

CONCEPTUALISING A THEOLOGY OF THE COMMON PRIESTHOOD OF THE BAPTISED

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Abstract

Lumen Gentium gives the first official teaching on the image or self-understanding of the Church. Even though other images are also mentioned and used variedly in the document, the Church is understood as the People of God. The divine character of the establishment called Church was further emphasised by accruing to the members the role of priests. History has shown the existence of structures, offices and hierarchies within the body called Church, one of which is the office of priests. *Lumen Gentium* offers something new in this respect: it creates a platform for all the members of the Church to participate in one office, namely the office of Priesthood of Christ. The document makes, however, a distinction between priesthood of all the baptized and ministerial or hierarchical priesthood. Even though *Lumen Gentium* has not worked out a theology of the common priesthood of the baptized, analysis of the concept indicates a necessity for such an enterprise. The concept has the vertical and horizontal dimensions in itself; it stresses the basis for all Christians and also brings out the sacramental dimension of the Church to the fore.

Keywords: Laity, Priesthood, Hierarchy, *Lumen Gentium*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*

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The Beginning of a Theology

The Church as community of believers and as an institution has gone through various stages of development especially in respect of its self-understanding and self-image. These images and models are intrinsically linked to the direction that the Church wants to go. It is no wonder that Pope Paul VI posed a question on the direction of the Church in his opening address to the second session of the Second Vatican Council (hereafter Vatican II). According to Pope Paul VI "Christ is our starting point,"¹ leader, goal and way. Acknowledging the many beautiful images of the Church, especially in Scriptures, he reiterated that it is important for the Church to undertake a deeper reflection on its life and being. The result of the self-reflection is the self-understanding of the Church as a "people of God" and the two resulting concepts: common priesthood of the faithful (baptized) and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood.

The differentiation between the two concepts above seems to demonstrate an attempt to start a new page in the Church (in terms of awakening) and at the same time a continuation of the already existing practice.² Taking Jesus as the starting point of the life of the Church connotes emphasis on service and not on rank. Has this always being the case in the Church?

From a Community of Brothers and Sisters to a Society with two Categories of Persons

The Church started as a small group of followers of Jesus Christ, who lived according to the teachings of their master. They formed a community and shared a two-dimensional communal life: horizontal and vertical. The horizontal union was demonstrated through their interpersonal relationships and the vertical union was characterized through their relationship with God. The exercise of offices and charisms was seen as the bearing out of special moments of grace, which allows the members to serve their fellow brothers and sisters for the growth of the community and to the glory of God. It was acknowledged as an act of witnessing also to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The phenomenon experienced dramatic changes in character during the reign of Constantine (AD 306-337) with the gradual

¹Cf. Paul VI, "Die Aufgabe," in Yves Congar, Hans Küng und Daniel O'Hanlon, ed., *Konzilsreden. Was sagten sie? Wie wird die Kirche morgen sein? Die authentischen Texte geben Auskunft*, Einsiedeln, 1964, 15. Paul VI goes on to use such expressions as "Christ is our leader and Way. Christ is our hope and goal."

²I intentionally use the word practice and not tradition. The former has to do with habit whereas the latter has to do with pedigree.

development of two classes of members: the laity and the Clergy. The former was defined, however, in a negative relation to the Clergy. The Church assumed structures comparable with those of the political state to the extent that the bishops adorned themselves with titles and honours that accrued to the civil servants or administrative staff of the Roman Empire. The Body of Believers called the Church also understood itself to be a carbon copy or mirror of the imperial administration, thus *imitatio imperii*. It moved away from understanding itself as Kingdom of God on earth but rather as an empress – *imperatrix*. Consequently the emphasis shifted from issues that promoted the fraternal spirit to the reinforcement of hierarchical positions. The situation above depicted the self-understanding of the Church as a community of non-equals in a certain sense: the class of clergy or hierarchical priests and the class of non-clergy termed as laity.

