

LAY MINISTRY AND ORDAINED MINISTRY: COLLABORATION TO CO- RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract

The term 'collaboration' has been used to describe lay ministry in the Church since the Second Vatican Council. The laity were viewed as assisting the clergy in performing 'their duties,' mostly in the areas where there were shortage of priests. Nevertheless, this takes a new dimension when Pope Benedict XVI, on 26th May, 2009, addressing the Diocese of Rome used the term 'co-responsibility' as the most appropriate word to describe lay ministry in the Church. This shows that the ministry of the laity in the propagation of the Kingdom of God is more than mere participation in the 'duties of the clergy,' but becomes, like the clergy, their responsibility. This paper, therefore discusses the theological basis of lay ministry as co-responsibility in the mission of the Church, emphasising the importance of 'co-responsibility' as an ongoing self-understanding of the Church as a community of God's people who are partakers in the priesthood of Christ by virtue of their baptism. It discusses active participation of the laity in the mission of the Church as a way of pastoral renewal and growth of the Church and accomplishment of its mission as agent of the new evangelisation. The article therefore recommends proper formation of the laity for the accomplishment of the divine mission.

Keywords: Collaboration, Co-responsibility, Evangelisation, Lay Ministry, Ordained Ministry

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Introduction

The call for active participation of the laity and relationship with the ordained ministers in the mission of the Church in the contemporary age continue to witness a remarkable convergence of signs of renewal of the Church in her mission to the world. This is evident in the resounding affirmation and promotion of the role of the laity in the mission of the Church. The Second Vatican Council Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA) brings this out particularly that: “The hierarchy entrusts the laity with certain charges more closely connected with the duties of pastors: in the teaching of Christian doctrine, for example, in certain liturgical actions in the care of souls” (AA, 24). However, since the Second Vatican Council, the concept of ‘collaboration’ has been the dominant term used to describe this lay ministry. The laity were seen as participating in the ecclesial ministry as helpers or as substitutes where there were no sufficient priests. Nevertheless, the concept took a new dimension on 26th May, 2009, when Pope Benedict XVI, addressing the Diocese of Rome raises the term ‘co-responsibility’ as an appropriate word through which to interpret the role of the laity in the evangelical mission of the Church. Advocating for urgent need for renewed efforts for the self-understanding of the whole Church and accomplishment of the mission of new evangelisation, Benedict XVI insists on the need to improve pastoral structures,

... in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is gradually promoted, with respect for vocations and for the respective roles of the consecrated and of lay people. This demands a change in mind-set, particularly concerning lay people. They must no longer be viewed as ‘collaborators’ of the clergy but truly recognised as ‘co-responsible’ for the Church’s being and action, thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity.¹

With this Benedict XVI’s intervention, the concept of ‘co-responsibility’ therefore becomes an explicit theme of the Church’s efforts at involvement of all her members in bringing the Gospel to the ends of the world in the recent age. The laity as well as the clergy have the role to play in the evangelical mission of the Church. This is based on the fact that “the Church is directed and guided by the Holy Spirit, who lavishes diverse hierarchical and charismatic gifts on all the baptised, calling them to be, each in an individual way, active and

¹John Paul II on the occasion of the opening of the annual Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090526_convegno-diocesi-rm_en.html, Accessed 01/05/2015.

co-responsible.”² Benedict XVI recognises the particular reality of laypersons exercising ministerial roles within the Church together with the ordained, identifying their contributions as inspiration for the growth of commitment among the wider body of the faithful. Hence Daniel Ang points out that the co-responsibility of the laity is not to be interpreted as a ‘collaboration’ in Church ministry fitting to clergy alone, and therefore not as derivative in nature, but as an integral and authentic participation, an ecclesial responsibility, that is proper to laypersons themselves.³

According to Benedict XVI, the importance of regarding the mission of the laity as co-responsibility, as an ecclesiological development, is best appreciated in the light of previous view on the role of the laity vis-à-vis the ministry of the ordained as collaboration. In collaborative ministry, the contributions of the laity in the mission of the Church are seen only as participation in the duties solely belonging to the clergy. They could only be relevant where there is shortage of priests. However, the laity’s contributions are their own fulfilment of their call as apostles of the Good News by virtue of their baptism. The clarification makes clear that the context of common responsibility is for the Church’s mission in the world which includes witness and proclamation of their communion with Christ, a gift the laity have received together with their shepherds.⁴ In this instance ‘co-responsibility’ is understood to embrace both the active contribution of laity within the Church’s life as well as their social mission beyond it. Laypersons contribute in both spheres, *ad intra* and *ad extra*, through their Spirit-led witness and baptismal discipleship.⁵

Taken together, these express an increasing consciousness of the role of laypersons in the world as well as some recognition of their involvement in the evangelising mission of the Church. Hence, Daniel Ang points out that Benedict XVI’s appeal for co-

²Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and Vatican Dicasteries, Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, 397-410.

