

Commonweal

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Pieter Bruegel the Younger, *The Seven Acts of Mercy* (Wikimedia Commons)

G. K. Chesterton once commented that every modern conversation begins one step too late. His assertion pertains, unfortunately, when we think of the church. Immediately we tend to think of its structure: there are the ordained, the religious, and the laity. According to this reckoning, the laity are defined in a negative manner: they are the ones who are neither ordained nor members of religious orders. If one is a Catholic, and neither ordained nor a religious, then one is lay; it cannot be helped.

There is, as a result, a paradigmatic clericalism within the church. It is not ill-intended. I would argue that it is not intended at all, but it is present nonetheless. There is a widespread assumption in the Catholic community that, to have any real agency in the church, it is necessary that one be ordained.

We are all familiar with the model: there is the priest-pastor and his flock. Or, perhaps truer to experience, the priest-pastor and his critics.

That the laity have no agency in the church is not magisterial teaching; it is not, in fact, true. Yet it is the paradigm through which we relate to each other and through which we tend to filter our understanding of magisterial teaching. This apprehension is founded on, and fostered by, the common conception that the purpose of the church is predominantly, or even exclusively, the care of souls. We read in the Second Vatican Council's decree *Christus dominus* that "the parish exists solely for the care of souls." The purpose of the care of souls is personal holiness, our salvation in Christ, which translates in our communal imagination as an invitation to personal piety.

Now, if the whole business of the church is the care of souls, then it is indeed difficult to see that the laity as such have any real agency in the church. I am not referring to the ministries that lay people can undertake by delegation, when they assist in the pastoral care of the community at the discretion of their pastors. Such ministries, though important, are not proper to the laity, but are ministries that are proper to the ordained. When the laity undertake such ministries, they are therefore called "extraordinary" ministers in the church. But what, then, is proper to the laity? The common conception would seem to suggest that the ordinary vocation of lay men and women is a vocation to be cared for, especially through their participation in the sacraments.

That this is the paradigm that governs Catholic imagination is manifested in the fact that lay men and women tend to identify the church with the hierarchy, and therefore to disenfranchise themselves. When Catholics say "the church teaches" they really mean "the hierarchy teaches," or when Catholics say "the church believes" they tend to mean "bishops and priests believe." They count themselves out. The church therefore comes to be identified with the bishops and the ordained. What follows from this improper identification is that, when a bishop is immoral, the whole church is held to be corrupt. Whence this identification? And why this paradigm?

Adult in all other aspects of their lives and secular responsibilities, many Catholics still conceive of themselves as dependent children in their relationship to Christ and the church.

The early-medieval church was marked, especially in the West, by the monastic movement. The monk was early on regarded, not in terms of his function or role, as clerics were, but in terms of a way of holiness, a "state of life." The monk seeks a life of holiness, of personal consecration to God, a life of penance and the seeking of "perfection." In this seeking, the monk is precisely not a lay person; the monk leaves the world behind. In the light of the monastic movement, the laity came to be regarded in terms of a "state in life" that contrasts with that of monastic men and women. The lay state tends to be regarded as a less perfect way of following Christ than that of the monks. Lay men and women are embroiled in the care of temporal things, whereas the monks seek perfection in the eternal. This provides an easy step toward the distinction that we find assumed in the Decretals of Gratian (writing in the middle of the twelfth century) between perfect and imperfect Christians. The lay condition comes to be regarded as a concession to human weakness. Yves Congar, the great Dominican theologian of the Second Vatican Council, cites Pope Honorius II (1124–1130): "from the beginning the Church has offered two kinds of life to her children: one to help the insufficiency of the weak, another to perfect the goodness of the strong." It was the place of the clergy, the "strong," to afford care to the laity, the "weak."

A second movement also contributed to the negative definition of the lay state. From at least the reign of Charlemagne (crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800 A.D.) onward, there is a movement to organize

all temporal life under the supreme regulation of the church. Apart from the anointed secular ruler (emperor, king, prince), the laity tend to be defined negatively, in terms of what they are not. The laity, concerned with temporal affairs, are considered to have little or no part in the sphere of sacred things. Hence the definition of the lay person: one who has no part in the power of jurisdiction and, especially, of the holy order. Lay persons have the right and responsibility to receive spiritual goods from the clergy, especially aids for their salvation, but no responsibility in the governance or sacred ministry of the church.

We can distill the paradigm that has so much controlled our imagination of the laity into three propositions: (1) With respect to their state of life, lay people do not live exclusively for heavenly things, like monks. (2) The lay state of life is a concession to human weakness, and a less perfect commitment to following Christ. (3) With respect to their function in the church, lay persons have no participation in the power of ecclesial jurisdiction.

