

THE DIGNITY OF LAITY IN VATICAN II AND IN SOME POST-CONCILIAR DOCUMENTS

Peter Neuner[♦]
München

Abstract

Vatican II tried to overcome the negative definition of laity as “non-clergy” and regarded laity as members of the People of God, participating in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office. In their dignity and their apostolate they are equal to the clergy. Nevertheless in Vatican II there are also formulations which seem to underline a former clericalism. These texts were written in order to give the conservative minority of the bishops the chance to subscribe the documents. Compromises were necessary, because councils strive for a consensus. In the years after the Council in western societies there occurred large turbulences and they also affected the Church. Especially the crisis in clergy with a dramatic reduction of young priests led to concerns on the future. Thus post-conciliar Vatican documents on the laity, e.g. *Christifideles laici*, tried anew, to underline the difference between laity and clergy, they were more interested on priests than on the laity. They picked up just the formulations containing the compromises and interpreted them in a traditionalist way. The essay shows, that in this respect these post-conciliar documents are not in accordance with the Council. It strives to

[♦]Prof. Dr Peter Neuner studied Philosophy and Theology University München and obtained a doctorate in theology in 1976. From 1980 he was Professor of fundamental theology at the University of Passau and from 1985 Professor of Dogmatic and ecumenical theology at the University of München, where he was the dean from 1989-1991 and from 1997-1999. From 1998-2002 he was President of the Association of German speaking dogmatic and fundamental theologians. He retired from the university in 2006, but gives lectures in different institutions. Special interest and publications: ecumenism, religious experience, catholic Modernism. Email: Peter.Neuner@lrz.uni-muenchen.de

rediscover Vatican II and to make its approach fruitful to the Church of today.

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1. The Concept of Catholic Action as the Background

There were different reasons which led to a concentration of nearly all responsibility in the church in the hand of the hierarchy. In the early church there were first of all the controversies with heretical positions, that paved the way to the picture of the bishop as the spiritual leader and the witness of the Christian faith. In medieval times we find the conflicts between the Pope and the Emperor and between the Pope and the Ecumenical Council, in which Papacy became more and more powerful, up to an identification of Pope and Church. Counter-reformatorian efforts enhanced this development until Vatican I (1869-70) declared the universal primacy of the Pope and his infallibility. All the Christian faithful who did not belong to the clergy became more and more passive members of the Church. They only had the right, that priests and bishops cared for their spiritual welfare. They were the sheep who had to obey the commands of the shepherds. The term "laity" received a negative connotation; lay people were simply those who did not belong to the clergy.

It was during the 19th and the early 20th century, that bishops and priests were no longer able to keep the Christian message present in the world. The society became increasingly diversified and complicated, and the pastors had only very restricted access to the world of politics, art, science and economy. In this challenge laity were rediscovered. It was the so called "Catholic Action," in which the laymen should communicate the Christian message within the mundane world. Especially in the pontificate of Pope Pius XI (1922-39) the Catholic Action received approval and a firm ecclesiastical status.

But the hierarchical concept of the Church was not questioned. The Catholic Action remained in strict subordination to the hierarchy. The leading idea was: Christ has given all the power in the Church to the pope, the bishops govern their dioceses on behalf of the Pope and the parish priests on behalf of the bishops. The bishops may delegate some of their prerogatives to laymen. But it was always the power of the bishops, what they received and the bishops could retract it back at any time and for any reason. Laity had no right of their own. Pope Pius XII repeatedly used an impressive picture: Catholic Action is the

prolongation of the arm of the bishop. By it the bishop can reach out into regions to which he personally would not find access. As the consequence the Catholic Action must be totally dependent upon the hierarchy.¹

This concept of laity dominated the Catholic Church till Vatican II. It is surprising to recognize to which degree the Council rejected this traditional approach and designed a new picture.

