay people are confused by the rise of lay ministries to the extent that the lines between priest and layperson are being blurred. The points of difference between the laity and the hierarchy continue to ferment in the background and came to a head with *The Open Letter to the Pope and Australian Bishops* (2011).



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The Promises Regarding the Laity in the Documents

If we now turn to the actual documents of Vatican II and post-conciliar documents we can identify the promises. My objective here is to consider the current practices in the Church, and in Australia in particular, and to see whether the promises of Vatican II regarding the laity have been fulfilled. The promises derive from four main points. These are the pillars on which the role of the laity depends. They are the foundation stones of church membership and can be given briefly as follows.

1. Indwelling of the Holy Spirit

Regarding the Spirit, *Christifidelis Laici*, teaches that the living presence of the Spirit reaches the depth of every individual's heart. It is thus that lay people are formed in the church 'in mutual communion and collaboration of all her members: clergy, religious and lay faithful' (#61). All members of the church receive the Holy Spirit and have gifts of various kinds. This belief is central to understanding church and therefore to understanding the role of the laity.

2. Collaboration of all members

This springs from the above paragraph. In exercising their gifts, there is a two-way relationship: the laity are encouraged to work in close union with bishops and priests in their mission (*Gaudium et Spes*, #10), while the clergy and religious should co-operate with

laity (*GS* #26). The role of the clergy with respect to the laity is to: ‘... recognize their services and charismatic gifts that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart.’ (*LG*, #30). If the services and gifts of the laity are not recognized they cannot play their rightful role.

This co-operation is also stressed in the missionary document, *Ad Gentes*: ‘The Church has not yet been truly established, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among men, unless there exists a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy.’ (#21) The urge to collaborate derives from the very nature of the church which is missionary: ‘The pilgrim church is essentially missionary by her very nature. For it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father’ (*Ad Gentes*, #2)

3. Laity Co-responsibility

The responsibility of the mission is such that ‘the whole church ought to feel more strongly the Church’s responsibility to obey the command of Christ ‘Go into the world...(Mk 16:15)’, (*CL*, #64). This goes back to baptism where the individual is committed to proclaiming the gospel and living out his/her Christian witness. Bearing witness is all about lay people giving an account of the hope that is within them: ‘Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and give answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them’ (*Lumen Gentium*, #10). This commitment springs from the love of God: ‘The members of the Church are impelled to carry out such missionary activity by reason of the love with which they love God and by which they desire to share with all men in the spiritual goods of both this life and the life to come’ (*Ad Gentes*, #7).

4. Laity Involvement in Decision-making

The responsibility goes even beyond consultation to decision-making in some cases.

When speaking about the participation of the faithful in these councils (Pastoral Councils and broad consultation) the principle of collaboration can be applied. The participation of the laity can go beyond consultation and collaboration can also apply ‘in certain instances’ to ‘decision-making’ (*CL*, #25).

From this it is plain to see what promises regarding the laity emerge. The laity (as well as the hierarchy) will be seen as experiencing the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; their services and charismatic gifts will be recognized by the hierarchy; they will be seen as collaborators of the hierarchy, as co-responsible in the mission of the Church; and in some cases, they will share decision-making with the hierarchy. These are the promises that emerge from the Vatican II documents and the post-conciliar times. Now we must ask: have these promises been fulfilled?

Have These Promises been Fulfilled?

We can begin by referring back to the four propositional points, or pillars, on which the role of the laity stands. Regarding the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, it could be said, generally speaking, that although it is perhaps agreed to by many in the church, the practical behaviours of the hierarchy contradict this belief in practice. Many actions of the hierarchy, as we shall see below, reflect, either intentionally or unintentionally, an unspoken belief that the Holy Spirit speaks only through the hierarchy. As regards the need for collaboration among all members of the Church, the hierarchy often fail to collaborate with the laity and their behaviours imply that the laity are not co-responsible for the mission of the Church. They do not involve the laity in real decision-making. Where there is an attempt at consultation the structures used are often dysfunctional.

