

**ASIAN
HORIZONS**

Vol. 9, No. 2, June 2015

Pages: 255-258

Editorial

After 50 Years: Apostolate of Lay People

On the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Vatican II *Asian Horizons* has been dedicating various issues to the theological reflection on Vatican II documents. The last in this series was scheduled to be the June 2015 issue, on the Apostolate of Lay People and on A Vision for the Church of the Future. However, considering the good number of articles that we received on these two themes, we are publishing them in two issues — this present issue is on the Apostolate of Lay People; the next issue will be on a Vision for the Church of the Future.

One of the major contributions of Vatican II is its recognition of the role of the laity in the Church — the equal dignity of the laity, their role in the mission of the Church, not merely as collaborators of the clergy, but as faithful having equal right and duty for all the spheres of the life the Church. Laity cannot be viewed as substitutes for the clergy, or as those who can be given certain privileges when there is shortage of clergy. Both the laity and the clergy share in the one priesthood of Christ. By their very vocation to be Christians, the laity have their unique role and function in the mission and ministry of the Church.

As many writers have pointed out, this role of the laity cannot be said to be a new invention of Vatican II; rather, Vatican II in a way re-discovered what was there in the early Church. Many argue that in the early Church there was no distinction between “laity” and “clergy”. At the same time, perhaps we can say that seeds of different ‘orders’ were there from the beginning, though some of the forms developed conditioned by historical contexts. Various sources also point out that the laity actively participated in the ministry of the Church.¹ However,

¹See for example, Christopher M. Bellitto, *Ten Ways the Church has Changed: What History can Teach us about Uncertain Times*, Bandra, Mumbai: St Pauls, 2008, 33ff.

the laity-clergy divide deepened with the passage of time. Although it is important to understand the reasons behind this development, blaming history may not help us. What is important is to understand how the clergy-laity divide can be overcome so that the laity can actively contribute to the mission of the Church today.

Peter Neuner gives a comprehensive vision of the theology of the laity in the Conciliar and post-Conciliar documents. He explains how Vatican II regarded laity as members of the People of God, and thus tried to overcome the definition of laity in negative terms, namely, as 'non-clerics'. In dignity and apostolate, the laity and the clergy are equal. Neuner points out that in spite of this changed and positive view of the laity, in the Conciliar documents there are a few statements which emphasise clericalism. In the post-Conciliar documents on the laity, somehow such texts found prominence. Neuner comments that many post-Conciliar documents on the laity are more interested in priests than in the laity.

The decree on the Lay Apostolate extensively discusses the concept of priesthood. Naturally, in understanding the apostolate of the laity, one of the key issues is the concept of priesthood and the historical evolution of priesthood into its present status. Though from different perspectives, a good number of articles in this issue deal with the concept of priesthood, especially with the development of ministerial priesthood into a hierarchical structure. Joseph Mattam argues that the clergy-laity divide in the Church does not have its origin in Jesus; the leadership that Jesus encouraged and developed in the early Church was that of brotherhood/sisterhood based on service. Mattam feels that the present day priesthood should be re-examined and re-thought, and calls for a return to Jesus' vision and believes that a change is possible. Elmar Mitterstieler points out that though we say that all the baptized are priests, kings and prophets, we do not experience it in the actual life. He laments that although Vatican II has highlighted the equality of all the baptized, in theology and proclamation it has been ignored. Mitterstieler invites everyone to live the one priesthood of all the baptized, participating in the priesthood of Jesus. Drawing from scriptural, liturgical and theological sources, he makes it clear that Church should be a fraternal community, and not a hierarchical society. Leo Andoh Korsah and Francis Appiah-Kubi, on the other hand, try to emphasize the distinctiveness of the ministerial priesthood from the baptismal priesthood, arguing that the ministerial priesthood is basically Christological. Discussing the theological and historical evolution of

priesthood, they underline that the identity of all the baptized as priests should not limit the essence of the ministerial priesthood.