³Daniel Ang, “The Call to Co-Responsibility: Lay Leadership in the Church,” www.moorestephens.com.au/sites/.../ang.pdf, Accessed 03/05/2015

⁴John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 21. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici_en.html, Accessed 02/05/2015.

⁵John Paul II, General Audience on the Holy Spirit, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audience/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_2511198_en.html, Accessed 02/05/2015.

responsibility falls within the specific context of lay ministry in the Church, and not simply their involvement in worldly mission. This is also evident in the words of John Paul II at General Audience on the Holy Spirit that: “(the laity’s) participation and co-responsibility in the life of the Christian community and the many forms of their apostolate and service in society give us reason, at the dawn of the third millennium, to await with hope a mature and fruitful ‘epiphany’ of the laity.”⁶

However, while affirming the common priesthood of all the baptised and setting the ministerial priesthood within that context, and recognising a legitimate diversity in ministerial functions, this nevertheless does not negate the indispensability of ordained ministers in the Church. “For a community of the faithful to be called a Church, and indeed to truly be a Church, it cannot be guided according to political criteria or those of human organisations... The ministerial priesthood is therefore necessary for a community to exist as ‘Church.’”⁷ The priority of the task of the New Evangelization, which involves all the People of God, requires that, today in particular, in addition to a “special activism” on the part of priests, there be also a full recovery of the awareness of the secular nature of the mission of the laity.⁸

A genuine appreciation of laypersons as ‘co-responsible’ for ecclesial life invites the Church into renewed reflection on the theological status of laypersons and their service in the Church, one that stretches beyond the paradigm of ‘collaboration’ that has dominated the lay-clergy relation to date.⁹ This paper therefore, sets out to discuss the theological basis of lay ministry as co-responsibility in the mission of the Church, emphasising the importance of ‘co-responsibility’ as an ongoing self-understanding of the Church as a community of God’s people.

⁶John Paul II, General Audience on the Holy Spirit.

⁷“Some Questions Regarding Collaboration of Non-ordained Faithful in Priests’ Sacred Ministry,” *Origins* 27, No. 24 (November 27, 1997) 399. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/laity/documents/rc_con_interdic_doc_15081997_en.html. Accessed 04/05/2015

⁸Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), 31, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed., by Austin Flannery, Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996, 15.

⁹Benedict XVI, “Church Membership and Pastoral Co-Responsibility,” Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the Opening of the Pastoral Convention of the Diocese of Rome, 26 May, 2009; available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_benxvi_spe_20090526_convegno-diocesi-rm_en.html.

Evangelisation: The Essential Mission of the Church

The Church exists to evangelise. “For this the Church was founded... that she might bring all men [and women] to share in Christ’s saving redemption. All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of this goal is called the apostolate, and the Church carries it on in various ways through all her members” (AA, 2). Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, emphasises that the mission of the Church is to bring the Gospel to the world and to bring people to Christ, that is, to evangelise. He writes:

We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelising all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society makes all the more urgent. Evangelising is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelise, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.¹⁰

Christ not only established the Church but also gave her the evangelising mission to “Go out into the whole world and proclaim the good news” (Mt 28:19). This is not different from the Gospel mandate for all the Christians to be salt, light, and leaven in the world. Again, the Second Vatican Council teaches that this evangelising role is fulfilled, not only by bishops, priests, and religious but rather by every baptised Christian. All share in the evangelising mission of the Church. Yet, the laity especially are called to be “leaven and salt” in the world, infusing its structures and practices with the spirit of the Gospel (LG, 31-33). In the same vein Susan Wood maintains that while this role can be led and promoted by priests and bishops, it is a responsibility which falls most appropriately to the laity. She argues that:

...the voices of a few bishops are easily drowned out. The voices of priests in the pulpits are heard by a few. The voices of our Christian laity in our society, provided these voices are properly evangelised and well-catechised themselves, are a force for good, a force for the spread of the Gospel, which is still largely untapped.¹¹

The ecclesial mission of the Church requires active involvement and participation of all the people of God. This is the task that belongs to both the ordained and non-ordained in the Church.