2. Striving for a New Approach: Vatican II Council

2.1. The Picture of the Church in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (LG)

The majority of the bishops in Vatican II did no longer back this concept of the Church. They rejected the prepared Schema which started its vision of the Church with its ministries, especially with the episcopal ministry. In the final version *Lumen Gentium* begins with two fundamental chapters: "Church as a Mystery" and "Church as People of God." Both concepts are highly important to the conciliar approach to laity.

The vision of the Church as a mystery was rather controversial. Some of the Fathers regarded it as more or less protestant, tending towards an invisible Church, in which the institutional elements, especially its ministries lose their importance. In that approach one could be a member of the invisible Church without belonging to the visible one. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530) describes the Church as "the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered."² Sometimes this sentence is interpreted as if it declared the institutional side of the Church, especially its ministries to be secondary. Conservative bishops opposed such a suspected tendency of spiritualizing. Catholic ecclesiology is characterized by visibility. Institution, ministries and hierarchy are central.

Nevertheless Vatican II maintained that first of all the Church is not an institution, but a mystery: It is founded by the will of God towards the world and it represents what Christ has brought and what by His Spirit remains alive in the world. All who are baptized and sanctified by the word of God and by the sacraments belong to it and they are equal in their dignity and in their vocation to the

¹For the whole essay see Peter Neuner, *Abschied von der Ständekirche. Plädoyer für eine Theologie des Gottesvolkes*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 2015.

²So in the Augsburg Confession No. VII.

apostolate. The concept of the Church as mystery rejected a traditional clericalism and prepared the way to a new estimation of laypeople.

The second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* bears the headline: "The People of God". This expression is the translation of the biblical concept of the Church as the "laos tou theo." From the Greek term "laos" derives our word laity. Thus when the Church is described as People of God, it is seen within the context of laity. Vatican II regards the Church as the Community of the faithful and the ministries belong to it. Without them the people would not be the People of God. The ministries exist for the sake of the people, the laity, not vice versa.

As the People of God the Church performs the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ. "The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood," they shall "offer spiritual sacrifices" (LG, 10). They share the prophetic office of the People of God so that it "cannot err in matters of belief" because of its "supernatural discernment in matters of the faith ... from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" (LG, 12). Endowed with the kingly office it performs its apostolate within the world and everybody is called to represent the vocation of the Church in the world, according to his gifts and capacity. What chapter II of *Lumen Gentium* says about the People of God pertains to all members of the Church. The Holy Spirit distributes his gift and even special graces "among the faithful of every rank" (LG, 12). He is not bound to the ministry and he may even be found outside the visible Church.

On the basis of these fundamental positions the chapter four of *Lumen Gentium* "turns its attention to the state of those faithful called the laity" (LG, 30). It starts by underlining that "everything that has been said above concerning the People of God is intended for the laity, religious and clergy alike" (LG, 30). The council strived to avoid the negative description of laity as not clergy and to give a positive denotation. "The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of a religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the

Church and in the world" (LG, 31) Laity is no longer regarded as non-clergy or as a fold to be governed by priests and bishops, but as believers who by sacraments and by the Holy Spirit are endowed with the triple office of the Church. This renders a fundamental equality within the Church. "There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex ... All share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ" (LG, 32).

The consequence of this equality is – according to the Council – a participation of all "in the salvific mission of the Church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself" (LG 33) Important is here the term „himself“. Laypersons participate in the mission of the church, they are called by the Lord himself. Thus the concept of the „Catholic Action“ with its picture of the prolonged arm of the bishops is simply abandoned. Lay activity in the Church does not presuppose a special authorization by clergy or hierarchy. "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" (LG 33).

The traditional subordination of laity depended to a large part in the privilege of the clergy to receive theological instruction. In order to enable laypersons to a real participation in matters of the Church the Council proposed: "Let the laity devotedly strive to acquire a more profound grasp of revealed truth" (LG 35). It will change the Church, when theological competence is not only with the clergy. Laity "are, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church" (LG 37).

Vatican II regards laity by its secular character. They should be the "salt of the earth," especially in contexts in which the Church can be present only by them (LG, 31). The secular occupation is regarded almost as religious service. In the conciliar description of professional work one is reminded of Lutheran conceptions, where it is praised as worship.

