

Vatican II - An Event of Grace

7th National eConference – 10 October 2012

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Bishop Michael Putney

Second Vatican Council invites us into new kinds of relationships.

In my first talk I will focus on the relationship with God that the Council explores, and in my second talk I will be focussing on our relationships with each other and other communities and groups within the larger human family.

Communion and dialogue would be two themes that will emerge throughout, and I will also note the fresh expression of the role of the scriptures in our Catholic life.

I will also be reflecting on the way we might approach the Council at this point of history, describing its place in the larger Tradition, and key movements of its reception in the past fifty years as well as drawing attention to the interconnections of all of the various teachings found within its documents.

Session 1

Vatican II: A new relationship with God

- A theology of communion is the key to understanding Vatican II
- Collaboration is not just practical, it's spiritual
- Sacramental – spirituality of communion

Session 3

Vatican II: A new relationship with everyone else

- Lumen Gentium
- Vatican II is all about Jesus
- Scripture is normative with an indispensable way of interpretation through the Tradition
- We are Bible people – hear it address our hearts
- Dialogue with the world and other religions

Questions for discussion:

- Is there a “treasure” that you have found in the teaching of the Council?
- Has the teaching of the Council affected your relationship with God?

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Maryanne Confoy

Session 2

The Baptismal call to holiness – a call to personal and communal ministry

- The Baptismal call is to all people – to holiness, to service
- What does this mean for us in the diverse experience of church today?
- What does it mean to be holy?
Vatican II call to be one in service – difference but not elitism
How can our unique gifts work together for the goodness of God's Reign?

In this section I will develop:

- Vatican II and GS & LG opening our eyes to the needs before us.
- Docs on Laity, Interfaith dialogue and religious liberty in relation to unity in diversity.
- How do these documents challenge, invite our response as baptised Catholics working for the Reign of God in our time?
- What is happening in our world and our church that we have lived with so long that it has become invisible to us?
- What is our response?

Session 4

Baptismal Ministry in a pluralist world

- The Call to holiness and the implications for baptismal identity and vocation
- Moving away from elitist understanding of holiness – the glory of God is the fully alive (human being). (Irenaeus)
- Vatican II and GS & LG opening our eyes to who we are in community – a graced and gracing community.
- Docs on Laity, Interfaith dialogue and religious liberty in relation to diversity in unity.
- We are all called to become to fullness of life.

Questions for discussion (refer reading resources)

- Can you come up with a definition of “lay” that does not use negatives and that does not apply equally to the ordained? If not, what does this say about the content of the term “lay”?
- How might we restore a sense in the church of baptism as entry into a priestly mission?

Chapter Two

THE ROLE OF THE LAITY



**Title: The Role of the Laity
In
Catholicism at the Crossroads
How the Laity Can Save the Church
Chapter 2, Pages 27-45**

Author: Paul Lakeland

**Publisher: The Continuum International Publishing
Group Inc, New York 2007**

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In a course on the theology of the laity it is always instructive to get students to see the central issue at stake by throwing down a challenge on day one. "What we have to discover is a definition of a layperson that does *not* use the word 'not?'" You might not be surprised to hear that this is quite a difficult task, though obviously not impossible, or we would have to give up on the course and any theology of the laity. The obvious ways of identifying laypeople use the n-word all the time. "Laypeople are *not* priests." "They are *not* in positions of leadership in the church"; or "they cannot say mass"; or "they cannot preach"; or "they are *not* obliged to celibacy." The trouble with all such efforts is that they are not definitions, which must always have a positive content. They are descriptions. As descriptions of the life of laypeople in the church today they are accurate as far as they go, but since they work by excluding something or other they don't provide any material on which to reflect. And if you can't reflect on something, you can't do theology. Theology is neither more nor less than reflecting on something in the light of the gospel and the traditions of the church, with an eye to the life of the Christian in the world of today.

The descriptions that people naturally offer when they are asked about what a layperson is are an accurate reflection of the place that laypeople find themselves in after 2,000 years of church history. Perhaps what people don't always realize is that they are in no way

descriptive of something that has always been the case, or that must necessarily always remain this way. Once upon a time everyone in the church was described as a member of the laity. That happened once, and it could happen again. There was a time when lay theologians were taken very seriously by the teaching authority of the church. If we are to believe the apostle Paul, there was a time when women hosted local assemblies of Christians and perhaps presided at the meal in memory of Jesus. There was certainly a time when ministers were married, when laypeople helped choose bishops and took an active part in ecumenical councils. These things were part of the church once, and they could be again. You certainly can't say that any or all of these phenomena are essential to the church. We don't *have* to have married priests or deaconesses. But you can say that since we have had them in the past, they cannot contradict anything essential to the church. So, they could become part of the church's life once again.

