

THE CLERGY-LAITY DIVIDE IN THE CHURCH

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Abstract

This short article shows that the clergy-laity divide that has come to characterize the Church for many centuries does not have its origin in Jesus. Jesus' attitude to 'priests' was rather negative as we can gather from the story of the Good Samaritan; he does not use the term 'priest' except in this story and when telling leprosy patients to show themselves to the Jewish priests. The claim that just before his death Jesus ordained 'priests' just does not have any foundation in the NT. The normally proffered arguments that the Eucharist needs an ordained priest and the sacrament of Confession needs a priest are disproved by the practice of the early Church where the Eucharist was held in the homes presided over by the head of the family, and the sacrament of Confession was not known in the first century Church. Whereas, in all the four Gospels, Jesus speaks about the kind of leaders he wanted to leave behind — they were to be different from the leaders in the world; they had to be servants and were not even to be called master or father, but were to be brothers/sisters to one another. Jesus showed by the foot washing the kind of leaders he wanted. The leaders in the Apostolic Church were not priests; they were what we have come to call 'lay people', not clerical figures at all. Hence this article pleads for a return to what Jesus wanted: a community of brothers/sisters where no one is superior or inferior but with distinct

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functions which do not make one superior, or more 'reverend'; each member is responsible and respectable; all the offices of services should be open to every member who is willing to serve the community. It is hoped that such a change is possible.

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One of the characteristics of the pre-Vatican II church had been the clergy-laity divide. It was taken for granted that this divide comes from Jesus, as it was believed that Jesus had ordained priests at the last supper, as a class apart and above the people. Unfortunately, this claim has no biblical support, as Jesus did not ordain any 'priest'. The focus of this short paper is that this division does not stem from Jesus and is not called for from the practice of the early Church, for Jesus did not seem to want a two-tier Church made up of a superior class called Clerics and an inferior class of the laity.

Why would Jesus not have Ordained 'Priests' before his Death?

Is the generally accepted claim that Jesus ordained 'priests' before his death tenable? By Jesus' time, the OT priesthood had become exclusively a sacrificing priesthood, as by then the Scribes had taken over the teaching function.¹ Jesus, like the prophets before him (e.g., Amos 5:21-22, 25) was opposed to sacrifices (Mt 12:7), the main function of the priest at Jesus' time. He insisted that God did not want sacrifice but fidelity, mercy and love (Mt 9:13). Jesus had no interest in cultic practices. His visits to the temple were primarily to teach and not to take part in the sacrifices. The image of God that Jesus gave us shows that God does not need sacrifices from sinners, but that they accept God's merciful love and live (Lk 15; Lk 7:36ff; Jn 8:1ff and many other texts). Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman in Jn 4 also show that the worship of God in "spirit and truth" was a totally new type, without the need of priests or sacrifices (Jn 4:24). The cleansing of the Temple and the prediction of its destruction also point in the same direction. Jesus had a very poor opinion of the priests of his time (Lk 10:29ff). Jesus never spoke of himself as a priest, nor considered any of his followers as priests. Jesus was a thoroughly secular person, a layman. If Jesus had used the term 'priest' for himself or his disciples, it would have led to a total misunderstanding of his person and mission. We notice that Jesus

¹Soares Prabhu: "Christian Priesthood in India Today, A Biblical Reflection," in *A Biblical Theology for India*, ed., Scaria Kuthirakkattel, Pune: Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth Theology Series, vol. 2, 1999, 214-244.

gave no importance to any religious practices, but emphasized the importance of compassion, forgiveness, mercy, faith, proper interpersonal relationship and concern for the needy (Mt 25:31ff). In the Last Judgment story not a single cultic item is mentioned (Mt 25.31ff). To speak of Jesus ordaining anyone is sheer anachronism, as the idea of "ordaining" (entering into the order/rank) came in only around the 4th century based on the class divisions in the empire; there were many orders — (grades like Senators, Nobles, etc.) the whole system of the empire was taken over by the Church from the 4th century onwards. Except when telling leprosy patients to show themselves to 'priests' and in the Good Samaritan story Jesus never used the word 'priest'. Given this background, it is highly unlikely that Jesus would have ordained 'priests' before his death. The problem is with the word 'priest' as it is a specifically religious, cultic title for a person who is considered 'sacred' and set apart for cultic functions; but, as we shall see later, Jesus did leave leaders in the community whose task was to build up the community.