Pope Pius X in his encyclical "*Vehementer Nos*" of 11th February 1906 supported this stance by using the scriptures and fathers of the Church. He describes the Church as the mystical body of Christ. He quickens however to add that it is "ruled by the *Pastors* and *Doctors* [...] — a society of men containing within its own fold chiefs who have full and perfect powers for ruling, teaching and judging."³ In his view the Church is "essentially an *unequal* society, that is, a society comprising *two categories of persons*, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful."⁴

The situation presented above demonstrates an inner ecclesial structure with two leagues: the league of the laity and that of the pastors, whom Pius X describes as "chiefs who have full and perfect powers for ruling, teaching and judging." Consequently he presents the laity as those who are ruled, taught and judged. They are the docile flock. Based on this background one could expect an open confrontation and criticism,⁵ since the thought was out of date with the life situation of the faithful. How can adult Christians, who work hard for the development of their respective societies, be expected to become mere recipients of the teachings of the pastors like docile flocks?

³Pius X, *Vehementer Nos* (11th February 1906), ASS 29 (1906) 3-16, 8.

⁴Pius X, *Vehementer Nos* (11th February 1906), ASS 29 (1906) 3-16, 8.

⁵Guiseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II*, trans. Matthew Sherry, [original *Breve Storia del Concilio Vaticano II* (1959-1962)], New York: Maryknoll, 2005, 71.

The creation of two categories of members — docile flock and the leading pastors was not seen positively by all those in the category of Clergy. There were voices in the Church that advocated and opted for active participation of all the baptized according to their capabilities and talents. Pope Paul III who convoked the Council of Trent appointed a group of laymen to the cardinalate to help in his reform endeavours. Though not an ordained priest, Reginald Pole presided over the Council in its early sessions. Another example is the service of Count Ludovico Nogarola who was appointed as secretary of the theological discussions and even preached before the assembled legates and bishops on St Stephen's day. The incidence of lay people taking up such positions in the Church deviates from the notion that they (the laity) are only passive receivers of what comes from the clergy and recognizes them as members with "equal" rights of participation, even though this point was probably not the intention of Pope Paul III. His intention was to get the lay people bring about the needed renewal and restructuring in the Church.⁶

It was Pope Pius XII who buttressed the importance of full recognition of the laity as members who are not mere recipients of the teachings of the pastors by saying that the

faithful, more precisely the lay faithful, find themselves on the front lines of the Church's life; for them the Church is the animating principle for human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the head of all, and of the bishops in communion with him. These are the Church.⁷

The statement above will become very relevant later in Vatican II documents. For, Pope Pius XII already hints to the common foundation of all the baptized, namely, that all of them form the faith community and are called the baptized or the faithful. He then goes further to make a distinction by calling one group the lay faithful. One could go further to call the unnamed group as "clergy among the faithful" or the "ministerial faithful."

The Church is People of God

In Vatican II what Pope Pius the XII calls the FAITHFUL is now described as the People of God. The concept asserts that all Christians

⁶Cf. Paul Lakeland, "The Laity," in Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella, ed., *From Trent to Vatican II. Historical and Theological Investigations*, Oxford, 2006, 196.

⁷Pius XII, Discourse to the New Cardinals (Feb. 20, 1946), AAS 38 (1946) 149.

irrespective of their function in the Church have received a permanent apostolic task in and through their baptism.

It appears⁸ that the fathers of Vatican II, therefore, wanted to distance themselves from an image of the Church as a society of unequal members and to buttress the common roots of all, namely, Jesus Christ, the resurrected Lord. Hence they opted for the concept “the People of God” to describe the Church’s self-understanding. This concept implies a reorientation of the life of the Church, perceived as sacrament or mystery and characterized concretely in the people of God. It is interesting to note that the initial meaning attached to the concept was that it implied the laity. The reception indicates that “the People of God” comprises the laity as well as the clergy. *Lumen gentium* (hereafter LG) underlines the importance of the baptism as the common basis for all the members: it is the means of getting initiated into the people of God. All Christians find their mission and call in this one act of baptism as prophets, teachers and priests.

In LG we read that all the baptized participate in the priesthood of Christ. It is He who “made them to a kingdom of priests of God, his father” (LG, 10). Through the rebirth and anointing by the power of the Holy Spirit every baptized person forms part of a spiritual edifice and a holy priesthood set apart to offer spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God and to bear witness to Christ.