What Are "Laity"?

The very early church never talked about "laity" and "clergy." Everyone was a part of the *laos* or "people" of God. So, long before there were clergy and laity, there were simply Christians. In the days of Jesus himself, he had followers, some of whom he called and some of whom simply attached themselves to him, before he ever named apostles. In the early years after Pentecost the first followers of Jesus thought of themselves as a sect of Judaism and were thought by the Jews to be such a group, at least if we are to believe the Acts of the Apostles. So, before there was a church, there were followers of Jesus the Nazarene. The formation of "the church" as we know it is a somewhat protracted process, which begins as the followers of Jesus, moved by the Spirit, imagine life without him. The early letters of Paul, the oldest documents in the New Testament, show some of the experimental character and even the chaos that marked these first few decades. In the letters of Paul and the Gospels that followed, there is no hint of "clergy" and "laity" as we know them today. To be

clearer: there are certainly some leadership roles that are played out by particular individuals and not by others as, for instance, in the plentiful evidence from the greetings in Pauline letters that women were major figures in at least some of the "household churches," which seem to have been the earliest venues for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Scholars disagree about just how early a clear distinction comes to be made between clergy and laity; though no one, as far as I know, is willing to date it before the second century. And they all agree that in the very early church, even when the distinction was made, it implied no classification of people into ranks, even more clearly no assignment of particular holiness to one group or another. In the early church, the mark of holiness was baptism, not ordination. The *whole* church, the *whole* people of God, was set apart for the service of the Lord.

Let's return for a moment to the problem of defining laypeople positively. A more sophisticated attempt to do so might avoid the negatives and say something like, "they are baptized Christians called to ministry." True enough, even if forgotten for many centuries, and wholly in the spirit both of the early church and of Vatican II. While this accurately depicts the place of laypeople in the church, it does not distinguish them, however, from the clergy. Indeed, this is so precisely because such a definition harks back to those early days when the distinction made no sense. It leaves us with essentially the same problem of explaining how they are called to ministry in ways differing from the ways that the clergy are called, without the call seeming to be a lesser call. But in the historical development of the church, this is exactly what happened. As the roles of priests and bishops became more and more distinct, the roles of laypeople were diminished, if not always demeaned.

While the history of the changing fortunes of the laity is complex and drawn out over several centuries, the fundamental reason for it is fairly simple and wholly without sinister intent. Suppose that all M&Ms were the same color, except that every bag contained one purple and one white M&M. Which would gain more attention? Which would be sought out more eagerly? Which would likely be suspected to have greater flavor or more distinctiveness? About which M&M

would we ask, "Why is it here? What is its meaning?" It is always the special, not the run of the mill, that garners the attention, and this is no different in the life of the church or in Christian theology, since both are sites of human behavior. So, as some individuals showed talents for leadership or preaching or religious reflection or holiness, over a period of time it was natural that they would come to be looked up to. Over time, the church would naturally tend to define their positions and, indeed, their privileges and responsibilities. Bishops, somehow successors of the apostles who led the very early church, were obviously important. Eventually, a couple of centuries later, with the rise of the monastic movement, monks too would be seen to be special and understood somehow to represent an ideal of the Christian life, though obviously not one that all or most were suited for. And laypeople, those who were not special in gifts of leadership or learning or holiness, would just be forgotten. Certainly, they were not abandoned by the church, but they came to be seen as the recipients of what those with special gifts had to offer, rather than as persons vested with any particular responsibilities of their own or possessing any special gifts. But they were certainly forgotten by theology. They were simply not interesting enough.

Fifteen hundred years after the erasure of laypeople from the consciousness of Christian theology and from pretty much any responsible activity in church leadership, at the beginning of the twentieth century, we can see in the words of Pope St. Pius X exactly where this ended up:

It follows that the Church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories of person, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors. (*Veheementer Nos*, para. 8)

There is really no better indication of the effective exclusion of the laity from the gifts of the Spirit, at least in the consciousness of the institutional church, than that chilling statement that it is the "one duty of the multitude . . . to allow themselves to be led." What has baptism become in this vision of the church, if not simply admission to the ranks of the sheep?

