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REDISCOVERING AUTHORITY AS SERVICE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: THE LONG WAY FROM *MYSTICI CORPORIS* TO POPE FRANCIS

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Abstract

It is a useful exercise in this thematic issue to study a variety of documents issued from Rome in the long period between *Mystici Corporis* (1943) and *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) with attention to the terminology used to describe the relationship between the different categories of the people of God. Along this long but crooked path the laity are called subjects of their superiors till the final draft of *Lumen Gentium* and the term subordination is found in the first draft of the Dogmatic constitution on the Church as well as in the 2013 *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Priests*. Since the 1962 draft of *De Ecclesia*, however, Catholic ecclesiology stresses that all members of the people of God participate in the threefold office of Christ and that the ordained exercise their authority as a service towards the laity.

Keywords: Authority; Ecclesiology; Hierarchy; Laity; Priesthood; Pope Francis; Vatican II

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Introduction

In this article I study the evolution in treating about authority in the Catholic Church from *Mystici Corporis* till Pope Francis. I will especially pay attention to the way the relation between hierarchy and laity has been described in texts by the Catholic magisterium.

1. The Power of the Hierarchy and the Obedience of the Laity in *Mystici Corporis* (1943) and in the Draft of a Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1962)

1.1. *Mystici Corporis*

The first encyclical ever in the Catholic Church dedicated to the theme of ecclesiology constitutes a first albeit imperfect attempt to surpass a purely juridical approach in dealing with this theme.¹ The 1943 encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* by Pope Pius XII indeed speaks about the Church as an organically structured body of which the members are “reciprocally dependent” (§ 16), without however giving up the hierarchical distinctions within the body. “That those who exercise sacred power in this Body are its chief members must be maintained uncompromisingly” (§ 17). About them alone the encyclical teaches that they continue “Christ’s apostolate as Teacher, King and Priest” (§ 17). Their triple task “to teach, to govern, to lead men to holiness” is rather called “a triple power, defined by special ordinances, rights and obligations, the fundamental law of the whole Church” (§ 38). If much attention goes in the encyclical to describing the relationship of the Church to Christ as its head, this seems to be at the same time but a prelude to the encyclical’s teaching about the “normal and visible way” “our Redeemer governs his mystical body through His Vicar on earth” (§ 40) and the encyclical also insists that “the individual Christian communities are ruled by Jesus Christ through the voice of their respective bishops” (§ 42). The succinct reflection on the bishop is only interested in underlining that their “ordinary power of jurisdiction” is “subordinate to the lawful authority of the Roman Pontiff” (§ 42).

If the greatest part of *Mystici Corporis* focuses on the “juridical principles” of the Church that are the result of its foundation by Christ, its final part makes it clear that the Church also deserves to be called the “mystical body of Christ” thanks to the “spiritual gifts” which it receives from “the Spirit of our Redeemer” (§ 63). But even then the encyclical will once again repeat the clear criteria for

¹ Cf. http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html

membership in the “social body of Christ” – “their profession of the same faith and their sharing the same sacred rites, through participation in the same Sacrifice, and the practical observance of the same laws” (§ 69), so that there can be no doubt that for *Mystici Corporis* the “true Church of Jesus Christ is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church”² (§ 13).

1.2. Draft of a Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

When one realizes that the Dutch Jesuit Sebastian Tromp, the ghostwriter of *Mystici Corporis*, had been appointed secretary of the pre-conciliar Theological Commission, one immediately understands why the 1962 *Draft of a Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* does not yet present the desired renewal of the ecclesiological outlook of the Catholic Church.³

The first two chapters bear some affinity with the opening chapters of *Lumen Gentium* dealing with ‘The mystery of the Church’ and ‘The people of God’ but their titles are typical of pre-conciliar juridical ecclesiology: ‘The nature of the Church militant’ and ‘The members of the Church militant and her necessity for salvation.’ The Church is defined as “a structure of many members, not, of course, all equal, since some members are subordinate to others and since there are in the Church clergy and laity, superiors and subjects, teachers and pupils, and different states too, over all of which Christ the Head is superior in position, perfection and power” (D 5).