The fifth chapter of the *Lumen Gentium* is concerned with the "universal call to holiness." "All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (LG, 40). Holiness is not a privilege to those

who live in the “state of perfectness” — as the traditional formulation stated. Exactly in their “temporal service” laypeople “will manifest to all men the love with which God loved the world” (LG, 41). Not every Christian’s life has to copy the spirituality of monks and nuns.

2.2. The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA)

The guidelines of *Lumen Gentium* concerning the laity were specified in different documents of Vatican II, especially in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. Here even the title was controversial. Some fathers raised the objection, the term apostle and apostolate should be reserved to the bishops as the successors of the Twelve Apostles. Nevertheless Vatican II spoke of the apostolate of the laity, thus proclaiming that the Church as a whole is apostolic, not only its (episcopal) ministry. Apostolicity is essential to the whole Church and laypeople are declared as “true apostles” (AA, 6). The Church carries on its apostolate “through all her members” (AA, 2), who “derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head” (AA, 3). In this context the council also touches the question of women in the Church: “Since in our times women have an ever more active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that they participate more widely also in the various fields of the Church’s apostolate” (AA, 9).

Immediate consequences showed the decision, that in the dioceses, wherever it is possible, “there should be councils which assist the apostolic work of the Church either in the field of evangelization and sanctification or in the charitable, social, or other spheres, and here it is fitting that the clergy and religious should cooperate with the laity” (AA, 26). Accordingly, councils were established on all levels of the Church, beginning with parishes to the districts and dioceses. The members were elected or nominated by their associations.

2.3. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC)

Many Catholics regard the admission of the local language in the liturgy the most important reform of Vatican II. But the question of language did not play an important role in the Council; liturgy in Latin was not abolished or even forbidden. The Constitution on Liturgy demands that worship should be reformed, so “that the Christian people, so far as possible, should be enabled to understand them with ease and to take part in them fully, actively” (SC, 21). Liturgy, especially Eucharist, is “communal celebration” and it

demands an "active participation of the faithful" (SC, 27). "Therefore liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church"; they "are not private functions" of the priest (SC, 26). The priests belong to the People of God, they fulfil important duties, but they are not isolated from the people. The whole congregation "should give thanks to God; by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him" (SC, 48).

Prior to Vatican II, liturgy appeared to be the task of the priest; he may offer the sacrifice for the sake of the congregation. The congregation did not play an active role. When biblical texts were publicly read by a layperson in the mother tongue, the priest had to recite them in Latin. And he could celebrate the mass even without a congregation.

Actually, Vatican II did not forbid the private mass of the priest, but it appears as an exception. The norm is different now, liturgy got a new foundation. Its subject is no longer the priest, but the Church, the congregation, to which the priest belongs. He does not act in an isolated power, but as a constitutive member of the community. It is the congregation which celebrates and all its members are called to an active participation. That is by far more important than the disappearance of the Latin. The language is only the consequence that the congregation celebrates Eucharist and all participate actively.

2.4. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS)

The "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" defines the Church not in a theoretical approach, but in its relation to the secular world. In this context laity appears as the subject of the church, for it is them, who realize this vocation. Therefore significant aspects for a theology of laity are proposed in the Pastoral Constitution.

Especially important is the proclamation of "autonomy of earthly affairs" (GS, 36). It underlines that, "all things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order," which "man must respect" (GS, 36). In view of the fact that Pope Pius X stressed for a "Christian Democracy," "the most rigorous obligation to depend on the authority of the Church and to be totally subdued and obedient to the bishops"³ and in view of the "Catholic Action," which

³Quotations in Peter Neuner, *Abschied von der Ständekirche. Plädoyer für eine Theologie des Gottesvolkes*, 128.

according to Pope Pius XII is “by its very nature submitted to the ecclesial authority,” the proclamation of autonomy is nothing less than a change of paradigm.