At the beginning of the twentieth century, under the papacy of Pius X, the thinking church was suffering enormous repression. As a result of his crusade against what was labeled "the Modernist Crisis," theological reflection that was in any way creative became intensely suspect. But as is often the way, there was a backlash against these crimes against the intellect, and theology actually emerged stronger than it had been for many centuries. For particular historical reasons, it was in France and Germany above all that the "new theology" as its enemies sarcastically referred to it, began to draw attention to the importance of good historical scholarship. One of these theologians, the French Dominican Yves Congar, gave particular attention to restoring the idea that there is a theological value to the lay state. Under his influence the fathers of the Second Vatican Council also addressed the role of the laity and came to the same conclusions Congar had reached in 1953. The particularly distinguishing mark of the layperson is his or her "secularity."

The idea that laypeople are distinctive because of their secularity was an important step forward in understanding just what a layperson was; but it was also true that without careful explanations, it could create more problems than it solved. Understood too literally, it was the world, that the normal work of the clergy was within the church, and that of laypeople in the world. The clergy dealt with the sacred, or the things of God, and the laypeople, with the secular, or the things of the world. Even understood less rigidly, along the lines that Congar and Vatican II had intended, while this language gave laypeople an important role in the mission of the church, spreading the gospel in the world by word and example, it also inevitably maintained the subordination that laypeople had been subjected to for almost fifteen hundred years. The church *itself*, one might be inclined

to say, and certainly its governance, remained wholly in the hands of the clergy, as it does de facto to this day.

At about the time the Vatican Council was incorporating the ideas of Congar on the secularity of the laity, the great Dominican himself was having second thoughts, which found their way into the second edition of his wonderful book *Laypeople in the Church* and into a series of essays that he wrote for a number of French theological journals. In these works Congar criticizes first his own intellectual rigidity in making the distinction between laity and clergy too forcefully, and especially for defining the laity relative to the clergy. In other words, Congar thought he had fallen into the trap of thinking of the clergy as what we today might call "the default mode" of being Christian, with the consequence that laypeople's ways of being Christian were understood as a variation on this default status. Indeed, he said very clearly that in his view the time had been reached at which it was necessary to understand the clergy relative to the laity. Laypersons express the default mode of being Christian, and the clergy must be explained relative to them.

Congar's principal suggestion was that we should stop talking about laypeople and clergy and talk instead of "different ministries," some of which were recognized by the church in ordination, and some of which were simply empowered by the Spirit of God among all the baptized. In his own times, he was probably thinking of laypeople conducting two sorts of ministry. One, solely authorized by their baptism, is the "ministry of word and good example" that lay Catholics bring to the world in their everyday lives. The other, now no longer as significant in Catholic life as it was fifty years ago, was "Catholic Action," the name for apostolic associations of Catholics, working under ecclesiastical supervision, that had as their agenda to spread the gospel in the "secular" world. But his suggestions are considerably more valuable today in an American church in which the concept of the "ecclesial lay minister" has become so prominent. So long as we stay with the lay/clergy divide, lay ecclesial ministers must be seen as a kind of monster, or as a temporary expedient for a shortage of priests (the so-called apostolate of the second string). But once we grasp the idea of different ministries, of ordained and non-

ordained ministries on a spectrum, we find lay ecclesial ministers as a permanent and valid phenomenon in their own right distinctly less difficult to envisage.

As Vatican II came to an end in 1965, this was the complex situation of the laity. Laypeople had become noticed again in the official teaching of the church. The church had recognized formally their equal dignity with clergy in virtue of their baptism and their responsibilities for the mission of the church. The council fathers had even said that laypeople had a right and responsibility to speak out when they deemed the good of the church to be imperiled, and that the clergy should listen to what they had to say. The council laid down the groundwork for the enormous growth of lay ecclesial ministers in the half century since it ended deliberations, a growth that has been more noticeable in the North American church than elsewhere. There was, however, another and less satisfactory side to the story. Apart from the passages about equal baptismal dignity and the characterization of the lay vocation as "secular," the council did not choose to reflect theologically on what it meant to be a layperson. Instead, the council fathers chose the easier path of discussing what laypeople could do in the church. In all probability, this was a result of the recognition among the bishops that a theology of the laity would get them into pretty deep waters, because it would have implications for the theological status of the ordained and even for understanding the essential character of the church as communion, which they certainly had proclaimed. And so, inevitably, the divide between clergy and laity persisted, in spite of the advances of Vatican II.