The Concept of Priesthood in the New Testament

Until the advent of Vatican II the use of the terms priest and priesthood was in respect of the office between diaconate and the episcopate. The priest is understood to act in *persona Christi*. This in turn clearly demonstrates the source of reference of the office, namely Jesus Christ. The description of Jesus Christ as priest is a post-Easter event and was meant to explicate Christ’s salvific act and to present him as the one who offered the last priestly sacrifice. This point will be looked at later in this paper. There is, however, no explicit biblical statement that had the intention of creating the office of priests.

The terms “priests” and “priesthood” have, however, become part of the vocabulary of the Church.⁹ The concept priesthood ensues from

⁸As will be seen later LG does not clearly define the place of the Clergy within the people of God unlike Pope Pius XII who clearly spelt it out. The reception of the document should be differentiated here from the original wording therein.

⁹Clergy as a concept is sometimes used to refer to the same phenomenon, which in its extreme use is sometimes equated to clericalism. Due to the scenario above it is important to trace the roots of the word “clergy” and to situate its application in the

the term priest. Its Greek component is *hiereus*. The Latin form is *sacerdos*. The evangelist Luke uses the word *hiereus* 14 times in the Acts of the Apostles to describe the respective office holders in the Jewish religion. An exception is what is found in Acts 14:13. Here St Luke talks about the priest of Zeus from Lystra. The origin of the word betrays the reason why its application or usage in post-Easter Christian community has not reflected in the gospels. As already stated it is not found anywhere in the Scriptures, where Jesus describes himself as a priest. It is in the letter to the Hebrews that Jesus is portrayed as the High Priest in his role as saviour, the one who has offered the last sacrifice for the salvation of human kind.

In the first letter of St Peter reference is made to the Christians as the chosen race, a royal priesthood. 1 Peter 2:9 specifically gives a moral exhortation to the followers of Christ to set themselves close to the Lord, so that they may also be living stones which make up the spiritual house. Furthermore they form the holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. The text alludes to the book of Exodus in which Sinai symbolizes the place where Israel was made holy through the covenant with God. The metaphorical language is important for the analysis of the issue under consideration: the Community of Christians now become the "Mount Sinai," built out of the living stones. Jesus Christ is now also compared to the new rock on which and through which God now makes his covenant with the human kind. The author uses the Jewish thought in the Old Testament in Psalm 118:22, "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" and Isaiah 28:16 in which the Lord talks about laying a stone in Zion, a granite stone, a cornerstone, a firm foundation-stone to buttress his analogy. The individual Christians are seen by the author of 1 Peter 2:9 as the living stones which are built on Christ for the erection of the new spiritual house. He goes on further to borrow the language of the Old Testament by saying that the living stones will be used to build the new temple. Consequently the readers of the letter of St Peter were exhorted in the midst of trials and persecutions to remain steadfast in

history of the body of Christians. In its Hellenistic roots the term *kleros*, with its equivalent clergy in English means *lot/destiny*. Its plural form "kleroi" stands for the shepherds who are entrusted with the care for the sheep (see 1 Peter 5:3). The positive connotation of the term clergy is negated through the use of the concept, which relates to the abuse of privileges accrued to those in clerical stand. This phenomenon took concrete shape during the reign of Gregory VII, who sought to delineate the governance of the Church to be solely in the hands of the clergy. The situation described above reached its apex in the Bull of Boniface VIII *Unam Sanctam* (1302).

the Lord and not to lose courage in their bid to follow the Lord. The exhortation has its basis in the Jewish thought spelt out in Lev 19:2 — “Be holy, for I, Yahweh your God, am holy” — and Lev 20:26 — “be consecrated to me, for I, Yahweh, am holy, and I shall set you apart from all these peoples, for you to be mine.” The author of the text in 1 Peter 2,9 appeals to his readers to be holy like their father in heaven, who has called them to form a holy priesthood. At the same time they are those who will offer the spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The author of 1 Peter 2:9 does not present an office nor does he intend to create a hierarchical structure through his formulation of his text. He uses a metaphorical language based on the symbols emanating from the Old Testament and familiar to him and probably also known to his readers to exalt them to steadfastness and holiness in the Lord. The appeal was to the whole community of Christians whose vocation it is to be like Christ. Members of the Holy Priesthood have a task to perform, namely, to offer spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. The purpose of the spiritual sacrifice is the salvation of human kind and brings out the sacramental character of the Church, vividly expressed in *Lumen Gentium* (LG), 1. As already stated above the import of priesthood in 1 Peter is a moral appeal to the persecuted Christians to be steadfast in the Lord and to strive for holiness and the identification of their vocation which has its foundation in Jesus Christ, namely, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. It should be noted that he qualifies the word sacrifice with the adjective spiritual. In short, the Christians are encouraged to live according to their nature, namely, as followers of Christ.