It must be added that the laity often acquiesce in these behaviours, that is, they allow these understandings to prevail. I agree with Daniel Ang that the hierarchy must not be seen as the sole cause of the present situation but

they do play a vital role.⁴ Undoubtedly the laity have been slow to take up opportunities since Vatican II but the years of subservience and the culture of ‘pray, obey and pay’ are difficult to overcome. Inherent negative cultural elements in any institution, are extremely difficult to change.

If we look at different levels in Church organization we can be more specific. First of all at the level of the Roman Curia. The composition of the curial dicasteries (departments) are still mainly clerical and male. The Pontifical Council for the laity is one exception but members are appointed rather than elected by their dioceses. To the best of my knowledge, there are no lay people in positions of decision-making in the dicasteries. There is no consultation regarding the election of bishops or other weighty matters such as the pool of candidates from which candidates for the priesthood could be drawn. Letters and petitions sent to Rome are often unanswered and disappear in what Lakeland refers to as the ‘inefficient bureaucratic mechanism of the Roman Curia’⁵. The centralization tendencies of Rome continue and the principle of subsidiarity is largely ignored.⁶ This tendency has increased noticeably during the last two papacies. The Curia is dominated by a few cardinals. The centralist tendencies of Rome have deprived local bishops’ conferences of decisions-making ability and denied the principle of subsidiarity.⁷

Without doubt clericalism is a blight on church life. Many clergy and many lay people suffer from this attitude. It is the feeling that the clergy are superior (elitism) and should enjoy a position of privilege in the church.⁸ It is the ‘Father-knows-best’ attitude in spite of the belief in the indwelling of the Spirit in all members. Both clergy and the laity can hold this attitude.⁹ In fact while the laity go along with it, it makes it easier for (some) clergy to continue with it. Co-responsibility and collaboration in mission is always going to be difficult if clericalism prevails.¹⁰

At the national and diocesan level a number

of observations can be made. The promises listed above have not been fulfilled. This can be seen through actions or lack of actions. Synods are the first obvious potential vehicle for consultation mentioned in many Roman documents and part of an ancient tradition. Today few dioceses actually have regular synods or assemblies. In Australia the history of synods is disappointing as elsewhere. At their November meeting in 2007 (42 years after Vatican II) the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference committed itself to holding synods and consulting the members of the Church. What has happened since then? Not much if one consults the websites of dioceses. Only 10% of Australian dioceses have held assemblies or synods. The history of synods in Australia is short but not without some points of encouragement in only *three* out of thirty-three dioceses. The first synod in Australia was in Canberra-Goulburn diocese in 1989 called by Archbishop Frank Carroll. There was a second in 2004. The diocese of Maitland-Newcastle held a diocesan Synod in 1992, followed by diocesan assemblies in 1995, 1997 and 2000. There were regional assemblies in 2003 and 2004 followed by diocesan assemblies in 2004 and 2005. The bishop concerned with these consultations, except the first (1992), was Michael Malone. Brisbane has a good track record for collaboration. Archbishop Rush held an Assembly in Brisbane in 1989. In 2003 Archbishop John Bathurst continued Rush’s collaborative style with a synod. To sum up: nationwide, over forty-seven years, only three dioceses in Australia have expressed an eagerness for consultation or collaboration through a synod or assembly. Let me add that priests themselves are not being consulted adequately in spite of councils of priests.¹¹

Let us turn to another topic: national consultation regarding international synods. As an example of this process let us mention the forthcoming Roman synod. The Bishops through the National Office for Evangelization (an ACBC agency), requested feedback from the Australian dioceses on a discussion

paper preparatory to the Synod on the New Evangelization in Rome, October 2012. Submissions were due in by the beginning of October 2011. Many people had not heard of this consultation by September 2011. Where was the problem? Obviously the bishops collectively thought it important enough to set up an agency and a bishop to oversee the feedback and provide some stimulus material but the process has not got through to the parishes. It would appear that at the diocesan and parish level there is no strong conviction that the laity should be consulted. If consultation is to be taken seriously, the local bishop with the local clergy and laity must find new ways of making it happen.