The bishops' discussion of the lay apostolate might not have been accompanied by an equally serious consideration of the theological status of lay life, but it certainly opened the door for a measure of maturation in the church, as laypeople began to play more and more significant roles. Today we have far more laypeople in positions of responsibility in chancery offices, in the Vatican, and above all in the parishes than could ever have been envisaged only fifty years ago. The Catholic laity are much more highly educated than they were a few generations ago, and for many of them that includes considerable theological education. Add to this the serious shortage of ordained

clergy, and the pressure is clearly on for a radical revision of how we see the role of laypeople in the church today. In a word, laypeople have to be and to be recognized as adult. Adulthood, of course, implies ownership and requires the recognition on the part of everyone that adults make decisions for themselves. This brings the adult lay church of today into head-on confrontation with the structures of clericalism, though not with all the clergy. The clericalist church of the recent and not-so-recent past cannot coexist comfortably with an adult laity. Where adults do not make their own decisions, they are either phantom adults or they live in a paternalistic culture in which adulthood is not really recognized.

It is clear that in today's American church we are trying to find our way to adulthood in this deeper sense. Of course, the church is an organism in which different people exercise different gifts, and not all are called to leadership or to preaching, or to presidency at the Eucharist. But at the same time we all know what an adult society is like. It is one in which we have leaders with particular responsibilities, but this does not preclude a vigorous public forum in which all the adult members of the given society exercise their adult rights and responsibilities. In other words, while the church is certainly not the state, nor needs to be modeled on the state, a church which recognizes the adulthood of its members is going to need to look like any other open society. In this sense at least, the church needs to be much more democratic. The only alternative to that is the prolongation of a paternalistic culture of clericalism in which adult Catholic laypeople settle for the ecclesiastical status of children, however complex, professional, and "adult" their secular responsibilities may be.

Let us return to the question of the chapter. What is a layperson anyway? It seems that we have two possible directions in which we can go, both of which must begin with recognizing the equal dignity of all the baptized, ordained or not, and the responsibilities that all of us have for the mission of the church. The first direction, which when we are at our best we are currently employing and which we find both in early Congar and in the documents of Vatican II, sees a layperson as a baptized Christian, gifted by the Spirit with a responsibility for the mission of the church that will be carried out through

the particular human qualities and gifts that this individual possesses. He or she is called to an active and responsible faith, in collaboration with the clergy and under the guidance of the teaching authority of the church vested in the bishops. Some of the laity may be called to work within the community of the faithful, though the majority will find their ministry in the world. The second direction we might go, following the hints offered by the later Congar, is to think of all the baptized as ministers in different ways, depending on their gifts. Some work within the body of the faithful, some outside it. Within the body, some are called to preside at Eucharist, some to preach, some to teach, and so on. While the ceremony of ordination is reserved for certain ministries and not for others, this direction is less comfortable in its use of the language of clergy and laity. And the principal difference between the two approaches outlined here is that the first is inclined toward maintaining an essential difference between laity and clergy, while the latter sees Christians on a spectrum, with no essential difference between what one kind of minister does and what another kind of minister does. In the first model, a layperson continues to be, in the end, defined as "not clergy." In the second, we would have to say that there are no longer clergy and laity, only the *laos*, or "people" of God.

Resistance to the second model as we have discussed it here can and often does take the form of a simple determination to maintain a cultic priesthood distinguished by lifestyle. There may be cogent arguments for maintaining that priests must be men, though I have never heard any. And there may be good reasons why priesthood should entail celibacy, though I do not know of any. But we can be pretty confident that there is no way to justify clerical culture as an essential characteristic of ordained ministry. Clerical culture does not say anything about what it means to be a priest. It is simply a description of a particular and entirely accidental subculture of Catholic life, which for historical reasons has grown up around bishops and priests. As a description it is a neutral term. But it has a dark side, usually called "clericalism," which is what has happened to clerical culture when it came to be seen as essential to the condition of priesthood. The way priesthood is lived out in the church today—

which of course is not at all the way it was always or is everywhere lived out—comes to be represented as the way it always must be. So prayers for vocations are pretty well all about celibate men.

The other and more serious objection to any efforts to blur the distinction between clergy and laity stems from a theological understanding of the sacrament of orders as conferring a "substantial ontological change" on the newly ordained priest. This was a medieval development in the church's thinking, in which ordination was thought to change the very being of the new priest. Because the change had taken place at that level, it could not be reversed, in somewhat the same way as the church has tended to understand the indissolubility of marriage. Once married, always married. Once a priest, always a priest. Hence the Catholic claim that there really is no such thing as an ex-priest. There are resigned priests or, as the church prefers, "laicized priests" (the canonical designation is actually "reduced to the lay state," which in itself should give laypeople pause for thought). But they are never really ex-priests. If they say mass, the mass is unlawful, but the consecration is valid. If they are called on in an emergency, they are expected to give absolution to a dying person. Their priestly "faculties," which come with ordination, can only be suspended, never entirely taken away. This whole set of issues surrounding the question of substantial versus relational ontological change is complex but significant, and we will return to it in more detail in chapter 4.