Small wonder, then, that the paradigm governing the lay imagination becomes more and more focused on personal piety in the face of a life embroiled in temporal affairs; little else remains to them. Congar liked to reference a nineteenth-century German dictionary of the church, which under the entry *laity*, said, "See clergy." Clearly, there are problems with this paradigm. First, personal piety is an insufficient basis for witnessing the faith to others, or even for imparting it to one's children. There is therefore a widespread presumption in the Catholic community that conversation about the faith and instruction in the faith must be left to experts. Of course, there is little call for conversation among the laity; one does not tend to discuss one's personal piety—or lack of it—with others.

Second, this paradigm tends to infantilize one's relationship with Jesus. The relation is one in which the layperson never acts *with* Jesus, never stands in his place—a function reserved to the clergy—but merely receives the grace that he affords for the sake of personal holiness. Adult in all other aspects of their lives and secular responsibilities, many Catholics still conceive of themselves as dependent children in their relationship to Christ and the church.

So long as our imagination remains limited to personal piety, we Catholics will not be able to institutionalize the mutual accountability between lay and ordained that the Holy Spirit called us to at Vatican II.

A half-century ago, at the Second Vatican Council, the role of the laity was taken up for the first time in the church's history at an ecumenical council. Congar had remarked that, for the ecclesial role proper to the laity to come fully into view, the hierarchy had to come to two realizations: first, there is a world out there; and, second, it is not the church. The council, as we well know, added to the care of souls a more fundamental duty of the church: to incarnate the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world.

So it is that we read in the first encyclical of St. John Paul II:

The Church wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life, with the power of the truth about man and the world that is contained in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption and with the power of the love that is radiated by that truth. (*Redemptor hominis*, 13)

Given that this is, in truth, the single purpose of the church, then the ecclesial role proper to the laity

comes into focus. It is to proclaim the Gospel in every area of secular engagement by transforming the very structures of society according to the plan of God:

The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, 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. *They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.* (*Lumen gentium*, 31, emphasis added)

This suggests a different paradigm, one in which the laity are “coresponsible” with the hierarchy in the church’s mission:

Indeed, the Church is directed and guided by the Holy Spirit, who lavishes diverse hierarchical and charismatic gifts on all the baptized, calling them to be, each in an individual way, active and coresponsible. (*Christifideles laici*, 21)

There are therefore two paradigms reflected in the documents of Vatican II. On the one hand, when the council emphasizes the church’s *mission*, we read of the indispensable role of the laity in the apostolic vocation of the church:

The lay apostolate...is a participation in the salvific mission of the Church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself. ... Thus, every layman, in virtue of the very gifts bestowed upon him, is at the same time a *witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church itself* “according to the measure of Christ’s bestowal.” (*Lumen gentium*, 33, emphasis added)

Notice that the laity are commissioned to the apostolate, not by the delegation of their bishops or priest-pastors, but by the Lord himself. They have a fully ecclesial role as “living instruments of the mission of the church,” *coresponsible* with their pastors. On the other hand, when the council reflects on the “care of souls,” the laity seem to be regarded merely as a resource to the clergy, when all else fails:

Moreover, the care of souls should always be infused with a missionary spirit so that it reaches out as it should to everyone living within the parish boundaries. If the pastor cannot contact certain groups of people, he should seek the assistance of others, even laymen who can assist him in the apostolate. (*Christus dominus*, 30)

According to this paradigm, which has so much shaped the lay imagination in the modern church, the laity act according to the delegation of their pastors—especially, apparently, when their pastors have no other recourse. The alternative paradigm that the council proposes speaks of coresponsibility in the church’s mission. Real coresponsibility would require at least four things.

First, if we are really coresponsible for the mission, then we must be *equally* responsible for it. The clergy are not more responsible for the mission of the church than the laity are.

Second, if we are coresponsible, then our tasks for the sake of the mission must be seen to have equal dignity. If, for example, it is my responsibility to offer a seminar and your responsibility to set up the chairs, then we cannot be said to be coresponsible for the outcome. My contribution has greater dignity than yours. If, however, it is my responsibility to lull the participants to sleep and yours to pick their pockets, then we can truly be said to be coresponsible for the outcome.

