

Chapter 10 – The Laity

In their comments on the schemas of the Council (1963), the Fathers of our Holy Synod stated: "This schema appears to us to be one of the best. If the clergy were treated in such a manly way, we would have made the Church progress considerably. In the schema "De Clericis," there is an impression of dealing with minors. Here we are speaking to adults. If this schema produces its full effects, we shall in 50 years have a laity that will be far superior to the clergy, which it must nevertheless obey. Care must be taken not to produce this strange inequality."

The quality of the present schema no doubt stems from the fact that since the question of the laity is new, in thinking it through, men aware of modern needs have been consulted, whereas "De Clericis" and "De Religiosis" were prepared by functionaries who repeated familiar ideas.

The Apostolate of the Laity

Intervention of the Right Reverend Father Hilarion Capucci, Superior General of the Aleppine Basilians, on October 9, 1964.

The Church of the East has always, in the exercise of its mission in the world, known a close relationship between its clergy and its laity. It has never experienced the dissociation between the hierarchy, aristocratically conceived as in sole charge of the Kingdom of God, endowed with the charism of command, and the laity, considered solely as the flock to be governed and from whom only obedience is required. The Church, the Body of Christ, is missionary in its entirety, it is totally directed toward the return of the Lord; it is in its totality on the move and in action, fashioned by the Holy Spirit through the countless gifts of His uniform grace poured out in profusion into the members of Christ, for the service of the whole of the Father's family. *"In the last days it shall be, the Lord declares, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh.... and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, on my menservants and my maidservants I will pour out my spirit and they shall prophesy"* (Acts 2: 17-19).

Perhaps it has even happened that the East has fallen into a certain excess of democracy. It has unduly circumscribed the role of the clergy within hieratic functions, leaving to the laity, organized in councils, but always under the presidency of the pastors, not only all temporal administration but also even theological education, charity, and relations with the state. The role of these lay councils has been preponderant in episcopal elections and in the Holy Synods.

We can cite the advantages and disadvantages of every human institution. Nevertheless, is it not time for the Church to abandon its clericalism and open wide its doors to a laity treated as adults, and to integrate them into ecclesial and pastoral life, with the full responsibilities of mature men and women? The forms of this integration can change according to circumstances of time, place, and persons. Yet the orientation remains the same: a Church of cosmic dimensions closing its ranks; a laity aware of its duties, assuming its full responsibility, gathered around a hierarchy with an open mind and a heart oriented toward the Kingdom of the Lord.

Let us therefore get rid of our clerical complexes of absolute superiority and exclusive effectiveness, and let us put our trust in the zeal, the competence, the feeling for the Church of those we have chosen and trained from the ranks of the laity.

Possible failures, groping starts, cannot discredit a trend that is increasingly asserting itself in the Church by reason of its nature, which is inspired by the action of the Spirit and not simply because of the scarcity of priestly and religious vocations, as is sometimes said.

Let us never forget that in the church bishops and priests are the servants of the Spirit. They are given to the Church *“to equip of the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ”* (Eph. 4:12), to work in order to give the Church its missionary cohesiveness. They have the responsibility of seeing to it that the Church is in truth a priestly people, faithfully fulfilling its mission of the apostolate: *“that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light”* (1 Pt 2:9). They must listen to the Spirit who acts in the entire Church, in order to understand how to discern with a completely spiritual comprehension the initiatives inspired by the Spirit for the salvation of the world. They must transmit the divine knowledge that will enable the baptized to become a spiritual sacrifice in the Eucharist. That is to say they must help human freedoms to mature in the awareness of their responsibilities and to develop in a truly Christian freedom, completely transfigured by the Holy Spirit.

Far from lamenting, let us rejoice. The Holy Spirit is making the Church aware of what it is, especially in all the faithful people. The only sign of salvation placed in the world is in the communion of bishops, priests, and laity living the mystery of Jesus Christ at the level of human problems, human values, human efforts.

Concrete Examples of the Lay Apostolate

Intervention of Archbishop Elias Zoghby, Patriarchal Vicar for Egypt and the Sudan, on October 9, 1964.

I shall give you a concrete example of the cooperation of the laity with the clergy in the East among the Orthodox and in certain Catholic communities. I shall speak of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church of Egypt, where I have exercised my apostolate during twenty-five years as pastor and as bishop.

In each city in Egypt where we have a parish there is a lay commission that is called the Patriarchal Commission. In Cairo and in Alexandria it consists of 24 members, two-thirds of whom are named by the people and the other third designated by the ordinary of the place, who is the patriarch.

This commission is presided over by the patriarch, and in his absence by the patriarchal vicar, who is a bishop, and at the parish level by the pastor.

This Patriarchal Commission plays a broad role in the Church. It is divided into several committees: the education committee takes care of everything that relates to our schools, in collaboration with the priests who direct these schools; the juridical committee, composed of lawyers, settles the legal matters of the patriarchate and directs all activities of the Church from the point of view of their relationship to the law. It was from among these lawyers that the community tribunal was chosen to judge the civil effects of marriages contracted before our Church, such as alimony, the custody of children, adoption, etc. This jurisdiction has been taken away from us by the suppression of religious tribunals in 1955.

There is also the committee of the *wakfs*, that is to say, of the ecclesiastical resources, which concerns itself with the management of the Church's properties, always under the presidency of the ordinary or of his representative, without whose consent nothing important can be decided. Likewise, there is the committee of cemeteries, which supervises their maintenance; the committee of churches, which collaborates in their material administration, their maintenance, and arranges to have poor churches benefit from the income of those that are less poor. This committee of churches is aided by a certain number of churchwardens, who, under the direction of the pastors, look after the churches directly, take charge of collections, prepare the churches for special ceremonies, and organize parish festivals and gatherings.