In the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is referred to as high priest. His assumption of the role of the high priest is only understandable in relation to its original use in the Old Testament. Therein it is stated that the high priest is taken from among his people and offers sacrifices (annually). Metaphorically the author of the letter to the Hebrews uses the concept in respect of Jesus with the understanding that He was chosen, however, not by men rather by God. He offered sacrifice, however, not annually but rather once and for all. His sacrifice is the fulfilment of all sacrifices. He is thus the last “High Priest” and has offered the last sacrifice. As can be seen clearly, there is no relation made to the individual Christian bearing the title of priest in the New Testament.

The Common Priesthood of the Baptized in Vatican II

Vatican II uses the terminology “common priesthood of the faithful” (LG, 10) as model of the universal Church; hastens however to say that this form of priesthood differs not only essentially but also in degree to the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood. The language of LG article, 10 does not present a clear theology and identity of what the common priesthood of the faithful is in its relation to the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood.¹⁰ It only observes that they are ordered to each other and share in their individual way in the priesthood of Christ. On its part the ministerial priesthood “forms and rules the priestly people,”¹¹ whereas the faithful “by the virtue of their royal priesthood, participate in the offering of the Eucharist” as well as by the reception of sacraments and the exercise of their priesthood through prayer and thanksgiving.

Lumen Gentium does not present a detailed description and theology on the common priesthood of the baptized. This situation is further complicated by the quick move to put the word faithful at par with the concept laity. The question that arises is: what is the place of the members of the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood in the common priesthood of the faithful? Since the concept of priesthood as used here is to be understood within the context of the theology of the people of God, the priesthood of all faithful or baptized would be understood as common office of the faithful including the members of the ministerial/hierarchical priesthood. The text seems to be a struggle to give an identity to the laity within the people of God rather than seeking to develop a theology that places all members of the Church as brothers and sisters in the one Lord, who take up different functions based on their charisms and call.

LG, 10 seems to be an attempt to correct the pre-Vatican II hierarchy oriented images of the Church. I use the word “seems” because the nuances of the thought of the Church in terms of two classes of members — the clergy and the non-clergy (lay faithful) are still found in this article of LG. The above situation supports the view that in its conception the people of God was initially meant to refer to all those members in the Church without a hierarchical office. In any

¹⁰The original Text is as follows: “*Sacerdotium autem commune fidelium et sacerdotium ministeriale seu hierarchicum, licet essentia et non gradu tantum differant, ad invicem tamen ordinatur*” (LG, 10, 2).

¹¹ Translation is taken from Austin Flannery, (General Editor), *Vatican Council II, Volume 1. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New revised edition Northport and Dublin, 1996.

case the use of the word faithful to refer to the laity in LG, 10 is an unhappy coincidence. If the word faithful would be used to refer only to the non-ordained members in the Church, then one would ask whether the prayers of the faithful during the Eucharistic celebration do not include the ordained ministers. Furthermore, it is unfortunate that the non-ordained members of the Church are termed laity emanating from *laós*. It is interesting that the biblical term *laós*, which was used to differentiate the Christians from non-Christians turned out to be applied only to the laity — those without Holy Orders.¹²

Another issue worth looking at in the differentiation between the two types of priesthood in LG, 10 is the conception of ministerial or hierarchical priesthood. The question is how the text should be interpreted: should the concentration be on ministry or hierarchy? Without questioning the importance of office and leadership in the Church, it would have been very important to clearly set out what characterizes the Church: service to human kind. Since the one who serves is the greatest in the kingdom of God, the absence of the word hierarchical priest, with the negative connotation that accrues to it, would have sharpened the nature of the leadership in the Church the more: it purports to serve the people of God. This would deem to set equilibrium in the life of the Church and to draw the attention of all its members to the core of its being and vocation. The significance of the differentiation can be found in the following point of view: The emphasis on the common priesthood frees the Church from the narrow confines of a particular institutional structure. At the same time, it needs leadership structure as a community of believers with a concrete and historical character and this protects it from becoming a merely intangible and ahistorical conception.