¹⁰Paul VI, On Evangelization in the Modern World, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN), 14.

¹¹Susan K. Wood, ed. *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood. Theologies of Lay and Ordained Ministry*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003. 25.

Therefore, the idea of evangelism is intrinsic to the vocation of the lay Christians. "...they are bound by the general obligation and they have the right; whether as individuals or in associations, to strive so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all people throughout the world" (AA, 6, 13).

The Church as Communion

The concept of communion (*koinonia*), which appears with a certain prominence in the texts of the Second Vatican Council (LG, 4, 8, 13-15, 18, 21, 24-25; DV, 10; GS, 32; UR, 2-4, 14-15, 17-19, 22), can certainly be a key for expressing the renewal of pastoral structure of Catholic ecclesiology.¹² The Church's identity as a communion (*koinonia*) was endorsed by the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 as the "central and fundamental idea of the Council documents" and represents a genuine development in the Church's self-understanding.¹³ The ecclesiology of communion brings out the Church's sociological dimension, with its structures of participation based on the common priesthood of the faithful and on the charisms the Holy Spirit stirs up so that the Church can accomplish her universal mission. This also brings out the collegiality of the institutional structure of the Church rather than being monarchical.

The concept of communion is central to the vertical dimension (communion between God and the people) and the horizontal dimension (communion of the people with one another in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit) of the life of the Church. The Church is called to nourish and support this communion and be a sacrament or sign of our intimate union with God and one another. The Church is a communion in which members are given a share in the union with God brought about by Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. The reality of the Church is the communion of each Christian with the Triune God and, by means of it, the communion of all Christians with one another in Christ (LG, 10-13, 31).

The Church as a communion is the whole people of God that are "by regeneration and anointing of the Holy Spirit... consecrated into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood," "made one body with Christ, sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ" and so "share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ, a true equality" (LG, 10). It includes lay persons, religious and clergy.

¹²The Documents of the Second Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, *Relatio finalis*, II, November 28 – December 8, 1985, Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1986, 1.

¹³Second Extraordinary Synod of Bishops (1985), *Relatio finalis*, II, 1.

All baptised believers without exception make up and belong together to the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation. This, according to Denis Edward, implies that as Christians, all members of the Church are fundamentally equal. All equally have been called by God to belong, all equally have been justified by Christ; all equally have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit. All equally have been called to respond to the message, the person and the work of Christ, by their faith, their commitment, their cooperation, their trust and their love. In principle also, all are equally responsible for the Church's work in the world, its mission.¹⁴

Each member of the ecclesial body, baptised and confirmed in the Holy Spirit, shares "the same vocation to perfection" and is commissioned to the one salvific mission of the Church "by the Lord Himself" (LG, 33). In the Church all Christians are at one and the same time brought into communion and sent on mission. In fact, "communion and mission are profoundly connected with each other, they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other to the point that communion represents both the source and the fruit of mission: communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion."¹⁵ However, it is important to note that these gifts — baptismal regeneration, the *tria-munera* of Christ, and the call to holiness and the mission of Christ — are ascribed to the entire *christifideles*, to all the faithful or People of God in their Christian vocation, and are not particular or distinguishing of the laity per se (LG, 31).

The ecclesiology of communion recognises diversity in unity and acknowledges the Spirit as the source of all the gifts that serve to build up Christ's Body (1 Cor 12:4-12, 28-30). For "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7). In its broadest sense, ministry is to be understood as service (*diakonia*) and is the means for accomplishing mission in the communion of the Church. It is a participation in and expression of Christ's ministry.

The baptismal and Trinitarian foundations of *communio* ecclesiology bring to limelight the life and mission of the Church, specifically the requirement to promote and foster participation in ecclesial life so that the diverse yet inseparable gifts and capacities of all of its

¹⁴Denis Edwards, "A Second Theological Basis for Renewal: Australian Local Church as Sacrament of God's Saving Action in this Land," in Edward Denis, ed., *Called to Be Church in Australia*, Homebush NSW: St Pauls, 1987, 4.

¹⁵John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 32.

members are allowed full expression in response to God. All ministry finds its place within the communion of the Church and serves the mission of Christ in the Spirit. Thus, communion and mission provide the foundation for understanding and carrying out lay ecclesial ministry. All believers, through Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, are formed into “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pt 2:9) and so share “a common dignity of members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons and daughters, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity” (LG, 32).