Luckily, the first chapter will also repeat the core insight from *Mystici Corporis*, which will only slightly be revised in LG 8, that “the Church society and the Mystical Body of Christ are not two realities, but only one, which presents both a human and a divine aspect” (D 6).⁴ This insight also allowed the Theological Commission to draw an

²Whereas the *Draft of a Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* (1962), prepared by the Theological Commission before the start of the Council will repeat the teaching of *Mystici Corporis* in chapter one by stating that “the Catholic Roman Church is the mystical body of Christ,” the most famous line of *Lumen Gentium* will modify this teaching by stating that “the unique Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church” (LG 8). This allowed the Council to affirm its recognition of “many elements of sanctification and of truth outside its structure” in the same phrase and thus to officially confirm its ecumenical attitude.

³For our presentation of this draft we can make use of the translation in English provided by Fr Joseph Komonchak. See <https://jakomonchak.wordpress.com/2013/07/27/draft-of-a-dogmatic-constitution-on-the-church/>. References to this draft in the body of this article will start with the letter D followed by the paragraph number.

⁴The Council fathers indeed were able to end up with a very coherent Dogmatic constitution on the Church in November 1964 by making it clear in all chapters, whether they were speaking about the people of God as a whole or about the laity, the

analogy between the way the human and the divine aspect is related in Christ and in the Church. For the first time it is emphasized that the Church ought to imitate Jesus' example of being the servant of all:

For as in the Incarnate Word the human nature served as a living instrument of his divine nature for our and the whole world's salvation, and continues so to serve in heaven, so the Church society is equipped with the charisms of preacher, priest and king so that she might serve the Spirit of Christ in the building up of Christ's Body (D 6).

Following these introductory chapters about the Church as a whole, in its subsequent chapters the 1962 draft followed a top-down sequence, by first dedicating two chapters to the bishops, and then one to the religious before—for the first time in Church history—giving explicit attention to the laity in the Church.

In the two chapters dealing with bishops—chapter 3 on 'The episcopate as the highest level of the sacrament of orders, the priesthood' and chapter 4 on 'Residential bishops'—the bishops are hierarchically distinguished from other groups in the Church. In chapter 3 it is emphasized that they are "superior to presbyters in the hierarchy of Orders" (D 11) and in chapter 4 the power relation between pope and bishops is expressed in words that will no longer be maintained by the Council:

Bishops are so subject to the supreme power of the Roman Pontiff that he can extend or restrict the exercise of their ordinary jurisdiction, even by exempting subjects; for the Roman Pontiff possesses sovereign authority over all other ordinary powers, as well as immediate and episcopal power of jurisdiction both over each and every Church and over each and every shepherd and member of the faithful (D 14).

Remarkably, however, the opening paragraph of chapter 4, dealing with 'The office and dignity of bishops' (§ 13) combines two biblical memories. It repeats the idea from Mt 20:28 that "Christ did not come to be served but to serve"; with an appeal to Acts 20:28 the reader is reminded that the Holy Spirit has appointed the successors of the apostles "as bishops to govern the Church of God." Here too the power of the bishop over his flock is described in words which one will no longer encounter in LG 27: "Not only can and must bishops direct by counsel, persuasion, example, but they also have real and proper power not only in the internal and sacramental forum but also in the external and public forum" (D 13).

religious, the bishops, the Pope or even Mary, that in the Church nothing happens as a merely human act, apart from the will of Christ or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Cf. Peter De Mey, "The Sacramental Nature and Mission of the Church in *Lumen Gentium*," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 14 (2014) 348-361.