Why does the author of Hebrews call Jesus a priest? The ex-Jews of his community wondered: "How could they be considered as belonging to a religion, since they had no priest and no sacrifice?" To answer and assure them the author of "Hebrews" made Jesus a High priest and his very secular 'murder' a sacrifice, but Jesus had not seen himself or his disciples as cultic priests.

Are the claims about the Eucharist as sacrifice requiring an ordained 'priest' tenable? In the earliest reference to the Eucharist, namely 1 Cor 10:14-33, Paul emphasises concern for the brother/sister and the comparison is about the purpose of eating and drinking at the Lord's table and in the temple, namely, communion with the deity or Jesus. Paul insists that one cannot have communion with the demons and communion with Jesus. 1 Cor 11:17-34 is the earliest account of an actual Eucharist we have in the early documents. Here Paul seems to emphasise the role and attitude of the community; the Eucharist is the fellowship meal of the new covenant community, with a threefold relationship: to the Father as the giver of the gifts ('thanked'), to Jesus as source of nourishment ('take and eat... drink'), and to the community as brothers and sisters, as equals. This is where the community failed and hence the great annoyance of Paul and his severe criticism of the community: "In this matter I do not command you" and he suggests that they wait for one another. What seems to have happened is that the richer members would come earlier and would not wait for the poorer members (slaves, servants) to come

after their work at home. Paul's emphasis was clearly on unity and equality. Paul does not talk about who presided over the "Breaking of Bread." In the early Church one who presided over the community, presided over the "Breaking of Bread" as it was an orderly community action, the whole community offered the Eucharist along with their president.² I am not aware of any reference to the Twelve having to preside over the 'Breaking of Bread.' Incidentally, Paul does not refer to Leadership in the community among the charisms, nor does he regard presiding over the "Breaking of Bread" in homes as a special function, as it was done by the head of the family where the believers gathered, precisely as head of the gathered community. Both Raymond Brown³ and Schillebeeckx⁴ are very explicit in this matter: the one who presided over the community presided over the Eucharist as it was the celebration of the community. The consecratory words as we have in the Mass today are not exactly the words of Jesus. We have four accounts of the Last Supper (Mt, Mk, Lk and Paul) but only Matthew has "for the forgiveness of sins" which is an interpretation of the "new covenant," which is found in the earliest account (1 Cor 11:17-34). For, in the new covenant forgiveness of sins would be necessary; having the proper relation to God and to one another was the basis of the covenant. Except Matthew all other accounts emphasize the 'new covenant.' It is also easily forgotten that in a sacrifice blood is not drunk, but sprinkled for purification of sins; Jesus did not ask his disciples to sprinkle his blood for purification ('forgiveness of sins'), but to drink it which is for nourishment. The absolute necessity of having a 'priest' to celebrate the Eucharist is a later development.

Another claim normally made is that the priests are given special powers to forgive sins in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit and reference is made to John 20:21ff. The Council of Trent uses Jn 20:21ff as foundation for this sacrament; this is a misreading of John. John is talking about the nature of the community as a loving community, parallel to Gen 2:7 where Adam becomes a *living* being by the breath of Yahweh, whereas here with Jesus' breath the community becomes a *loving* community, characterised by forgiveness. Did the first century Christians make 'confession' to 'priests'? The early Church

²Herve-Marie Legrand: "The Presidency of the Eucharist according to the Ancient Tradition," in *Worship* 53 (1979) 413-438.

³Raymond E. Brown: *Priest and Bishop, Biblical Reflections*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970, 14ff.

⁴Edward Schillebeeckx: *Ministry: A Case for Change*, London: SCM Press, 1980, 48ff.

had the conviction that a child of God does not sin (1 Jn 3:9; Rom 6:1-14), and God is an unconditionally loving Father. But when the community became aware of actual sins in the community, Matthew proposed a way of handling the wrong doer: mutual correction, community correction and finally excommunication (18:15ff). James spoke of confessing to one another and also prayers (James 5:15ff). In the second century, for 'lesser' sins the practice of the New Testament times is continued (mutual correction, mutual forgiveness, prayers and confessing to one another), along with fasting and almsgiving. It is in the 2nd century that they would think of 'penances' for 'grave' sins (adultery, murder, bearing false witness, apostasy and idolatry) one could, with the permission of the Bishop, enter the Canonical penance only once in a life time and its purpose was clearly reconciliation with the community. The formula of absolution that we are familiar with, namely, "I absolve you in the name of the Father..." is from the 12th century, as earlier, the concern was reconciliation with the community, through the head of the community, the way the community wanted. The text used as foundation for this practice was Mt 16:19ff: the power of 'binding and losing' which was a rabbinical practice of keeping a person out of the community and taking him/her back to the community.⁵