It must be acknowledged that the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) has taken some decisive steps regarding the role of women in the Church in Australia (and women are part of the laity!). In 1989 they launched a project on the *Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia*. Setting aside the peculiar tone of this title which seems to imply that women are outside the Catholic Church but might be able to participate in it under certain guidelines, the project came up with a worthwhile report ten years later (1999), *Woman and Man – One in Jesus Christ*. The report admits that tensions remain in the areas regarding ordained ministry, leadership, and decision-making. However the bishops stressed this was a starting point and statement of intentions. They set up a commission for Australian Catholic Women which later became the National Office for the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church. A very practical and tangible outcome that emerged from all this was the Young Women's Interfaith Fellowship which is a programme of study and living together which resulted in a Graduate Certificate in Interfaith Dialogue for some of these young women who will be the leaders of the future. The year 2006 marked the inaugural programme. The success of the programme will be measured by the extent to which they are allowed to contribute

at the parish, diocesan and national levels. The bishops also noted that more women were now visible on councils at all levels of church life. This is a good move forward but unless women and men can share in the decision-making at these levels, the promises regarding the laity remains unfulfilled and the gestures tokenism.

What about diocesan Pastoral Councils? Certainly there are many. But here the question must be asked as to who elects the council members and who makes the decisions. To the extent that councilors are expected to follow the thinking coming from Rome and not to question anything, the presence of laity will mean nothing. Instead they should be encouraged to think creatively, to discern carefully and allow the Spirit to speak through them. Lay people who are not councilors, have done precisely that, but have not been given a hearing. These are good people who refuse to be silenced because they honestly think differently. Examples of this could be the decision to import priests from other countries. Whose decision is it and what consultation took place and with whom? The importing of foreign priests is a matter of grave concern among laity and priests.¹² In the election of a bishop: who among the laity is consulted?¹³ In these matters and others there can be no feeling of co-responsibility among the laity.

Some of this honest thinking has come to the fore recently. *Catholics for Renewal*, based in Melbourne, have expressed the lack of listening and consultation in an open letter to the Pope and the Australian Bishops (July, 2011), in the following words: 'As an institution it does not yet embody the vision of Vatican II for a truly collegial Church in which decisions respect local cultures, communities and circumstances. Rather, it appears as an institution focussed on centralism, legalism and control, with few effective structures for listening and dialogue, and often more concerned with its institutional image and interests than the spirit of Christ.'

At the parish level the picture is no rosier. It is my experience and that of others I have

spoken to, that Parish Councils are often largely constituted by people who are keen to do 'what Father wants'. The infantilization of the laity continues, in Lakeland's words.¹⁴ There are few good formation programmes for the laity that encourage people to think outside the square. There are plenty that emphasize the virtue of obedience and compliance. In terms of recognizing the services and charismatic gifts of the laity, there is some progress. There has been an extension of ministries such as married deacons, eucharistic ministers, senior servers, funeral ministers, RCIA leaders, but this is little in terms of what could be. Preaching talents are overlooked. Adult education programmes are underdeveloped with the result that many of the laity still fit into the 'pray, pay and obey' category of Catholics. There is curiously little delegation in spite of parish priests being overwhelmed with duties. Yet there are also some good examples of collaborative ministry where parishes operate with pastoral teams which relieve some of the workload of the parish priest.

Finally there is the ultimate and convincing piece of evidence: the fact that many Catholics do not get involved in their church activities is a sign that they do not feel the parish is theirs, they do not feel co-responsible for anything; they do not feel they have gifts that can be used. The fact that some priests use the language of 'My parish' does not help the feeling of co-responsibility. Unfortunately Canon Law re-enforces this language by speaking of priests 'taking possession of their parishes'.

A Way Forward: Renewed Language, Spirituality and Structures

One cannot leave the discussion at the point of saying the promises of Vatican II have not been fulfilled without suggesting a way forward. One of the first things to attend to is that of language which deserves more attention than I can give it here. A few brief comments will indicate the complexity of the is-

sue. The language of church documents is important to the success of communication. The language we find in the church documents has its problems. Roman documents have a peculiar way of stating things which is heavily determined by the culture and theology of the centuries both within and without the church. It is formal, hierarchical, absolutist, stilted and often superior in tone. It tries to speak to many peoples of different cultures, with different educational backgrounds and at different stages of faith development, all at the same time—an impossible task. The hierarchy needs to address this problem. Current church language is a language which does not invite dialogue or co-responsibility.