Apart from the two chapters entirely dealing with the role of the bishop in the Church, there are three chapters in the 1962 draft that have a more general title, but the bishops get a lot of attention as well, chapter 7 on 'The teaching office of the Church,' chapter 8 on 'Authority and obedience in the Church,' and chapter 10 on 'The Church's obligation to proclaim the Gospel to all nations of the world.' It is important to be aware that the chapter on 'Authority and obedience in the Church' has been completely omitted in the final version of *Lumen Gentium*. At the start of this chapter the Theological Commission wanted the Council to express its being "grievously afflicted to see that there is a certain crisis of authority in the world that arises both from erroneous doctrines and lack of discipline and also at times from misunderstanding and incorrect exercise of power" (D 36). Authority in the Church should have a better reputation, though, since "all legitimate power comes from Christ" (D 37). The longer definition links authority to service: "The exercise of authority is a human cooperation, commanded and ruled by Christ's will as the humble service rendered to brothers in order to achieve the supernatural goal of redemption willed by him" (D 37).

In 1962 it was not deemed problematic to dedicate an entire paragraph to 'The relationship between superiors and subjects' (§ 38) which called "subjects, with the eyes of faith, to always see Christ in their superiors, especially those whose authority was instituted by Christ the Lord" (§ 38). Luckily one no longer reads such lines in the final version of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

The only idea in this chapter that would be included in *Lumen Gentium* as an example of how the entire people of God participates in the prophetic office of Christ, is that "there exists in the Church a certain supernatural sense of the faith on the part of the whole Christian people" (D 39). The goal of the paragraph, however, was to point to the profound distinction between *sensus fidei* and public opinion. Among others, the view "that in the Church one may inconsiderately and without the most serious reasons appeal to public opinion in order to effect some change in the decrees of the Sacred Hierarchy" (D 39), is rejected. It is an important evolution that *Lumen Gentium* would present the active application of the sense of the faith as something positive.⁵

⁵Cf. Peter De Mey, "The Actors Involved in the Exercise of the Prophetic Office in the Church: The Common Message of *Lumen Gentium* 12 and 25 and *Dei Verbum* 7-10," in *Studia Canonica* 53 (2019) 127-164.

Lastly, we pay attention to chapter 6 on 'The laity.' One would expect it to be the counterpart of the chapters on the power and authority of the bishops and, therefore, emphasizing the obedience by the laity. That this is less the case is due to its author, the Louvain theologian Gérard Philips, who would also be able, after the disastrous reception of the pre-conciliar draft by the Council in its first session, to propose a new structure for the dogmatic constitution.

The chapter speaks in a positive way about the indispensable role of the laity in the mission of the Church and situates the sacramental basis of their mission in baptism and confirmation (D 23), whereas their apostolic work in the Church is said to consist in a mission to consecrate the world (D 24). The chapter almost received no criticism during the plenary discussion in November 1962. One may only deplore that Philips, till the final version of 1964, keeps referring to an allocation by Pope Pius XII in which the Pope insists that "the ministerial priesthood and the universal priesthood ... differ not only in degree but also in essence" (D 21), even if he also would comment on their interrelatedness. In this chapter one also comes across the last remains of a typically condescending way of defining the laity by what they are not: "those faithful who have not been called out of the People of God to the hierarchy of orders or to a religious state approved by the Church"⁶ (D 22).

2. Vatican II's Focus on the Participation of the Entire People of God in the Threefold Office of Christ

2.1. A Focus on the Entire People of God

One of the most important changes in Roman Catholic ecclesiology is that it stopped considering the ordained as the *ecclesia docens* and the laity as the *ecclesia discens*. All Catholic faithful are entitled, on the basis of the graces received in baptism and confirmation, to be active subjects in the Church. They all belong to the people of God. For this reason the Belgian Cardinal Suenens, one of the most important advocates of renewal during the Council, in the summer of 1964, only a few months before the dogmatic constitution was discussed a third and last time, had made a successful plea to divide the long chapter on 'The people of God and especially the laity' in two parts. In the second session of the Council that chapter still followed the one on 'The hierarchical constitution of the church and in particular the episcopate.' The final version of *Lumen Gentium* now focuses on the

⁶Cf. LG 31: "Under the title of laity are here understood all Christ's faithful, except those who are in sacred orders or are members of a religious state that is recognized by the church."

Church as a whole in the first two chapters. Only in the third chapter the Council discusses the specific tasks of the ordained and especially focuses on the bishop, whereas the fourth chapter pays specific attention to the laity.