Lay Ministry: Call to Co-responsibility in the Mission of the Church

The call to co-responsibility by the laity in the mission of the Church is grounded in the Scripture and the teachings of the Church, from St Paul to the Second Vatican Council and in more recent documents. The Church teaches that: “Sharing in the function of Christ as priest, prophet and king, the laity have an active part of their own in the life and activity of the Church. Their activity within the Church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect.”¹⁶ This call is particularly rooted in the common baptismal call of all Christians to holiness of life, to service in building up of the Body of Christ, and to participation in the transformation of the world, according to the gifts bestowed upon each one. Therefore, *Redemptoris Missio* points out that: “All the laity are missionaries by baptism.”¹⁷ According to their gifts and calling, they participate in Christ’s mission of celebrating, proclaiming, and serving the reign of God. Gifts or charisms are given freely through the outpouring of the Spirit to “the faithful of every rank” making them “fit and ready (*aptos et promptos*) to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church” (LG, 12).

The apostolic mandate of lay men or women, like that of bishops and priests, is received from Christ himself through the sacraments. “Therefore, lay Catholics are apostles in their own right. The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with

¹⁶*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 10; see also LG, 33, and Congregation for the Clergy et al., *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests (Ecclesiae de Mysterio)*, Washington, DC: USCCB–Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998, Foreword.

¹⁷John Paul II, On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate, *Redemptoris Missio*, 7 December, 1990, 71, www.vatican.va/...paul.../hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio, Accessed 02/05/2015.

Christ the head; incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself" (AA, 3). In view of this Brid Long writes: "We are more than recipients of the clergy's ministry; we are apostles. We are more than volunteers in the parish; we are apostles. Importantly, however, we are not clerics; our apostleship is not hierarchical in nature. Our leadership, our charisms, our apostleship focuses not only in the secular world, but also in the Christian community. We are the first and primary evangelisers of the people and structures of this world."¹⁸

Indeed, this endowment of revelation to the whole community of believers leads Ormond Rush in his work on the *sensus fidelium*, including the *sensus fidei* of the laity, to explain that the co-responsibility of the laity in the Church's mission is obvious in the theology of the Spirit. He notes that: "it is the entire Church which is anointed by the Holy Spirit to enable its reception of Christ."¹⁹ He explains that:

...to state that the whole Church is the primary recipient of the revelatory Word of God, and that the whole Church is the recipient of the principle of revelation's reception, the Holy Spirit, is to exclude from the start any claim that the bearers of the magisterium are the sole receivers of a revelation which they then pass on to the rest of the faithful who have not received that revelation, and that they alone have the assistance of the Holy Spirit.²⁰

This missioning was sealed on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit of the Triune God remained with the disciples forever, as promised by the Messiah (Acts 2: 16, 11; Mt 28:20; Lk 24: 49).

An ecclesiology of communion shows the different gifts and functions as complementary. The many and varied gifts given are manifestations of the Spirit at work bringing all into communion and enabling all to realise their own distinct call within a circle of ministry in an "ordered, relational, ministerial community."²¹ It appreciates the Church's unity as an expression of the mutual and reciprocal gifts

¹⁸Brid Long, "Lay Ecclesial Ministry in the Parish: A New Stage of Development," in *New Theology Review* 46, 2 (May 2006) 6-12.

¹⁹Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 44-45

²⁰Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith*, 45.

²¹United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2005, <http://www.usccb.org/laity/laymin/co-workers.pdf>, Accessed 05/05/2005, 21.

brought into harmony by the Holy Spirit. Paul explains the enrichment of a faith community when the diversity of the Spirit's gifts evolve into a unifying body of — first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracle workers, healers, assistants, administrators, and those who speak in tongues (1 Cor 12:28). All complement one another while united through the excellence of the greater gift of love (1 Cor 13). In view of this, John Paul II, at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 points out that:

The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities. It is the reality of many members joined in a single body, the one Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:12). Therefore the Church of the Third Millennium will need to encourage all the baptised and confirmed to be aware of their active responsibility in the Church's life. Together with the ordained ministry, other ministries, whether formally instituted or simply recognised, can flourish for the good of the whole community, sustaining it in all its many needs: from catechesis to liturgy, from education of the young to the widest array of charitable works.²²

As long as laypersons' participation in the mission of the Church is viewed as involvement in the other's duty, without taking into adequate account the reality of their witness within the Church, then their involvement in Church ministry can appear only as what Ang describes as a concession, an anomaly or even a usurpation of Church service that belongs properly and fully to the ordained alone.²³ No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.²⁴ On all Christians, therefore, is laid the preeminent responsibility of working to make the divine message of salvation known and accepted by all men throughout the world (AA, 3).