Ministry in the church has nothing to lose from a reframing of ordination and vocation, but clericalism is mightily threatened by it. The language of ontological change, true or not, encourages the development of a priestly caste, especially when the lifestyle of clergy in the Western church is also distinctive by its celibacy. Over the centuries, the role of the whole people, not only in selecting pastors but also and most importantly in confirming the claim to the possession of a vocation, has been entirely lost. A "vocation" to the priesthood today is an almost self-authenticating claim and determined entirely between the individual and ecclesiastical authorities. Moreover, priesthood must be one of the few professions where the claimed "vocation" precedes any real evidence that the skills required for a

successful pastor are actually talents that the individual possesses. Every pastor who shuts himself away and does not interact with the people, or who lords it over them, or who preaches or presides lazily or badly is demonstrating that his claim to possess a vocation is at best questionable.

If clerical culture needs to bow to normal standards of human life for the discernment of a calling, the more fundamental problem with an emphasis on ontological change in the ordination of a priest has to do with the way in which it ties the very being of the person to what is, when all is said and done, a role in the church at the service of the people of God—not a medal or a transfer into another or higher order of being. It really is not possible to be more a Christian than any other baptized person. Baptism makes you a Christian. God may call you to certain ways of service to the church, but it does not make you *more* something. It simply gives you a particular role in the church, always in relation to the whole faithful people. Consequently, any phenomenon such as clerical culture or its wicked stepister, *clericalism*, which possesses a dynamism toward the creation of an exclusive group that defines itself over against the others, is inimical to the notion of a baptized fellowship of equals. And it should go.

The Laity as Catalyst for Change

In thinking directly about the laity as a catalyst for change, we need to interweave two stories: one is the decline of the Catholic subculture and the impact of social changes, especially those of the fabled "sixties"; the other is the story of the reception of Vatican II. These two tales are often confused with each other. Conservative Catholics confuse the tales when they blame what they see as the decline of the church on a liberal "kidnapping" of the message of Vatican II, or even blame the council itself for a pollyannaish understanding of modernity. Liberals confuse them when they imagine that modernity and progress require the abandonment of tradition. Conservatives forget that traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Liberals overlook the truth that tradition is the living faith of the

dead. More traditional Catholics accuse progressives of having "thrown out the baby with the bath water," of having been unable to distinguish between the genuine reforms that needed to be made, and which Vatican II worked for, and the vitality of a popular culture and a devotional life whose loss has impoverished the Catholic imagination. Progressives respond often enough with the counterclaim that too many traditional Catholics are hankering after a golden age that never existed outside of movies such as *Going My Way*. Both have a point.

Two Tales

The Catholic subculture of the earlier part of the twentieth century lies in tatters in the first years of the twenty-first. The national network of thriving parishes staffed by numerous priests, each with its local school run by an order of nuns, is no more. Statues in churches, paraliturgies such as benediction, exposition of the sacrament, rosary, novenas, and so on are now apparently only minority tastes. If there are signs that some of them may be making a comeback, this is usually explained as residual or recidivist nostalgia. Parishes are increasingly likely to be staffed by a single priest or have no resident priest. Nuns are about as plentiful as two-dollar bills, soon perhaps to be as rare as three-dollar bills. And if there are a few thriving newer orders, the fact that they tend to prefer traditional floor-length habits and full wimples suggests, does it not, that they too are living in the past. "Vocations" to priesthood and religious life have shrunk to very low levels, and there are more priests in the United States today over ninety years of age than there are under thirty. Churches are being closed all over, particularly in the old urban centers of Catholicism, and Catholic schools survive, if at all, by taking in large numbers of non-Catholic children. Younger generations Catholics simply do not possess the cultural literacy of Catholicism, whether they are drawn to the church or not. Even those students most active in the church, though their prayer lives and commitment may put ours to shame, have no deep-seated loyalty to the community or its traditions. If the church disappoints them,

they will go elsewhere. In sociological parlance, they are "voluntarist" Catholics—Catholics because they choose to be. They are rightly critical of a church bowed down under the scandal of sex abuse, but they will give of their time generously when their imaginations are captured. They will travel anywhere to see the pope, but they will sleep with their boyfriends and girlfriends along the way. And if the church disappoints them, they will walk away without a moment's regret.