Even if LG 9 speaks about the people of God as a “messianic people,” a more extensive treatment of the participation of the people of God in the kingly office is unfortunately missing in chapter two of *Lumen Gentium*.⁷ One especially emphasizes their participation in the priestly office (LG 10-11) and in the prophetic office (LG 12). I commented already on the first draft of the most commented line in LG 10, which reads in its final version: “The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood, though they differ in essence and not simply in degree, are nevertheless interrelated: each in its own particular way shares in the one priesthood of Christ.”

The main message of this line is that the people of God should exercise its priesthood in a harmonious way. Within the sacramental ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* the essential difference refers to the different sacramental basis of their priestly work, baptism and confirmation for all the faithful, whereas the sacrament of ordination allows priests to also participate in a different way in the priestly office of Christ.

In LG 12 one observes that the Council on the one hand stimulates the people of God to search for adequate ways to express its prophetic task, whereas on the other hand it immediately mentions the controlling function of the magisterium. The exercise of the “supernatural sense of the faith” should take place “under the guidance of the sacred magisterium to which it is faithfully obedient.” The Council also expresses its joy about the variety of charismatic gifts which the Holy Spirit has given to all the faithful for “the renewal and the building up of the Church,” but ascribes “the judgment about their genuineness and their ordered use to those who preside over the Church, to whom it belongs especially not to extinguish the Spirit but to test everything and hold fast to what is good” (see 1 Thes 5:12 and 19-21).⁸

⁷See Peter De Mey, “Sharing in the Threefold Office of Christ, a Different Matter for Laity and Priests? The Tria Munera in *Lumen Gentium*, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* and *Ad Gentes*,” in *The Letter and the Spirit: On the Forgotten Documents of Vatican II*. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 297, ed. Annemarie Mayer, Peeters: Leuven, 2018, 155-179.

⁸A closer look at the biblical passage reveals that the message is not given to the leaders of the community, but to the community itself.

2.2. The *Tria Munera* in the Chapter on the Bishop

In chapter three of *Lumen Gentium* the pattern of the *tria munera* is used to describe the responsibilities of the diocesan bishop.⁹ LG 25 starts in a promising way with highlighting that, “among the principal tasks of bishops the preaching of the gospel is pre-eminent,” but soon focuses on the teaching authority of pope and bishops. In LG 26 the bishop has to regulate all kinds of worship in his diocese. In the formulation of these lines, it seems as if the bishops are the only active agents in the conferring of sacramental grace: “They sanctify ...,” “they direct ...,” “they exhort and instruct” ... Apparently the only proper attitude for the laity is to accept the sacramental grace mediated by the bishop in a passive way. The description of the sharing of the bishop in the kingly office of Christ in LG 27 dismisses the mutual accountability of the bishop and the other members of the people of God. The last subsection luckily speaks about episcopal authority in a more pastoral way. On the one hand it uses the metaphor of the family. The bishop receives the mission “to govern his family.” Juridical terminology is not completely avoided to describe the relationship between the bishop and those he is responsible for. In one and the same line, however, they are called his “subjects,” but the bishop is also exhorted to listen to them and to look after them “as truly his daughters and sons.” The use of the metaphor of the shepherd, however, allowed the Council Fathers once again to emphasise that episcopal ministry is first of all a service, to be fulfilled after the model of the good shepherd. It is also underlined in this section that the bishop remains a human being, who is “subject to weakness himself” (LG 27).