The Pastoral Constitution encourages laity “to equip themselves with a genuine expertise in their various fields ... Enlightened by Christian wisdom and giving close attention to the teaching authority of the Church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role.” Thereby “it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter.” It must be avoided, that “solutions proposed on one side or another may be easily confused by many people with the Gospel message” (GS, 43).

2.5. Different Kinds of Compromises

All these statements of Vatican II on the laity signify a break in the official doctrine of the Church. The concept of laity is one of the points, in which the Council with unexpected courage dared to break with a long tradition. Nevertheless in the documents of Vatican II one can also find formulations that represent the traditional concept of laity and seem to stabilize the old clericalism. How to explain such tensions?

It is a characteristic of the Ecumenical Councils since the first Council of Nicaea 325, that they do not make majority decisions, but seek unanimity.⁴ Such one can be achieved in several ways. The easiest is to exclude the minority and regard them as heretics. Or the minority is overruled and has to accept the will of the majority. Or one strives for compromises that are acceptable to all. Vatican II chose the third possibility. It dealt with its (conservative) minority very carefully, more than all the previous councils in the history. It was one of the concerns especially of Pope Paul VI to integrate them. Actually in the final decisions all the documents found a majority between 97% and 99% of the fathers. Given the fact that in the beginning of the discussions the positions were very controversial, this final consensus is one of the most surprising aspects of the Council. It became possible by formulating compromises.

But this consensus demanded a high cost. Especially in some crucial questions the agreement became possible by rather open

⁴See Peter Neuner, “Conflicts, Compromises and the Correct Interpretation of Vatican II,” in *Revisiting Vatican II: 50 Years of Renewal*, Vol. II, ed. Shaji George Kochuthara, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2015, 76-83.

formulations which could be interpreted differently, or even by juxtaposition of positions that could not be harmonized. Thus everybody could give his *placet* in the expectation that after the Council his interpretation would prevail. Retrospecting the half century since Vatican II it is hard to avoid the impression, that the Roman Curia waited until the end of the Council and when the bishops were back in their dioceses, large groups in the Curia tried to act as if the Council had never occurred. Granted, they often quoted the Council, but they picked up formulations, which were chosen to pacify the conservative minority, or which were open to a traditionalist interpretation. They declared their interpretation to be the authentic meaning of the Council, notwithstanding the fact, that at least in some cases the majority of the fathers of the Council had had other expectations.⁵

3. Some Views on the Reception of Vatican II

3.1. Changes in Society as New Challenges

In the years after Vatican II the society experienced substantial changes. The world grew together, de-colonization and globalization paved the way to a new order. Underdeveloped countries got their independence, but the gap between rich and poor countries became deeper. In Europe and in North America students revolted against the traditional order of the society. In the late sixties the western world was heavily disturbed.

These events had their impact even on the Church. The Council had seen the Church within the framework of the contemporary world; the Pastoral Constitution describes her in her relation to the modern world. Thus the changing world was no longer outside an unchangeable Church, but the widespread striving for freedom, democracy, equality and the mistrust to every authority also affected the Church. When the hierarchy tried to make decisions based only on authority, it met criticism and refusal. Backed by the Council, laity demanded to be respected as mature; they urged to be heard and be involved in decision-making.

In this context the papal encyclical *Humanae vitae* (1968) was of large impact. People criticized the Pope harshly. The whole system of command and obedience was questioned. *Humanae vitae* was a turning point in the modern history of the Church. Even the most

⁵The most prominent example is the famous “subsistit in” in LG, 8, which is interpreted in contrary connotations.

engaged and active members of the parishes appealed to their own conscience and in doing so they were backed by many bishops. No wonder that conservative bishops and especially the Roman Curia were shocked.

3.2. The Crisis of Priestly Ministry

Besides these events the years after Vatican II were characterized by a heavy crisis in the Church ministry. The number of the young priests decreased rapidly; seminaries tended to become empty. Uncertainty on the place of the priest within his congregation and on the future of the clergy led to a situation, where one could expect the breakdown of the parochial system within one generation. Such a future was not apt to make the priestly ministry attractive to young men. And very concrete disappointments enhanced this trend.