I believe that we need to speak more of 'community' and less of 'priests' or the 'laity' in the sense that we form community and priesthood and all ministries flow from community. Community is the basis out of which ministry emerges. Various ministries serve the community. Lakeland emphasizes that the focus should be on the 'quality of our own particular faith communities'.¹⁵ Presiding over the Eucharist and being the leader of the community is one such ministry and an important one at that, but there are many others, like visiting the sick, burying the dead, looking after the poor. Lifestyle (single, married, widowed) and gender should be irrelevant.¹⁶

Other than a renewed language, a renewed spirituality is needed. A common understanding of the importance of spirituality is a necessary basis for collaboration between all church members. The whole talk about spirituality does best when we use the inclusive 'we'. There is so much of New Testament spirituality that applies to all Christians that we should start with those aspects and relegate other matters to minor comment¹⁷. All are called to holiness and everyone lives in the world. The WCC document (*BEM*) on Ministry emphasizes this: it starts with the universal call to holiness. The Vatican II documents and *CL* call all church members to holiness and what it says on spirituality usually applies to

all members of the church.

There are many ways to respond to the call to holiness. One of the more inspiring approaches to spirituality is 'creation spirituality' with its joy and delight and awe, its silence and letting go, its creativity and emphasis on justice-making and celebration. This is a suggestion that I believe many people in the church could follow as a way to holiness because it is positive, inclusive, cosmic in scope and appealing to the contemporary person. There are other approaches to spirituality such as those advocated by religious orders and lay groups. In general though there should be room for diverse spiritualities which will need to be both mystical and contemporary.¹⁸

A way forward must also include renewed structures. Not only must spirituality be examined but the crucial aspect of structures must be courageously confronted. There has been, and still is, a systematic or structural oppression of the laity.¹⁹ The principle of the church always reforming itself needs to be applied to structures as well. It is a red herring to maintain that reform must apply to spirituality only. The pursuit of a renewed spirituality can run concurrently with the pursuit of renewed structures.

In terms of ministry structures, Bevens confronts the structures in a creative way.²⁰ Bold structural steps need to be taken if the ideals of Vatican II are to be implemented. One cannot state the ideals and then use (old) structures that cannot deliver the vision. *E.g.*, if the laity are to be co-responsible they must be given the opportunity to show responsibility, that means some of the traditional ways priests operated must change. The old mould of the priesthood must give way to a new one that is more flexible.²¹ Creative thinking is required.

One example is ordination. There is a shortage of priests but what action is called for? The old solution of praying for vocations to a celibate priesthood is advocated. This is calling on an old solution for a new problem. New structures that would accommodate married men, priests who have resigned and married,

must be considered and the idea of part-timers must be entertained.

Another example is collaboration: there need to be forums where the future of the church can be discussed, the hierarchy can listen to the laity and all can listen to each other. In this way new ideas will emerge and can be considered. Currently the existing forums are either not working or are not being used, or both. I am referring to meeting places, venues, opportunities such as synods or assemblies, or even deanery discussions, involving all members of the church. These could serve as structures for the hierarchy to listen to the laity or, if they are dysfunctional, they could be replaced by new structures. The gift of listening is not strong in the Church. For example, the current practice of inviting responses to *lineamenta* for synods is dysfunctional, past its use-by date. To some extent electronic forums such as *Catholica* have been set up, but not by the hierarchy. We need forums where all members are going to be 'present' and listen to each other. Electronic forms should be included.

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to identify the promises of Vatican II regarding the laity and then test to see if these promises have been fulfilled.