The disappearance of the Catholic subculture is both a blessing and a curse. The principal problem it engenders is the decline of the role of imagination in religious life, with its attendant practices of prayer and the substitution of a broadly ethical or even existential understanding of religion as a search for meaning. As Robert Orsi, Harvard historian of popular Catholicism, makes so clear in his most recent book, *Between Heaven and Earth*, religion without the rich imaginative subculture becomes a poor tool for the storytelling that links this world and the world beyond. But there is an equally important benefit to the subculture's decline. While the church of the mid-twentieth century was marked by its laity's deference to the clergy and a mostly passive though rich devotional life, adult lay Catholics today are ready and willing to take more responsibility for the church and to speak out about its ills. This causes some pain, because the adult and educated status of the average Catholic today does not fit well into an institutional framework designed in and for an age when the laity were treated as children. But the pains are growing pains.

The tale of the council is one similarly mixed, and the versions you will hear are very dependent on the person proclaiming them. The problem with the legacy of the council is that it has not been properly "received." This is a technical theological term which suggests that teaching must be heard and put into practice for it to be truly significant. While it is possible to read the council documents in such a way that they largely reiterate the message of the past, the fact that the council was called at all, the fact that the council fathers staged a coup that involved the ouster of curial influence on their deliberations, and the fact that what is novel in the council's teaching is what we must attend to most closely all suggest that a reform-

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ing council is what we had in those years. This does not mean that any and every initiative subsequently taken in the name of the council was beyond reproach. The liturgical reforms were long overdue but were accompanied by overzealous efforts to remove all traces of the subculture from church buildings. But it does mean that all subsequent efforts to interpret the council need to be viewed through the lens of Vatican II's vision of the church as a community of the baptized, a people of God on a pilgrimage toward the heavenly city, in an open and dynamic relationship to the world, and not through the distorting lens of previous times in which the church as a perfect society sat in judgment on the secular world and every other religious tradition.

When we draw these two tales into relationship to each other, we can see how theological reception can be affected by cultural discomfort. At a superficial but informative level, we see it particularly clearly in the liberal and conservative responses to the sex-abuse scandal. Conservatives will tend to explain sex abuse as a result of an ethic of permissiveness and a rejection of the virtue of obedience, which they attribute to the council's kowtowing to the spirit of the times (read, "the '60s"). In its turn this will become a license for a selective appropriation of the council's teaching, so that the reassertion of papal infallibility and the hierarchical character of the church will overshadow, even smother, the equally significant attention to episcopal collegiality and the proclamation of the responsibilities of all the baptized. Liberals explain the sex-abuse scandal as an outgrowth of an unhealthy clericalism, in which the exclusively male and celibate priesthood policed itself about as badly as any other privileged and exclusive club. The truth of the matter is that the council did not provide the agenda for *Opus Dei* or for *Call to Action*, but it offers a challenge to both.

Where the Laity Are Today

The challenges and complexity of the postconciliar age can be seen clearly in a focus on the Catholic laity. They are, on the one hand, rather less likely to be weekly worshippers than they were forty

The Role of the Laity

years ago. They are much less likely to be frequent recipients of the sacrament of reconciliation or to attend paraliturgical worship services such as the rosary in common or the stations of the cross. On the other hand, the phenomenon of lay ministry in the church has grown astonishingly over the years since the council, as has the involvement of Catholics in ecclesiastical NGOs. To a degree, this is a response to the growing shortage of clergy and the need for the laity to take up the slack that this occasions. But it is surely also a sign of a thoroughly adult sense of personal accountability for the fortunes of the community, not just for the state of one's own soul. The American Catholic Church could not function today without the generosity and expertise of the 40,000 or so "lay ecclesial ministers."

These are laypeople involved in full- or part-time, often paid, positions in the church. At one extreme, they administer parishes in the absence of a resident priest; at the other, they teach catechism to children. But all are essential to the work of the church. The American bishops have recognized the importance of lay ministry in a series of documents, the most recent of which was published in November 2005. In the next twenty years these lay ministers will come to outnumber the ranks of the clergy. With this demographic shift will inevitably come the pressure to scrutinize the nature of ministry and the differences, real and imagined, between priestly and lay ministry.

The existence of lay ecclesial ministers is indispensable to the church today, but the phenomenon also presents a challenge both to the understanding of the mission of the laity in general and to the idea of sacred orders. On the one hand, the very importance of lay ecclesial ministry can distract the church's attention from the indispensable ministry to the world which the whole baptized people are called to undertake. And on the other, the phenomenon of full-time lay employees in work formerly done by priests or perhaps religious sisters challenges us to ask about the precise difference between someone "ordained" to serve the church and someone clearly called but without the formal designation of ordination. Let us pursue both these points a little further.