Common Priesthood of the Baptized as Sacrament of Unity

In this paper we have already shown the differentiation made between the common priesthood of all the baptized and the ministerial priesthood through the expression “of essence and not merely of degree” in LG, 10. Some theologians argue that if all baptized are equal, that is, if they are all brothers and sisters in the one Lord, then one should also create the necessary structures that would do away with ranking of the members.¹³ In other words, the metaphors should not be used as ecclesiological cosmetics but should

¹²Peter Neuner, *Die heilige Kircheder sündigen Christen*, Regensburg, 2002, 78.

¹³B.J. Hilberath, *Zwischen Vision und Wirklichkeit*, 1999, 52f.

rather be translated into concrete actions. This is where communion plays an essential role.

Although the word common priests of God in itself does not bring in a new spirit into the already existing metaphors, it serves to clarify the way the Church wants itself to be understood: it is a community made of members with common source of grace and vocation. The Church is a royal priesthood, a people set apart for the service of the Lord. Since the emphasis of the text is common priesthood of the baptized, it opens the way for ecumenism. The chosen race and the royal priesthood refer to all those who call themselves Christians through the one baptism.

The main point here is the element of community characterized by the Greek word *Koinonia*, granted by God, through which the individuals enjoy mutual help, and through which witness is given to the abundance of life that God has intended for all human beings. This opens the way for all baptized to search for the issues that bind them together and make them live out their vocation in Jesus Christ.

The point made above is better explained by combining it with the view of the Church as Sacrament of salvation.¹⁴ One of the tasks of the ministerial priesthood, in Latin "*Sacerdos ministerialis*" — the serving priests — is to "assemble the family of God as a brotherhood fired with a single ideal."¹⁵ The document does not say what this single ideal is. However, one witnesses in it the importance of unity of the people of God which traces its roots to the very beginning of the Church. St Paul appeals to the community in Corinth to be united and to cater to the needs of all its members. Instead of showing discrepancy in relationship and instead of showing differences in rank and file, instead of showing differences despite the common basis in the one Lord, the Christians in Corinth were to build a real "*Koinonia*" translated into their daily dealings with one another. Not only in the Eucharistic communion is a person a brother or a sister but even outside of it. We are talking here about the baptized individual seeking communion with his or her brothers and sisters. It is this individual who is loved by God and who carries the name Christian. It is this individual member who is to be loved and called brother or sister. The common priesthood of the baptized opens the

¹⁴LG, 48: "Christ lifted up from the earth, has drawn all men to himself (cf. Jn 12:32). Rising from the dead (cf. Rom 6:9) he sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through him set up his Body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation."

¹⁵LG, 28. See also Decree on the Ministry of Priests, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 6.

doors for all members to see their common vocation with other brothers and sisters, thus making them capable of giving life as community to the rest of the world. This way the Church will be living out its nature and being as the likeness of the unity existing in the Holy Triune God.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need for the conceptualization of a theology of the Priesthood of all the faithful which puts emphasis on the vocation and nature of the Church and that means also of the individual members therein, since the Church is made up of individual members. This will put the charisms and offices in the Church in perspective, thus making them available for the good of humanity. The consequence of an opposite action would be to rob the concept of its beauty and adorn it with clericalism, with the title of a community that only exists to fulfil its own goals. However, the Christian Church cannot only exist for itself but is in the language of the Church a universal sacrament, a sign and instrument of God's desire to commune with his people.¹⁶ But if the Church gives witness to God's communion with humans and the communion of the people among themselves (see LG, 1) and if it wants to fulfil this task, then one has to experience it as a community that lives in and practises solidarity. It needs to distance itself from structural and hierarchical thinking which adds no value to its call and mission.

¹⁶B.J. Hilberath, *Zwischen Vision und Wirklichkeit*, 1999, 59. In the opinion of Hilberath, "wenn die Kirche nicht aus sich selbst und nicht für sich selbst lebt, hat sie einerseits transparent zu sein für den Grund, aus dem sie existiert, und andererseits hat sie offen zu sein für die, denen sie ja Zeichen und Werkzeug der *Communio* Gottes zu sein hat."