Different levels were considered, international, national and local. It was concluded that the promises of Vatican II have not been fulfilled; that there is no significant consultation with the laity; that the laity is not being invited to accept responsibility which would help it to be co-responsible for the mission of the church. It is concluded that the way forward is to change the way all church members speak about church, community and mission and for all members to pursue a renewed spirituality as well as striving to renew structures which either do not bring about greater lay participation or have become dysfunctional.

NOTES

1. Cf. Peter Coughlan, (1989), *The hour of the laity, their expanding role: exploring Christifideles laici, the Pope's key document on the laity*. Sydney: E J Dwyer.
2. In the USA there was the very positive document of the American bishops, *The American Catholic Laity*, (1980), which saw the laity as gifted and called to (1) adulthood, (2) holiness, (3) ministry, and (4) community.
3. Cf. E. Hahnenberg, (2007), *A concise guide to the documents of Vatican II*, (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press); (2010), *Awakening Vocation: a theology of Christian Call*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press); Thomas O'Meara, (1999), *Theology of Ministry*, (New York: Paulist Press), 210-224; Paul Lakeland, (2007), *Catholicism at the Crossroads: how the laity can save the church*, (New York: Continuum); John Vincent Broadbent, (2003), *Restoring the laity's balance to an unsteady church: balancing tradition with traditions*, (Bloomington: 1st Books); Peter Coughlan, (1989), *The hour of the laity, their expanding role: exploring Christifideles laici, the Pope's key document on the laity*, (Sydney: E.J.Dwyer); Brian Lucas (1991), *The Laity Today*, (Homebush: St Paul Publications), 21-36; Basil Hume, (1994), 'Christ's missionaries, the laity', in *Remaking Europe: The Gospel in a Divided Continent*, (London: SPCK), 88-98; Richard Gaillardetz and Catherine E. Clifford, (2012), 'The Role of the Laity in the World' in *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the teachings of Vatican II*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press), 95-101; Yves Congar, (1960), *Laity, Church and World*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman), 60-87; and the classical and detailed work of Yves Congar (1985), *Lay People in the Church*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman).
4. Daniel Ang, *Can't scapegoat the hierarchy*. Internet, *CathBlog*, 18.10.2011. accessed on 19.10.2011; David, Orr. (2009). 'Educating for the Priesthood of the Faithful', *Worship*, 83, 5, 431-457.
5. Paul Lakeland, (2002), *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church*, (New York: Continuum), 266.
6. Chris McGillion & John Carroll, (2011), *Our Fathers: What Australian Catholic Priests really think about their lives and their Church*, (Mulgrave: John Garrett Publishing), 140.
7. Lakeland, *The Liberation...* 273.
8. George Wilson, (2008), *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press). Chris McGillion, *Our Fathers...* 85-100.
9. 'The Catholic laity for the most part, do not know their oppressed condition and would deny it if it were argued in their presence.', Lakeland, *The Liberation...* 187.
10. McGillion, *Our Fathers ...* 79.
11. McGillion, ... 101-117.
12. McGillion, *Our Fathers...* 69.
13. Canon Law (Can.377, #3) makes provision for the papal Legate to consult with a number of people. This consultation may include a lay person 'if he judges it expedient' provided the lay person is of 'outstanding wisdom'. No such qualification is expected of the others who may be consulted.
14. Lakeland, *The Liberation...* 271.
15. Lakeland, *The Liberation...* 267.
16. Cf. John Linnan, (1990), 'Ministry Since Vatican II: A Time of Change and Growth', *New Theology Review*, 3, 33-45; L. Doohan, (1980), 'Contemporary theologies of the laity', *Communio*, 7, 225-242.
17. Cf. Allison A. Trites, (1977), *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, (Cambridge: CUP).
18. O'Meara, *Theology...* 233-258.
19. Lakeland, *The Liberation ...* 187.
20. Stephen Bevans, (2009). 'The Mission has a Church. The Mission has ministries', *Compass*, 43,3 Spring 2009, 3-14; Doohan, B. (1980), 'Contemporary theologies of the laity', *Communio*, 7, 225-242.
21. McGillion... 63. . Gideon Goosen, (1997), 'A New Relationship Between the Ministerial and Baptismal Priesthoods', *Compass*, 32, 2, 17-24.