The Clergy-Laity Divide

The crisis of the Roman Catholic priesthood is worsening: shortage of priests, many parishes deprived of the Eucharist, priests continue to leave the priesthood; there are fewer new entrants; many question the very foundation of their existence and churches are sold to Muslims or others. The Church has not recovered from the after-effects of the paedophile exposures. The Church citizens (Laity) have become more vociferous and are demanding their rightful place in the Church, claiming that they too are the Church, as was emphasized in Vatican II which spoke of the Church as "the People of God," which includes the Pope, Cardinals, Bishops, priests, deacons the religious and what we call the 'laity.'⁶ While tradition is important, it needs be evaluated in the light of the NT and the practice of the first century Church.

The words 'lay' and 'laity' come from the Greek *laos*, people; in normal ecclesiastical language the laity are the people distinguished

⁵Joseph Mattam, "The Sacrament of Reconciliation," in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, (1989) 421-434 and 489-500.

⁶*Lumen Gentium*, chapter 2.

from the clergy. The 'lay person' is 'non clergy.' This division does not originate with Jesus. For Jesus all his followers were equal as brothers/sisters/friends (Mt 23:8ff; Jn 13), though they have distinct functions, as Jesus claims for himself (Jn 13:13). According to him, they had to call one another only brother/sister and not even the terms father or Master (Mt 23:8ff). Paul was clear about the distinction of functions but without the notion of a hierarchy of persons (1Cor 12:12ff; Rom 12:4ff; Eph 4:11ff) and was totally unaware of what today we call 'priests'.

Jesus did not leave behind him a hierarchy, a class of people called "priests". Whenever he used the word 'priest' it was about the Jewish priests for whom he had little regard (Lk 10:31). Jesus never spoke of himself or any of his disciples as priests; the gospels and the genuine Pauline epistles do not present Jesus as a priest. He was opposed to the temple worship. Through his attacks on them the temple priests became the arch enemies of Jesus and, ultimately it is they who turn him over to the Romans. Had Jesus wanted the priesthood to be the backbone of his community, as it is now, he would definitely have spoken about it. The recent Popes have consistently held the view that Jesus ordained priests on Maundy Thursday. However, from what I have mentioned above, it is clear that Jesus could not have thought of ordaining 'priests' before his death, as 'priests' were not in his horizon. Professor Herbert Haag of the Catholic Universities of Tuebingen and Lucerne says: "The New Testament does not recognize any priesthood, whether sacramental or universal."⁷ Quoting Häring, Haag says: "The Church of the first three centuries did not know... either the concept or the reality of a 'clergy.'"⁸

On the other hand, Jesus spoke often about the leaders he wanted to leave behind and gave them very precise and clear instructions (Mt 20:20-28; 23:8-12; Mk 10:35-45; Lk 22:24-27; Jn 13:1-18). All the four gospels witness to the centrality of Jesus' concern for the kind of leaders he wanted to leave behind. Can anyone recognize in the present day Church leaders the kind of leaders Jesus envisaged? The function of the leaders Jesus wanted to leave behind was to "feed my lambs," "take care of my sheep" and "feed my sheep" (Jn 21:15-17); in other words, to care for and build up the community, and not the service of God by offering sacrifices. The early disciples of Jesus

⁷Herbert Haag, *Clergy & Laity. Did Jesus Want a Two-Tier Church?*, Kent: Burns and Oates, 1997, 72.

⁸Herbert Haag, *Clergy & Laity. Did Jesus Want a Two-Tier Church?*, 45.

followed his teaching and practiced the “brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Pet 5:9) as is evident in the writings of Paul. While, he was conscious of his authority (Gal 1:1.), he speaks of himself as a servant (1 Cor 3:5), others as his brothers/sisters (Rom 1:13; 1 Cor 1:10; 2 Cor 1:8). Paul commissioned Timothy and others to leadership in the community by laying hands on them, but this cannot be seen as an ordination to the priesthood. The idea of a ‘priest’ does not arise in the first two centuries.

The later leaders either ignored or refused to follow the teaching of the Lord, and on their own authority declared themselves ‘priests’ busy with ‘sacrifice’, and patterned themselves on the empire, taking titles and dress code from the empire system: Reverends, Lords, Eminences, Excellencies and Holiness which have nothing to do with what Jesus wanted, and in fact, are explicitly opposed to what he had wanted. They also moulded God unto the image of the emperor, inaccessible to the ordinary people, demanding mediators both on earth and in heaven. “This survey has shown that all ministries are the creation of the Church. None can be traced back to Jesus, not even that of the bishop, and least of all that of the priest.”⁹ The ministries arose as responses to the problems the community faced (e.g., Acts 6).