3. A Stronger Focus on Priestly Identity under the Pontificates of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI

3.1. *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest (1997)*

The changed attitude towards the complementary roles within the people of God in post-conciliar times can easily be shown by paying

⁹In this section I have been inspired by the commentary on *Lumen Gentium* by the Tübingen ecclesiologist Peter Hünemann, since he deplores that the bishop’s role in the local Church has rather been described in *Lumen Gentium* in a top-down manner, as if the Council had forgotten what it had said so beautifully about the interrelatedness of the entire people of God in chapter two. Cf. Peter Hünemann, “Theologischer Kommentar zur dogmatischen Konstitution über die Kirche *Lumen Gentium*,” in *Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil, II*, ed. Peter Hünemann & Jochen Hilberath, Freiburg: Herder, 2004, 263-582, p. 444 (on LG 25), 446 (on LG 26) and 448 (on LG 27).

brief attention to the famous 1997 *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest*, the only document of the post-conciliar magisterium signed by the heads of seven Vatican dicasteries.¹⁰ Already the title is forgetful of the rich teaching of Vatican II on the sharing of the entire people of God in the threefold office of Christ. Instead of the constant attention of the Council to link the threefold office of all the faithful to the threefold office of Christ, the focus is now on the collaboration of the “non-ordained faithful” in the sacred ministry of the priest.

The introduction to the Vatican instruction admittedly starts with a beautiful line: “The source of the call addressed to all members of the Mystical body to participate actively in the mission and edification of the People of God, is to be found in the mystery of the Church.” The first part of the document, however, expanding on a few ‘Theological principles’ before offering ‘Practical provisions,’ immediately focuses on the right interpretation of the teaching of LG 10 on “the essential difference between the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood.” Even the practical provision to refrain from using the term ‘ministers’ and definitely the term ‘pastors’ for co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord is motivated by reference to the essential difference: “It must be admitted that the language becomes doubtful, confused, and hence not helpful for expressing the doctrine of the faith whenever the difference ‘of essence and not merely of degree’ between the baptismal priesthood and the ordained priesthood is in any way obscured.”

Even if I understand that it was not the goal of this instruction to develop a full teaching on the ordained ministry, it is quite strange to read that the first of two “characteristics which differentiate the ministerial priesthood of Bishops and Priests from the common priesthood of the faithful and consequently delineate the extent to which other members of the faithful cooperate with this ministry” consists in the following: “a) The ministerial priesthood is rooted in the Apostolic Succession, and vested with “*potestas sacra*” consisting of the faculty and the responsibility of acting in the person of Christ the Head and the Shepherd.”

¹⁰ Cf. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_interdic_doc_15081997_en.html

A healthy theology of ordained ministry, also in the Roman Catholic Church, cannot exclusively refer to the *in persona Christi* but should mention the *in nomine Ecclesiae* as well.¹¹

Luckily the second characteristic restores the important idea found in *Lumen Gentium* that ministry in first instance consists of serving others by imitating the example of Christ: “b) It is a priesthood which renders its sacred ministers servants of Christ and of the Church by means of authoritative proclamation of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments and the pastoral direction of the faithful.”

3.2. The new *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Priests* (2013)

In January 2013, weeks before announcing his decision to resign from his office, Pope Benedict approved the new *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Priests* which the Congregation for the Clergy had issued 20 years after the previous one in order to summarize the rich teaching on the priesthood in the magisterium of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.¹² For our purposes especially the first part on ‘The identity of priests’ is insightful. Already in the introduction we encounter the terms ‘authority’ and ‘power’ but luckily also ‘service.’¹³ The directory repeats the teaching of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* that the priest receives the gift of “spiritual power” during ordination which is explained as a “participation in the authority with which Jesus Christ, through his Spirit, guides the Church” (§ 2). At the same time priesthood is a service of the people of God, following the example of Christ, “who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28)” (§ 2). With an allusion to LG 10 the directory also underlines that “the specificity of the ministerial priesthood is defined not on the basis of its supposed ‘superiority’ over the common priesthood, but rather by the service it is called to carry out for all the faithful”¹⁴ (§ 6).

¹¹See e.g. Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Priests*, New Edition, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013, 24 (§ 13: “In” and “in the forefront of” the Church).

¹²The footnotes contain indeed lots of references to their teaching. *Evangelii Gaudium* is the first papal document ever which will also make use of important texts issued by episcopal conferences and councils of episcopal conferences.

¹³In the entire document the word ‘authority’ occurs 23 times, the word ‘power’ 20 times; the term ‘service’ 47 times.