When the council spoke of the "essentially secular" character of the laity it was not making a derogatory comment intended to

exclude them from responsible voice inside the church, though it may unintentionally have provided ammunition for those who wish to do exactly that, if only by its choice of the word "secular." The important point the council fathers were making was that the first responsibility of baptized Christians is to the mission of the church to the world. Much of Vatican II, especially the documents on the church in the modern world, on religious freedom, and even on relations with other religions, establishes an entirely refreshing—might one even say "new"?—relationship between the Catholic Church and the human community beyond it, both religious and secular. This mission, the task to which God calls the church, is the principal responsibility of the baptized. "Secular," then, is not meant to imply "not sacred," which is why the word was a poor choice, but rather "worldly" in the best sense of the word. Of course, "worldly" itself is open to misunderstanding, when it is thought of in the sense that the values of the world are uncritically absorbed. Rather, "worldly" should be understood in the sense that the laity are at home in the world which God created and God loves—the place that is our home, the place where all of us are called to work out our salvations. In other words, I suppose one could say, the laity are called to be "secular" in exactly the same sense that Jesus of Nazareth was secular, a layperson with a mission from God.

Given the essentially secular character of the laity, then, what exactly are we to make of those who serve the church as lay ecclesial ministers? The documents of Vatican II, which set the scene for this development without formally establishing it or perhaps imagining how quickly it would come to be indispensable to the church, mostly see lay ministers as those who fill a gap left by a shortage of priests. While Vatican II thought the shortage was most likely to occur in what they called missionary situations, we know today that the problem is becoming equally acute in Europe and North America. This vision of lay ministry within the church has been described as "the apostolate of the second string." This very telling term suggests that if and when ordained clergy become plentiful again, the laity will be thanked and returned to the bench to await the next emergency. It is certainly true that Vatican II's discussion of the lay role in ministries

with the faith community often gives the impression that they are a temporary expedient. However, what if we are never going to see the rise in traditional vocations again? What if God is working something wonderful through the decline in the ranks of the traditional ordained ministry? If this is even a possibility, and it would be rash to conclude that the Holy Spirit cannot work in this way, then we may need to raise a wholly different set of questions.

As lay ministry increases in importance and is matched by a decline in the number of traditional clergy, questions will be asked about the sacrament of orders. Indeed, this has already begun with the increased focus in pastoral and sacramental theology on the relationship between baptism and mission. Baptism is not merely a sacrament of initiation; it is entry into a missioned community. Most of the baptized have as their mission to be other Christs in the world. Many, however, are called to work within the community of faith. What exactly is the difference between ordained ministry and that of others? The answer is not to point to celibacy or the exclusively male priesthood. Traditionally, the response is to assert that ordination etches an indelible mark or "character" on the soul, making the ordained minister somehow ontologically different from those not ordained. But increasingly this language of "substantial ontological change" is being challenged by the parallel notion of "relational ontological change." That is, what happens in ordination is that the relationship of the ordinand to the community undergoes radical change. This shift in thinking has many consequences, not the least that the change envisaged here is precisely similar in kind, if not always in degree, to the change effected in one who becomes a parish administrator or a youth minister or a catechist. And so we might want to venture two claims at this point. First, we can see that a theology of orders has overshadowed the theology of baptism for much of the history of the church, especially since the language of substantial ontological change came into prominence in the Middle Ages. This imbalance needs to be corrected by an insistence that it is in baptism that we become a new creation, not in ordination. Second, we can also see that the most helpful way of distinguishing callings in the church is not the traditional one of "clergy" and "laity,"

since it cannot absorb the category of lay ecclesial ministry. Rather, the best distinction is between ministry in the church and ministry to the world. Taken together, these two observations elevate the role of what we have traditionally known as the laity, just as they put "ordained" ministry in its place as one vocation among others. We will discuss this set of issues at more length in chapter 4.