Third, we must have equal voice in discerning the mission. We must learn to take counsel together and to discuss the way in which the church's mission is to be fulfilled in our parishes and dioceses. So, for example, we read:

The lay faithful should accustom themselves to working in the parish in close union with their priests, bringing to the Church community their own and the world's problems as well as questions concerning human salvation, all of which need to be examined together and solved through general discussion. (*Christifideles laici*, 27)

Fourth, we must learn to exercise mutual accountability for the sake of the church's mission. Whereas the pastor has personal responsibility for the governance of the parish, he is nonetheless accountable to our Lord, in whose place he presides. Similarly, in the exercise of their apostolate to the world, lay men and women are accountable, not to the pastor, but to the Lord who has commissioned them. Together accountable to our Lord, pastor and laity are accountable to each other.

This mutual accountability is expressed, most particularly, in the manner in which both the ordained and the lay faithful participate in the priesthood of Christ. We read in *Lumen gentium*:

The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, *are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood*, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man *they may offer spiritual sacrifices* and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. *Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.* (*Lumen gentium*, 10, emphasis added)

The priesthood conferred in Baptism—the Royal Priesthood—is not metaphorical, although one could be forgiven for thinking that it is.

The priesthood conferred in Baptism—the Royal Priesthood—is not metaphorical, although one could be forgiven for thinking that it is. What, after all, is a “spiritual sacrifice”? In modern English, the word “spiritual” is often taken to connote something that is insubstantial, even unreal. If, for example, I tell you that I will be with you in spirit, I mean that I will not be with you, but that I will somehow keep you in mind. No, the Royal Priesthood is not a metaphor. Rather, it is the fundamental priesthood in the Catholic Church. Every priest offers sacrifice, and the sacrifice that Jesus offered was himself. Having assumed all that is human in his person, he made an offering of all that is human to his Father, reconciling fallen humanity through the gift of his life. This is the sacrifice that is “spiritual,” and we are to do the same, offering our very bodies as “a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Romans 12:1).

Incorporated in Jesus Christ, the baptized are united to him and to his sacrifice in the offering they make of themselves in their daily activities.... As worshipers whose every deed is holy, the lay faithful consecrate the world itself to God. (*Christifideles laici*, 14)

Just as Jesus took upon himself what it is to be human and offered humanity back to the Father in his personal sacrifice, so every member of the church, by virtue of Baptism, is “consecrated,” set apart by God, to continue in the present age the self-offering of Jesus. Immersed in all the ordinary affairs of our fallen humanity, we consecrate the world itself to God through offering ourselves and all our relationships, engagements, and activities to the Father, intentionally uniting ourselves with his Son. The world itself is consecrated to God through the spiritual sacrifice of his Son, recapitulated in the spiritual sacrifice of each member of his people. For this reason, the Fathers of the Church are able to call each of the baptized an *alter Christus*—another Christ—commissioned by Christ himself to stand in his place.

The hierarchical priesthood, the priesthood of the ordained, is for the sake of the Royal Priesthood and is to serve it. Our Lord willed that his people would be consoled and supported in a face-to-face relationship with him that would continue until he returns. The sacrifice that a man offers by virtue of ordination is not the sacrifice of his own person, but rather the sacrifice of Christ himself. The ordained priest acts in the person of Our Lord who sanctifies, teaches, consecrates, and commissions his People through the instrumentality of his minister.

In the exercise of his ordained priesthood the minister has, as his horizon, the Church—the People of God—whom he is appointed to serve. In the exercise of the Royal Priesthood, the People of God have, as their horizon, the world itself, which Christ came to redeem. Insofar as they participate in ministry within the church, the People of God are accountable to *Christ incarnate through his ministers*, whose charge is the care of souls. Insofar as the ordained are ministers to the People of God, they are accountable to *Christ incarnate in his People*, for the sake of their redemptive mission.

What, then, is the appropriate “care” of the People of God? The Church has always provided a formation for the sake of mission. Priests receive a formation for their office in the church, religious a formation for the work of their community. Lay men and women have received instruction for the sake of receiving the sacraments, but our inherited paradigm has not acknowledged a mission for the laity. If lay men and women are to undertake responsibility for the church’s mission to the world, then a formation adequate to their mission becomes a necessity. The ordained must be able to trust the knowledge and expertise of their lay collaborators and take counsel with them. Lay men and women must have sufficient theological sophistication to apply the revelation to their secular engagements. Finally, the laity must be able to take leadership in the church’s mission to the world.

Our Lord cautioned us that we must not attempt to put new wine into old skins (Mark 2:22). So long as our imagination remains limited to personal piety, we Catholics will not be able to institutionalize the mutual accountability between lay and ordained that the Holy Spirit called us to at Vatican II. The current crisis of the church can only be resolved through a new paradigm centered upon the redemptive mission of Christ—a mission for which all of us, lay and ordained, are called to take our place, coresponsible in our participation in the one priesthood of Christ.

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