¹⁴Also, part II on ‘Priestly spirituality’ understands the priesthood right from the outset as “an authentic service to the faithful in the pastoral ministry” (§ 45). The terminology of service reoccurs in section 2.9, ‘Guide of the community’. To this guidance belongs, a.o., “serving all and each and all of its members with dedication”

It is further specified that “all authority is exercised in a spirit of service as *‘amoris officium’* (Augustine) and unpretentious dedication for the good of the flock” (§ 25). The directory warns in this regard for two temptations which are each other’s opposite, “the temptation of clericalism” which “always generates antagonism between the sacred ministers and the people” (§ 25) and “the temptation of democratism and egalitarianism”¹⁵ (§ 26). If “any difference of roles among the members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church” is eliminated, then “the distinction between the common or baptismal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood” is negated in practice. (§ 26). The directory even becomes more concrete: “Inadmissible in the Church is a certain mentality, evident at times especially in some organs of ecclesial participation, and which tends to confuse the duties of priests with those of the lay faithful, fails to distinguish the authority proper to the bishop from that of priests as collaborators of bishops, and no longer heeds the universal magisterium exercised by the Roman Pontiff in his primatial function willed by the Lord” (§ 26). In the same context it is also deemed necessary “to avoid the so-called ‘clericalisation of the laity’, which tends to compress the ministerial priesthood of the priest” (§ 27). The directory also warns against “the so-called ‘laicisation of priest’, which actually waters down in priests what constitutes their identity: the faithful ask priests to show themselves for who they are, both externally and interiorly, at all times, in all places and under all circumstances” (§ 41).

Both in the part on ‘The identity of the priest’ and in that on ‘Priestly spirituality’ attention is paid to their promise of obedience, which is related to the existence of a “hierarchical communion” in the Church (§ 31). The relationship between priests and bishops should be characterized by two virtues: “With full respect for hierarchical subordination, the priest will promote a genuine relationship with his bishop characterized by sincere trustfulness, cordial friendship, prayer for his person and intentions, and a true effort of consonance and convergence in ideals and programmes, which takes nothing

(§ 77). The directory repeats the biblical reference: “In imitation of Jesus, the priest is not called to be served, but to serve (cf. Mt 20:20” (§ 77)

¹⁵Sometimes the directory reads as a *syllabus errorum*. See also § 17: “Inadmissible are all those opinions, which, in the name of a misunderstood respect for local cultures, tend to distort the missionary action of the Church, called as she is to carry out the one and the same universal ministry of salvation that transcends all cultures and must give life to them. Universal dilation is intrinsic to the priestly ministry and therefore inalienable.”

away from intelligent capacity for personal initiative and pastoral resourcefulness”¹⁶ (§ 33).

4. Pope Francis on the Relationship between Priests and Laity

Though Pope Francis is the first pope who was not present at the Second Vatican Council, his sermons and texts make it clear that he has profoundly received the teaching of the council. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the first longer text the Pope wrote in 2013 on the theme of evangelization, the themes from *Lumen Gentium* we discussed before are present as well.¹⁷ The third chapter of *Evangelii Gaudium* on ‘The proclamation of the Gospel’ offers pope Francis the occasion to show his faithfulness to the ecclesiological model of the people of God. It is his deep conviction that ‘The entire people of God proclaims the Gospel,’ as the first section title in chapter 3 reads, and the Pope is aware that this entails diversity, brought about by the manifold gifts of the Holy Spirit: “It is he who brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time creating a unity which is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony. Evangelization joyfully acknowledges these varied treasures which the Holy Spirit pours out upon the Church” (§ 117).

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pope discusses the relationship between laity and priests in the chapter ‘The crisis of communal commitment,’ in the part focusing on ‘Temptations faced by pastoral workers’ (II.2). First, he speaks about their relationship in general terms and is convinced that the laity should be the principal actors of ecclesial life:

Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the people of God. The minority—ordained ministers—are at their service. There has been a

¹⁶The term “hierarchical subordination” is supported in n. 131 by a reference to St Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Ephesios*, XX, 1-2: “You are united in the heart through an unshakeable submission to the bishop and the presbyterate.” The same terminology also occurs in the paragraph on ‘Hierarchical obedience’ in the part on ‘Priestly spirituality’: “The hierarchical subordination required by the sacrament of Holy Orders has its ecclesiological-structural enactment in reference to one’s bishop and the Roman Pontiff, who holds the primacy (*principatus*) of ordinary power over all the particular churches” (§ 57).