The NT had a multiplicity of ministries, but by the 3rd century these are channelled into the threefold ministry of Bishop, presbyters and deacons, formed into a hierarchy of an order of priests. With this, there emerged a class called the laity, the non-clerics. Clerics are the norm, just as when we used to speak of ‘non-Christians’ the understanding was the norm is ‘Christian’. “The brotherhood throughout the world” eventually became two classes, the ordained and the non-ordained, one superior to the other, and their distinction became characteristic of the Church. The majority of the members of the Body of Christ, almost 99%, are devalued, as only the ordained can hold offices in the Church, preside over the worship and participate in the decision making processes — the others are just ignored and literally marginalized.

This gulf between the classes was caused by various developments, like the granting of privileged status to the Christian Church leaders by the emperor and thus the non-ordained were pushed to the background. The rejection by the Reformation of the hierarchy and the ministerial priesthood caused a further emphasis on the division and “ecclesiology came to be ‘hierarchology.’” The ‘Church’ meant,

⁹Herbert Haag, *Clergy & Laity. Did Jesus Want a Two-Tier Church?*, 108.

Pope, Bishop and priests. The change in the understanding of the Eucharist also led to this division.

The Eucharist, the continuation of Jesus' fellowship meals and a symbol of the new covenant community he founded, and of the Kingdom he proclaimed, was celebrated in the homes of the people presided over by the hosts of the house churches, or the head of the gathered community; and later, also by 'prophets', 'teachers' and elders. The concern Paul had about the Eucharist was fellowship, equality and concern for the poor (1 Cor 11:17-34), as we saw in the beginning. He does not refer to priests when he talks about the Eucharist. The *Didache*, a second century document, also does not refer to priests with regard to the Eucharist. For the first two hundred years it was not a rite of ordination but a commission that was the criterion for presiding over the Eucharist; a priestly ordination cannot be detected before the fifth century.¹⁰ "For nearly four centuries priestly ordination was not necessary for the enactment of the Eucharist."¹¹ Usually reference is made to Heb 5:1 ("Every high priest is selected from among the people... to offer sacrifices... for the sins of the people") when the Eucharist is seen in relation to the priesthood. This is absolutely untenable, as Hebrews speaks of Jewish priests and "no New Testament writing comes down so decidedly against the idea of a Christian priesthood as the letter to the Hebrews."¹² Various developments led to regard the simple, homely Eucharistic meals as sacrifice requiring priests. The Jews who had become disciples of Jesus had difficulty in accepting the rejection of the Temple and temple worship; without priests and sacrifices they had no identity as belonging to a religion. In the Roman Empire, Christians were accused of being atheists as they did not offer sacrifice to the emperor or to gods. Hence, they were literally forced to see the Eucharist as a sacrifice offered to God by priests. However, "in the whole of Christian literature of the first two centuries the term *hiereus*, *sacerdos*, "priest" is avoided. This was to change during the third century."¹³ By the 3rd century, thanks primarily to Cyprian of Carthage and Tertullian, OT terminology dominated Christian worship and the division priests/laity came to be firmly established. The laity was condemned to passivity, obedience and supporting the clerics.

¹⁰Herbert Haag, *Clergy & Laity. Did Jesus Want a Two-Tier Church?*, 45.

¹¹Herbert Haag, *Clergy & Laity. Did Jesus Want a Two-Tier Church?*, 108.

¹²Herbert Haag, *Clergy & Laity. Did Jesus Want a Two-Tier Church?*, 41.

¹³Herbert Haag, *Clergy & Laity. Did Jesus Want a Two-Tier Church?*, 90.