In order to maintain the worship, the proclamation of the Christian message and the variety of social care in the Church, many tasks, formerly performed by clergy, became handled by laypersons. There occurred something like the “awakening of the Church in the souls of the believers” (Guardini). In many cases the faithful felt responsible for the Church and they were ready to take duties. Sociology speaks of a “Functional Democratisation” in which the burdens and the responsibilities in the Church were distributed on many shoulders. The priest who in his person unites all activities in the parish began to disappear.

In addition to a widespread volunteer service we find also people who worked in the Church full time and for their living. They had passed theological studies and worked in many contexts within the dioceses and in the parishes. In the first generation of these “lay ecclesial ministers” the theological description of their ministry remained rather vague. Its starting point was more the practical need than a theoretical discussion. In many cases they did what previously the vicar had done, only with the exception of the celebration the Eucharist and of hearing confessions. Thus he (and very soon also she) were often regarded as priests’ substitutes.

Conservative groups and bishops were concerned about this development. They worried that the priestly vocation could be marginalized. If laypersons can do almost the same things as the priests do, why should one accept the requirements compulsory to the clergy, especially the celibacy? Will the progress of laity in the

Church endanger the clergy? This possible result was the leading concern behind the official documents on the laity since Vatican II.

4. Two Post-conciliar Documents

4.1. The Synod of Bishops 1987 and *Christifideles Laici*

In October 1987 Pope John Paul II convoked a Synod of Bishops on "Vocation and Mission of Laity in the Church and World, Twenty Years after Vatican II Council." It became the most comprehensive official discussion of the problem. The keynote was given by the Pope: The Synod should struggle against a "clericalization of the laity and a laicization of clergy."

The leading concept was that of the Church as a *communio*, but it tended towards a vision, which was signified by the term "*communio hierarchica*." It expressed the demand that all the faithful have to be in communion with the hierarchy and its decisions. The vision of the *communio* received a unilateral emphasis. In the "Propositions" of the Synod to the Pope the term "*communio*" was predominant, whilst the concept of the "People of God" was rather marginalized. In a broad overview the synod touched all the different problems in the modern world and declared that laity is called to handle them. This is their vocation, whilst clergy is called to administer the inner-church affairs.

One year after the Synod the Pope published the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*.⁶ In the first two Chapters he declared that the vocation to the apostolate is universal and he quoted Vatican II on the dignity of laypersons, given to them by baptism and incorporation into the body of Christ. All participate in the triple office of the Lord, all are called to holiness, which laity realizes within mundane structures. "The 'world' thus becomes the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation" (15). Clergy and laity are complementary to each other. The Pope criticized the levelling down of the difference between universal priesthood of all baptized and the priesthood of the clergy. Quoting *Lumen Gentium*, No. 10 he stressed "the essential difference between the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood, and the difference between the ministries derived from the Sacrament of Orders and those derived from the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation" (23).

⁶ http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html

In the chapters three to five the Pope designed the picture of a missionary church, in which all participate in her apostolic vocation. All members are entrusted to proclaim the dignity of men, to testify respect on human life, to take responsibility in politics, economy and in evangelizing human civilisations. He spoke on the position of women in the church, who by no means are discriminated but respected just in their female existence. "A woman is called to put to work in this apostolate the 'gifts' which are properly hers," but she "cannot receive the Sacrament of Orders" (51).

Christifideles Laici is the most important official document on the laity in the Church. The *Pontifical Council for the Laity* regards it as its "magna charta." Nevertheless it is hard to avoid the impression that its central interest is not in laity, but in clergy. Laity is described in a way that does not overlap with the prerogatives of the priests. The traditional image of the priest should be untouched. Laity may enjoy all activities within the world and society. Nevertheless in questions, which include moral aspects, they have the strong obligation to obey the decisions of the magisterium of the Church. The aim of the document was to clarify the image of the priest in order to overcome the crisis of clergy.