¹⁷See also Peter De Mey, “Towards a Healthy Future of Catholicity in the Roman Catholic Church: Recommendations by Pope Francis,” in *Catholicity under Pressure: The Ambiguous Relationship between Diversity and Unity (XVIIIth Academic Consultation of the Societas Oecumenica, 21-26 August, 2014)*, ed. Dagmar Heller & Peter Szentpétery, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016, 251-272 and “Synodality as Key Component of the Pontificate of Pope Francis: The Difficult Way from Theory to Practice,” in *Changing the Church: Transformations of Christian Belief, Practice, and Life – Essays in Honour of Gerard Mannion*, ed. Mark D. Chapman & Vladimir Latinovic, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020, 323-331.

growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church. (...) At the same time, a clear awareness of this responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation, does not appear in the same way in all places. In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making (§ 102).

Thereafter, the pope pays special attention to women in the Church: “we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church” (§ 103). He is not willing to reopen the discussion on women ordination but suggests that the frustration of Catholic women in this regard is often caused by a particular attitude by priests, especially “if sacramental power is too closely identified to power in general” (§ 104). In Pope Francis’ reflections on priest-laity relations, there is no need to stress their essential difference:

The ministerial priesthood is one means employed by Jesus for the service of his people, yet our great dignity derives from baptism, which is accessible to all. The configuration of the priest to Christ the head—namely, as the principal source of grace—does not imply an exaltation which would set him above others. Even when the function of ministerial priesthood is considered “hierarchical” ... its key and axis is not power understood as domination,¹⁸ but the power to administer the sacrament of the Eucharist; this is the origin of its authority, which is always a service¹⁹ to God’s people. This presents a great challenge for pastors and theologians, who are in a position to recognize more fully what this entails with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church’s life (EG § 104).

¹⁸In § 108 he also insists that seminaries should never accept candidates, if their motivation is “the pursuit of power.” Remarkably, “power” is a popular term in *Evangelii Gaudium* and occurs almost 50 times. The Pope can be very critical about “economic power” (§ 54) or about the “quest for power” which sometimes leads to situations of war among Christians (§ 98). At the same time, he refers in a positive way to the “power of God’s mercy” (§ 24), the “power of the Gospel” (§ 116) and the “power of the Spirit” (§ 119). The term “authority” is used only two more times, apart from § 104, once to refer to Jesus’ teaching “with authority” (§ 136), and once to complain that the juridical status of episcopal conferences needs to be reformed as well, in order to give them more “doctrinal authority” (§ 32).

¹⁹Also, the word “service” occurs a lot—25 times—in *Evangelii Gaudium*. The pope even addresses the theologians at one point. Their “charism” and their “efforts to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and sciences” are appreciated and encouraged by the Church, “in her commitment to evangelization.” Pope Francis adds: “I call on theologians to carry out this service as part of the Church’s saving mission. In doing so, however, they must always remember that the Church and theology exist to evangelize, and not be content with a desk-bound theology” (§ 133).

Conclusion

This overview of official documents on authority in the Catholic Church started with a discussion of *Mystici Corporis* and the draft for a Dogmatic constitution on the Church prepared by the pre-conciliar Theological Commission, two documents emphasizing the hierarchical difference between the bishops and the laity. Only the chapter on the laity of the 1962 document prepared the view of the Council on the interrelatedness of all the members of the people of God. *Lumen Gentium* developed this further by consistently making use of the pattern of the *tria munera* which holds that every member of the community participates in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ. In the selected documents from the pontificate of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI attempts have been made to delineate the identity of the ordained and of the laity in a precise manner. Pope Francis makes clear that the identity of the priest—which understands authority as service—can only be discovered in relation to the other members of the people of God.