A reappraisal of this division began with Pius XI's encouragement of 'Catholic Action'. "The aim of this organization was to activate the laity but it contributed more to the building up of Papal absolutism than bringing about the independence of the laity."¹⁴ Pius XII went beyond Pius XI and saw the laity as the Church; he gave the laity their rightful place in the Church. He said very boldly, "The faithful, and more precisely the laity, stand in the forefront line of the Church's life... Hence they..., should have an ever clearer awareness not just of belonging to the Church but *of being the Church*."¹⁵ Vatican II went far beyond the expectations of many when in the 2nd chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, prior to the discussion of various groups, declared the Church as the people of God, and "any and every class division within it is fundamentally rejected."¹⁶ But soon after saying this, the Council went on to affirm the hierarchical structure, being afraid that they have given away their privileges and rights by affirming the Church as the people of God. Vatican II did bring in some reforms, but the same council, when it came to the matter of the clergy went back to pre-Vatican positions and spoke about the essential difference of priests from the laity, implying, unintentionally, therefore, the hierarchical priesthood has no foundation in Jesus, since it is said in 1 Pet 2:4-10 that the whole community is a priestly, holy community, and an "essentially different" sharing in the same priesthood is difficult to understand. This "*pro domo sua*" approach has done great damage to the Council and to the Church. We cannot expect the men, who defend positions which are diametrically opposed to Jesus, to support positions which undermine their authority, status and power. Chapter four keeps the laity in their pre-Vatican place, forgetting chapter two and the words of Pius XII. Hence, even though, under duress from theologians like Congar, Rahner and others, agreed to the idea of the "people of God" that could not be sustained for long due to the fear of losing their self imposed importance and claims to superiority. The Popes after the Council have systematically gone back to the pre-Vatican positions, as is clear from the utterances of John Paul II and Benedict the XVI.

I do not deny that the 'priesthood', as it developed in the Church, has done a lot of good to the community and to the world, and that some such kind of leadership should continue. However, the exclusively male priesthood claiming to come from Jesus is not

¹⁴Herbert Haag, *Clergy & Laity. Did Jesus Want a Two-Tier Church?*, 14.

¹⁵*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 38 (1946) 149.

¹⁶Herbert Haag, *Clergy & Laity. Did Jesus Want a Two-Tier Church?*, 19.

justified and will have to be abandoned and a new form of leadership will have to be worked out.

The new code of Canon Law of 1983 was supposed to bear the stamp of the Council but the Code affirms in advance the division of the clerics and laity as divinely instituted (Canon, 207# 1), showing ignorance of the NT and the teachings of Jesus. Then the Synod of 1987 and the subsequent *Christifideles Laici* have only reaffirmed the inferior position of the laity, going against the desire of Jesus, the insight of Pius XII and Vatican II.

Honesty is required of all; especially of the disciples of Jesus who is The Truth. This is not evident in the present day hierarchy. I am convinced that the Church will become what Jesus wanted it to be, namely, a fellowship of mutual service as friends, brothers/sisters, only when the hierarchy recognize that their claims and position are not founded on Jesus, but on the Roman empire which had a clearly hierarchical structure, and on their legitimization of their self importance, and are ready to repent, give up the claims which are against the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus and want to become a community of brothers/sisters at the service of one another, where all members are considered equal, with distinct functions, and where every member has the right and duty to serve the community. Pope Francis in his *Evangelii Gaudium* clearly rules out any idea of superiority due to the various functions in the Church. The present day leaders should remember that Jesus by the gesture of the foot washing has overthrown all structures of inequality and domination, and established mutual service as friends as the characteristic of His community. Then leadership in the community would be considered as one of the services open to all the members, irrespective of gender. The present priesthood would be rethought to follow the pattern of Jesus, not as a privilege and a matter of powers, but a commitment to serve and build up the community, following the example of the foot washing Master, the God who became a slave. If this *radical* rethinking is not done, I do not see much meaningful future for the Church. We know how the Christians in Europe and America are voting with their feet by walking out of the Church. The present leaders ('the enemy within') will destroy it.

However, we hope that the Lord would not let this happen and the leaders will see themselves in the light of the NT and Jesus, as Pope Francis has begun to give a lead. Jesus had told Peter at the foot washing that "You do not realize *now* what I am doing, but *later* you will understand" (Jn 13:7). Unfortunately, that '*later*' is still waiting to

happen in the Church. Are twenty centuries not enough for that '*later*' to appear? The laity, especially women, will have to take the lead to make this '*later*' to happen, and a rethinking of what Jesus wanted is done, so that we become truly the salt, leaven and light of the world, the fruit-bearing branches of the divine tree, where all branches have the same dignity and the function of "bearing fruit" and thus revealing God.

Is such a change possible? In many areas where the Church held a wrong view, for example, it had taken social structures like slavery as 'natural' and 'God willed' have been given up; similarly, in so many areas the Church has accepted changes; hence I do not think it is impossible that a change happens and we re-discover the kind of Church and leadership Jesus envisaged. Fortunately, Pope Francis is giving a lead in this direction.