4.2. *Instruction on certain Questions regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest (1997)*⁷

In spite of all endeavours to let shine the image of clergy, the lack of priests became increasingly acute. In many local churches lay ministers became responsible not only for administrative duties, but also for counselling, liturgy of the word, homily. In many parishes the celebration of the Eucharist in the Sunday worship has become the exception, normal is a non-sacramental liturgy, which is prepared and presided over by deacons, sisters or by lay people. The liturgical books present a lot of possibilities, in which laypersons can perform sacred rites. It was impossible to avoid that, at least to many faithful, the image of priests and lay ministers overlapped. The difference between them became unclear.

As mentioned, in the first instance these new ministries in the Church arose on practical needs. They found a substantial theological interpretation first of all by the German Synod (1971-1975) in its document on "The common responsibility of all members in the

⁷http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_co_n_interdic_doc_15081997_en.

mission of the Church.”⁸ This German Synod was in accordance with the Council, when it expressed the conviction: “The whole congregation and each of its members participate in the duty of the Church, to be witness to the message of Christ.”⁹ All the differences and the variety of the duties are embedded within the one vocation of the Church. This unity of the congregation was regarded as the starting point, within which all the different charismas found their place. The Synod formulated a theological basis to a cooperative pastoral care, which had already become normal in many dioceses.

This starting point with the common vocation of all the faithful did not fit to the concept of Pope John Paul II, to prevent a “clericalisation of laity and a laicization of clergy.” His critique on the admission of laity to perform holy rites and to proclaim the gospel within the Sunday worship became increasingly harsh. What the new Canon Law (1983) had decreed, but was often regarded as not binding because of regional conventions and special allowances, the Pope wanted to enforce. That was the context of the “Instruction on certain Questions regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest” (1997).

As usual the text started with quoting the conciliar formulations on the equal dignity of the priest and the laity, but the aim was to distinguish them as belonging to different classes. Already the title of the document shows, that laity were regarded as the “non-ordained faithful.” “The faithful can be active in this particular moment of history in areas of culture, in the arts and theatre, scientific research, labor, means of communication, politics, and the economy, etc. They are also called to a greater creativity in seeking out ever more effective means whereby these environments can find the fullness of their meaning in Christ.” Furthermore they may help the priests to fulfil their ministry. But they don’t have a right of their own in liturgy and in leading a congregation. Centre of the argumentation was “the essential difference between the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood.” Whilst “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” the common priesthood is exercised in “a life of faith, hope and charity.” Laypeople may be

⁸Gemeinsame Synode der Bistümer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, *Beschlüsse der Vollversammlung*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1976, 652 -657.

⁹*Beschlüsse der Vollversammlung*, 652 f.

entrusted to cooperate in the sacred ministry of the priests, but “the task exercised in virtue of supply takes its legitimacy formally and immediately from the official deputation given by Pastors, as well as from its concrete exercise under the guidance of ecclesiastical authority.”¹⁰

To prevent what the Pope regarded as abuses, the document in its second part issued “practical provisions.” The ministry of the word belongs to priests and bishops, so it is forbidden that laypersons give a homily within the celebration of the Eucharist in Sunday worship. Bishops are not authorized to dispense them from this order. Laypeople may not be assigned in “directing, coordinating, moderating or governing the Parish” (Art 4 §1). Especially important was the fact, that all particular regulations and privileges, given “*ad experimentum*,” which were not in accordance with this decree, were revoked.

This instruction caused heavy disturbances. Actually it questioned the situation in many local Churches, where pastoral assistants were involved in Sunday homilies and where congregations were administered by them. This development in the consequence of a lack of priests should not be tolerated any longer. But the instruction could not propose positive expectations, except the invitation to pray for more priests and the request that priests should act in pastoral care even beyond the age of 75. The critique on this instruction was widespread, it caused disappointment and resignation. Nevertheless practical necessities demanded solutions, which did not correspond to this document.