Formation: A Right and Duty

The fact that the laity are no longer expected to be spectators but co-responsible in the mission of the Church calls for adequate preparation for the different ministries they are involved in. This is very explicit in Canon 231: "...lay persons who devote themselves permanently or temporarily to some special service of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation which is required to fulfil their function properly." The 1997 General Directory for

²²John Paul II, At the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*) (NMI), no. 46, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html

²³Daniel Ang, "The Call to Co-Responsibility," 6.

²⁴*Redemptoris Missio*, 3.

Catechesis makes it clear that apostolic formation is a normative part of a complete catechesis: "Formation for the apostolate and for mission is one of the fundamental tasks of catechesis."²⁵ "Catechesis" seeks to equip the disciples of Jesus to be present as Christians in society through their professional, cultural and social lives. It also prepares them to lend their cooperation to the different ecclesial services, according to their proper vocation.²⁶

The importance of training for ministry was highlighted in the Second Vatican Council which devoted a whole chapter of its Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People to this topic. With reference specifically to catechists, Vatican II declared: "Their training must in keeping with cultural progress and such that, as true co-workers of the priestly order, they will be able to perform their task as well as possible, a task which involves new and greater burdens" (AA, 17). In addition, the Synod of Africa recommends that like the ordained ministers, the lay ecclesial ministry requires both initial and continuous doctrinal formation for pastoral readiness. "Regular meetings should be organised for catechists so that they can discuss together how best to prepare their classes and devise plans for pastoral action."²⁷ These words for the formation of catechists can apply as well to the laity involved in the mission of the Church. The basic requirement is that people be formed and trained for effective participation in the various ministries of the Church. In view of this, Marti Jewell explains that: "Ministry formation programs have an obligation to form future leaders in the necessary connection between theology and practice, helping the ministry be rooted both in the practical reality ahead and the tradition in which it is practiced."²⁸

The task of the formation of the lay ecclesial ministry belongs to both the authorities of the Church and the laity themselves. The Second Vatican Council charges the Bishops with the duty of creating regional schools, centres of Biblical and pastoral formation on Diocesan and Parish levels to enable the laity have a solid foundation on doctrinal issues (AA, 17). Even though the Church has the

²⁵Congregation for the Clergy, *The General Directory for Catechesis*, 30, www.vatican.va/.../rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_17041998_directory-for-cate, Accessed 04/05/2015.

²⁶*General Directory*, 86.

²⁷Maura Browne, ed., *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, New York: Orbis Books, 1996, 91.

²⁸Marti Jewell, "Lay Ecclesial Ministers and the Future of Parish Leadership," in *Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project*, June 27, 2006, <http://www.emergingmodels.org/article.cfm?id=18>, Accessed August 8, 2010.

responsibility of the training of the laity, they also have the responsibility of their own formation:

Indeed, everyone should diligently prepare himself for the apostolate, this preparation being the more urgent in adulthood. For the advance of age brings with it a more open mind, enabling each person to detect more readily the talents with which God has enriched his soul and to exercise more effectively those charisms which the Holy Spirit has bestowed on him for the good of his brethren (AA, 30).

Conclusion

The growth and development of ecclesial mission in the present age requires the involvement of all the people of God. The teachings and works of Jesus embraced all humanity with an inclusive, collaborative spirit of mission, inviting all to become responsible co-workers in His vineyard (cf. Mk 6:7-13). This is why co-responsibility, as explained by Benedict XVI, requires a change in mentality, particularly with regard to the role of the laity in the Church, who should be considered not as “collaborators” with the clergy, but as persons truly “co-responsible” for the being and activity of the Church. It is important, therefore, that a mature and committed laity be united, who are able to make their own specific contribution to the Church’s mission.²⁹

Therefore, like the Bishops and the priests, lay Catholics are apostles in their own right, derived from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ’s Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord himself (AA, 3). Hence, for the Church to truly achieve her mission in the world, the theme ‘co-responsibility’ should be understood in the context of the Church as a communion. The presentation of the contributions of the laity in ecclesial ministry as ‘co-responsibility’ rather than mere ‘collaboration’ by Pope Benedict XVI will be of particular significance for theological integrity for the roles of the laity in the Church and Church’s self-understanding in the future.

²⁹The 6th Assembly of the International Catholic Action Forum (August 10, 2012) on “Ecclesial and Social Co-responsibility.”