Other lay organizations are in charge of the apostolate of charity. Chief among these is the Social Welfare Society, to which some of the faithful bequeath some real estate. A large number of the faithful, both men and women, is mobilized every year to collect the donations necessary for this good work. This Social Welfare Society, composed of laypersons, has its offices in the very buildings of the patriarchate. It provides, insofar as its means permit, maintenance of poor families and hospitalization for the sick; it furnishes the necessary funds for free education. Ladies are associated with this charitable activity. They take care of clothing supply for the poor, and of noon meals for

undernourished children, which they themselves take turns in serving. Other ladies take care of the decoration of churches and of altar linens.

All these works are centered in the patriarchate itself. That is where their meetings are held, in the shadow of the Church, in close collaboration with the clergy. The laity devote themselves to these works with an admirable apostolic spirit. They are very respectful of the ecclesiastical authorities; they offer their services without charge, without seeking to impose their will. Conversely, the clergy derives great benefit from the experience of those faithful who are lawyers, engineers, businessmen, whose cooperation is indispensable. Any of our bishops and pastors who refused the collaboration of the laity would be discredited and would lose their influence over the faithful.

In addition to this collaboration of the laity in the material, social, charitable, and pious works within their own Church, one may add an inter-ritual collaboration at the level of Catholicism as a whole: Catholic Action in the strict sense, the Legion of Mary, the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, the Vacation Colony Project, etc., about which I shall not speak, because you know them already.

So you see, Venerable Fathers, that the collaboration of the laity with the clergy is close, continuous, and extends to every sphere of activity. Suffice it to note that one third of the premises of our patriarchate in Cairo and in Alexandria are devoted to purely ecclesiastical activities, and two thirds are devoted to lay activities in the service of the Church. The collaboration of the laity extends even to the service of the altar. A layman chants the Epistle during the Divine Liturgy; members of the laity read the prayers and psalms and prophecies at the liturgical hours. In the Coptic Orthodox Church the churches often have, together with their pastor, a lay preacher who has specialized in preaching. I shall not persist any further.

This is another chapter in which the East provides an example. I am certain that the West, as it opens itself to the apostolate of the laity, will in turn help us to preserve and deepen this heritage that our Fathers have bequeathed to us.

The Place of Non-Christians and of Women in the People of God

In an intervention that made a sensation, on October 24, 1963, Archbishop George Hakim called the attention of the council to human realities: the great majority of men and women are not Christians. What is their place in the “people of God”? At least half of the “people of God” consists of women. What is their role in the Church?

After studying with the greatest possible care Chapter III of “The People of God,” and after hearing certain comments in this hall, I should humbly like to make the following two points:

1. As Archbishop of Galilee, having under my jurisdiction the Holy Land itself, where there are not many Catholics—and this is also true of most of the regions of the Near East which were once the territory of flourishing Apostolic Churches—I am troubled as I read the text of this schema and when I hear the interventions of certain Fathers in this hall. I am troubled, I say, because of this prevailing spirit of triumphalism already denounced at the first session, and which, after the actions and declarations of John XXIII and Paul VI, we hoped had been destroyed!

In fact, how is it possible to speak of the people of God in the terms used in our schema when Christians—Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants taken together—constitute only one third of the human race, and two out of three men and women do not know Christ? Do these two billion human beings, who apparently are of good faith, having not heard the Gospel, that is to say the good news of salvation, have nothing to do with the people of God?

Calling to mind the momentous words of His Eminence Cardinal Wyszyński, Archbishop of Warsaw, and the path so clearly opened by His Excellency Archbishop Dubois of Besançon, I would hope that the Schema on the Laity would be based on truth and in conformity with the situation of the modern world. This council is in fact the council of the 21st century, and in the modern world the Church must be the epiphany of the charity of Christ. Saint Paul has told us that “His goodness has appeared,” and it must not look at itself as if it were alone in the world ... Is it not sent to evangelize this world?

This schema was written by bishops and experts from Christian regions; it was conceived as the sanctioning of that state of ecclesiastical power that, although still alive in certain regions of the West, no longer exists in most of the regions of the world. In fact, if we are not hypocrites, we must admit that the Catholic Church in this world is the “little flock.” Its strength continues to rest on the Word of God and not on its self glorification. Besides, certain observations that we have heard do not seem, in my humble opinion, to take into account those who are not Catholics or witness to them the love that we owe them. Here is just one example: several participants in this hall have scorned and belittled married deacons, disregarding how much and what good they do in Christian Churches that fortunately have preserved this institution. As we glory in the ecclesiastical celibacy of the Latin Church, are we not forgetting, are we not scorning these married clerics of the Eastern Churches and so many married pastors and priests of other Christian denominations? ... Actually, it is not a question now of having a deacon who is already

ordained marry afterwards, but of elevating a thoroughly tested layman, who is already married, to the diaconate or to the priesthood.

2. In presenting my second comment, I shall speak briefly, since His Eminence Cardinal Suenens has already dealt with it perfectly.

I should humbly like to denounce a serious oversight: there is no reference in our schema to women. Do we not often make declarations as if women did not exist in the world? And yet what an admirable role they play in the apostolate! What great help we enjoy today from the lay auxiliaries who so often constitute the nucleus of the works of God!

In as much as in certain places women are not sufficiently honored, I propose that the Council, in recognizing the advancement of modern women, due in large part to devotion to the Mother of God, declare the eminent place that belongs to them in the people of God, in the apostolate of the laity, and in all works of the Church.