It is sad that church leaders have not yet reached this point in their reflections, and are inclined to be much more on the defensive, shoring up old ways as if they were the only ones possible. In a brave address given to the priests of the Milwaukee archdiocese, Fr. Bryan Massingale, a priest of the diocese who teaches ethics at Marquette University, proposes a model of priestly ministry for today as hospice care. The present form of the institutional church is dying, he says, and it has to be helped to face up to its own mortality, while at the same time trying to maintain a quality of life, all while we await the wonderful transforming work of the Spirit, who will bring new life out of the old. If Massingale is right, then our church leaders are simply in denial. There is no other explanation for the crisis in ministry being answered solely by prayers for traditional vocations and sets of rules to insist on the rigid separation between the roles of the ordained and the laity. Hope for the future needs to be accompanied by a little courage and imagination. As Massingale would surely agree, awaiting the transforming work of the Spirit should be accompanied by a little preparing the way of the Lord.

Bibliographical Note

The discussions of the early history of the laity and the fortunes of the laity at Vatican II can be reviewed in more detail in the early chapters of my book *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* (New York: Continuum, 2003). A much fuller treatment of the role of laity in ministry can be found in Edward P. Hahnberg's fine book *Ministries: A Relational Approach* (New York: Crossroad, 2003). The U.S. Catholic bishops have recently published a new document on lay ministry, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard*

of the Lord (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006). The text of this document is available online at <http://www.usccb.org/laity/laymin/>. You can read Bryan Massingale's stirring words, "See, I Am Doing Something New!" at <http://www.jknip.com/massin.htm>.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you come up with a definition of "lay" that does not use negatives and that does not apply equally to the ordained? If not, what does this say about the content of the term "lay"?
2. What would it mean for a parish or diocese if we abandoned the terms "priests" and "laypeople" and talked of "different ministries"? Specifically, what would it mean for the community of faith for all persons to think of themselves as possessing some kind of mission or ministry?
3. In your local parish faith community, how are lay ministers perceived, relative to the ordained and relative to the regular laity? Are they thought of as lay leaders, or as emergency workers in a shortage of priests, "the apostolate of the second string," or what?
4. How might we restore a sense in the church of baptism as entry into a priestly mission?

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Paul Power

Session 5

What Relevance does Vatican II have to us today?

Paul Power, Chief Executive Officer of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), readily says Vatican II has defined his life's work. He says everyone should know the grace and wisdom contained in Vatican II's key document 'Gaudium Et Spes' (the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World).

"Important concepts in Gaudium Et Spes are that the Church and the world learn from each other," says Paul. "We are called to scrutinise the signs of the times. Each must work for the common good, taking into account the needs and legitimate aspirations of others. We have an inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbour of every person, including the isolated aged person, the foreign worker despised by others, the refugee, the starving person."

Born in 1963, Paul remembers growing up Catholic and encouraged to think and act on social justice issues. As a young man, aged 21, heading into a career in journalism, he found himself caught up in the overarching anxieties of the times, "of the US and USSR poised on the cusp of nuclear annihilation that any small conflict or mistake could ignite."

In a Christian social justice group Paul was asked to research the Catholic Church's response to nuclear disarmament. "To my amazement I found the Church had been advocating nuclear disarmament for nearly forty years. The Catholic Church had among the Christian churches been the strongest and clearest against the nuclear arms race, and had been so for decades, and I was unaware of it!"

Paul says the revelation "made a big impact on me and everything that came afterwards". After a 12-year career as a journalist and editor, he worked for Caritas as a media officer, trainer, researcher and manager. Prior to joining the RCOA, he was involved with projects in international aid, community development, mental health support, volunteer training, social research and advocacy.

"I say don't ever doubt the transformative legacy of Vatican II in the world today," says Paul. "The Catholic community is a quiet but significant force working for good of humanity." Catholic organisations and individual Catholics – "both practising and not" – are over-represented in the networks of RCOA, says Paul. "Twenty five of 150 organisations are Catholic in origin and purpose."

Questions for discussion

- When has faith formation or reflection inspired you to practical action?
- In Gaudium et Spes, the Second Vatican Council says that "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinising the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel". What are the signs of our times and how should we interpret them in the light of the Gospel?

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Dr Jill Gowdie

Session 6

A Window in Time: A view to the Future.

I intend to explore the 'graced moment' of the Council through four meta-perspectives that permeated the council and which I think inform our contemporary church and its future direction:

- A renewed kind of language;
- A renewed kind of leadership;
- A renewed kind of dialogue;
- A renewed trust in the presence of God.

I will use these perspectives to talk about how they come together particularly in authentic contemporary Catholic spiritual formation.

In doing this, I will use stories from the Council, which resonate in my own journey and in the journey of the Church in these last 50 years.

I use the word renewed rather than new because these things are all in the earlier tradition.

Questions for discussion

- What has been the greatest gift for lay people in the aftermath of Vatican II? What do you think the church of the future will look like? What do you hope it will look like?