Looking back to the origin of the concept of priesthood to the biblical times and analysing its development, Moses Asaah Awinongya says that *Lumen Gentium* offers something new in this respect, namely, it creates a platform for all the members of the Church to participate in one office, that is, the office of Priesthood of Christ. He acknowledges that *Lumen Gentium* has not worked out a theology of the common priesthood of the baptized and points out that such an enterprise is necessary, especially to put the charisms and offices in the Church in perspective. Shalini Mulackal discusses the common priesthood of all the baptized, especially the common priesthood of women in the Church. Describing the biblical, theological and historical development of the concept and function of priesthood, she observes that even after Vatican II, "undue emphasis is still given to ministerial priesthood in the church." Insightfully, she points out that women in the Church live their priestly vocation seriously even though they do not often talk about it or are conscious about it: "there are thousands of women who offer their bodies as a living sacrifice. Often mothers let go off their right to care for their bodies like taking meals on time, getting adequate rest, having sufficient intake of nutritious food, etc."

According to Ojo Anthonia Bolanle, the term "collaboration" which is used to describe lay ministry, is insufficient, as it considers the laity only as helpers or substitutes. On the other hand, "co-responsibility means active participation in the ministry and mission of the Church. She holds that 'co-responsibility' conceives the Church as a community of God's people who are partakers in the priesthood of Christ by virtue of their baptism. The concept of co-responsibility is important not only for the mission of the laity, but also for the self-understanding of the Church, and for developing a more creative ecclesiology. Bolanle further discusses active participation of the laity and underlines the importance of their formation. Vimal Tirimanna examines the challenge that the theological concept *sensus fidelium* poses with regard to consulting and listening to the lay faithful as an indispensable part of exercising the teaching office of the Church. He says that though through the concept of *sensus fidelium* Vatican II has upheld the traditional belief that all the baptised are anointed by the Holy Spirit and hence as a whole the Christian community will not fall into error, this has not been put into actual practice. According to him, this has led to a gap

between the teaching of the hierarchy and the rest of the Church. While agreeing that *sensus fidelium* cannot be equated to the majority opinion, he underlines the need of consulting the laity, so that the Church's teaching may become more credible and relevant. Tirimanna holds that "listening to each other and taking each other seriously are indispensable moral obligations both of the hierarchy and of the laity."

Raymond B. Aguasis and Wilson Angelo G. Espiritu discuss how the laity should engage politics without compromising either the rightful autonomy of temporal affairs or one's fidelity to the gospel. They reject positions which completely unite faith and politics or totally separate them. They propose Robert Benne's model of Critical Engagement to engage temporal matters using secular disciplines without necessarily compromising their religious identity. They argue that, "Critical engagement facilitates a dialogue between the sphere of faith and the sphere of politics not by collapsing the boundaries of the two but by a critical collaboration." Jeanmarie Gribaudo looks at the post-Vatican II evangelizing mission of the Church in a pluralistic world, in light of its transition to a global Church. Drawing insights from Rahner, she discusses the need of interreligious dialogue and the role of the laity in the evangelizing mission of the Church today.

There are two articles dealing with other relevant themes. Bilju F. Vazhappilly proposes a sacramental theology of the Syro-Malabar Church today within the framework of context-liturgy-ethics. Candace McLean deals with the debated issue of "communion". Pointing out that the model of Eucharist as a sacrifice has been emphasised almost exclusively, she explores the various options for depicting the Eucharist, for example, the models of sacred, covenant meal, and healing "food for the journey". According to McLean, such models may provide the opportunity for the Church to expand hospitality to any person who feels compelled to receive the sacrament.

A lot has been achieved in re-discovering the dignity and role of the laity; yet we may feel that there is much more to be done in this regard. The Church becomes a community only when everyone of its members has equal possibility of participating in every sphere its life. Our mission is a shared mission.

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