5. Some Aspects of a Comparison of Post-conciliar Documents with the Decrees of Vatican II

These and other post-conciliar documents concerning the position of laity in the Church tried to prove their accordance with the decrees of the Council. They contain a lot of citations from Vatican II. Only a very small group of extreme traditionalists question the authority of the Council. Nevertheless, there are important differences between the concept of Vatican II and these statements.

First of all let us regard the starting point. Vatican II started by emphasizing what all the members of the Church have in common, what is “for the laity, religious and clergy alike” (LG, 30). According to this approach the German Bishops’ Conference stated in 1986, that the Church is not composed of different groups, but that “the

¹⁰All citations from the Premiss to this Instructio.

differences are rooted in what is common to them and they have to be interpreted starting with what is common."¹¹ In contrast to this approach, the post-conciliar documents were under the guideline to prevent a "clericalisation of laity and a laicization of clergy." Thus they started with the differences and so they remained within a traditional juxtaposition or even contraposition of clergy and laity: Clergy has to be different from laity and laity different from clergy. Actually, this concept remained within the definition of laity as not being clergy. Exactly this position Vatican II had tried to overcome.

The difference in approaches becomes especially clear in the interpretation of *Lumen Gentium*, article no. 10. It says, "the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood ... differ from one another in essence and not only in degree." The interpretation of this sentence depends on the meaning of "essence." This term can take rather different notions. Actually, the Council indicates, how it is to be understood in this context. It maintains that the essence of the special priesthood resides in the ministry of celebrating the sacraments, especially the Eucharist "in the name of all the people," and that it "teaches and rules the priestly people" (LG, 10). Thus the essence of the hierarchical priesthood resides in the duty to perform certain religious functions within the common priesthood of the People of God. The whole article no. 10 in *Lumen Gentium* has the goal to underline the unity in the participation of all "in the one priesthood of Christ," not to fix a difference. *Lumen Gentium*, 10 does not understand "in essence" in a metaphysical sense. An ontological interpretation would imply, that the priest by essence, by his very nature was somebody different from the "average" Christian. Vatican II did not affirm a metaphysical difference, as if ordination to priesthood would change the essence of the ordained. Such an interpretation must be criticized in the name of the Council, wherever it appears.¹²

The most frequently used argument to underline a difference between laity and clergy is the responsibility of laity in the secular world. In Vatican II the concerning texts state the dignity of the

¹¹Peter Neuner, *Abschied von der Ständekirche. Plädoyer für eine Theologie des Gottesvolkes*, 155.

¹²The expression "not only in degree" does not imply a gradual concept. The priest is not more Christian than the layperson and he is not a better Christian. Cardinal Kasper wrote: "Common and special priesthood do not differ on the level of Christian existence, they refer to different vocations and missions within the communion of all Christians" [Walter Kasper, "Berufung und Sendung des Laien in Kirche und Welt," *Stimmen der Zeit* 205 (1987) 585].

professional work and of the life in a family. These facts appear as fulfilment of the Christian task. Especially *Gaudium et Spes* describes them almost as a kind of worship within a secular world. It is a prerogative of laity that they can be witnesses of the Christian message in the mundane area. This estimation of professional work in Vatican II is different from the tendency to restrict laity to secular activities and thus to reserve the life of the Church to the clergy. The conciliar position does not include such restrictive aspects.

The present overview shows that in some respects the post-conciliar documents are not in accordance with the teaching of Vatican II. Challenges from inside the Church and from new developments — especially in western societies — led to an enforced underlining of the prerogatives of the priests. In post-conciliar documents laity and especially lay ministers in the Church were marginalized, whilst in practice they became more and more important and had to take new responsibilities. Thus there arose tensions between the official teaching and the practical necessities and solutions in almost all the local Churches. The theology of the Council could open new ways to overcome these tensions and to find a solid approach to clarify the widespread practice. The celebration of fifty years of Vatican II may help to rediscover the courageous concept of the Council and to act as open-minded, as the bishops did in Vatican II. The declarations of Pope Francis give hope, that Vatican II is not only a matter of history, but first of all a matter of the future of the Church.