

# The Three Titles of the Laity

Leo Pelkington, O.P.

The emergence of the laity in assuming a dynamic participation in the life of the modern Church is a good instance of the evolutionary character of the Church. The Church is a living, mobile organism which relates itself in the temporal and spiritual spheres to all mankind; especially to its own members: the faithful. Not that the Church all of a sudden realized the dignity and importance of the laity's role in the Church—indeed, the relevancy of the laity's role is incorporated into the very fiber of its existence—but where the Church in previous times has asked individual members of the faithful to take on an active role in her affairs, she now asks *all* the faithful to assume the duty of active and mature participation in the salvific mission of the Church. She does this by emphasizing the three titles or roles of the laity: the *Priestly, Prophetic* and *Royal* titles. These roles of the laity are spelled out by the Church in the monumental decree of the present Ecumenical Council, *The Constitution On The Church*. The scope of this article will be a brief analysis of the three titles of the laity.

## Who Are the Laity?

The term *laity* is applied to all the faithful of the Church except those in holy orders and those who embrace the state of religious life. Through the sacrament of Baptism a person is incorporated into one body with Christ and the baptized constitute the People of God. What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature; that is, through their special vocation of living in the world, the laity seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to Christian principles. The *Constitution On The Church* describes the nature of the laity as a testimony of life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity which works for the sanctification of the world from within.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. *The Constitution On The Church (De Ecclesia)*, National Catholic Welfare Conference, Washington, D. C., Chapter IV.

The laity should not be defined in the negative, i.e., as those who are not priests or religious. A layman has a positive vocation to the role he has in the Church. Cardinal Suhard aptly delineated the meaning and function of the laity when he declared:

The fact is that only the laity are truly present in the temporal order, since they live in it, and are in continuous and immediate touch with factories, homes, and districts. But their irreplaceable role comes neither solely nor mainly from this reason—it comes from their vocation. Placed by God at the head of a family, or a firm, or in some profession, it is the duty of their state to direct these institutions to their proper end.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Priestly Title**

We read in the Apocalypse that “Christ the Lord, the high priest taken from among men made the new People a kingdom and priests to God the Father” (Apoc. 1:6). The laity, raised by Christ as the new People of his kingdom, have a priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of man. Offering worship and praise is not the only office of a priest. The role of the priest is to offer sacrifice to the Father and act as a mediator between men and the Father. These duties are likewise incumbent upon the laity through their priestly title. The laity have the obligation of offering “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Petr. 2:5); these sacrifices are enacted through prayer, self mortification and good works. The laity, like the ordained priest, act as a mediator or bond between the people with whom they come into contact and the Father by praying for them and setting forth good example. In this manner, they consecrate the world itself to God. (34)<sup>3</sup>

The layman and the priest share a common calling. St. Paul tells us that “there is neither slave nor freeman, there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). The People of God, both the laity and the hierarchy, share a common dignity which flows from their generation in Christ through the sacrament of Baptism. They both partake of the same filial grace and the same

---

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Cardinal Suhard, *Priests Among Men* (New York, Integrity Magazine, n.d.), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Parenthetical numbers refer to corresponding sections of the *Constitution on the Church*.

vocation to perfection. All the People of God possess in common one salvation, one hope, and one undivided charity. (32)

Is there no real difference, then, between a layman and a priest? A discussion of the difference will bring out more sharply the role and dignity of both the laity and the priest. Although the People of God share a unity through the one body of Christ, there is a necessary diversity within the body. "For just as in one body we have many members, yet all the members have not the same functions. So we, the many are one body in Christ, but severally members one of another" (Rom. 12:4-5). The role of the laity, through their particular apostolate, is a participation in the salvific mission of the Church. Every layman, in virtue of the gifts bestowed upon him in Baptism and Confirmation becomes a witness of the faith and a living instrument of the Church's mission.

This participation of the People of God in the salvific mission of the Church should be further explained. The salvific mission of the Church has two aspects, the *homologia* and the *kerygma*. The *homologia*, to which all the People of God are called through the reception of the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, is the confession or witnessing of the faith. It is not a mere adhesion to a formula such as the creed, but a part of a complete Christian way of life. It has a pronounced liturgical connection. It is not only the outward assertion of our faith's conviction, but the internal acts of spiritual worship and sacrifice. Coupled with the *homologia* is the *kerygma* or the testimony of faith through preaching. This office of the *kerygma* is to transmit the Christian message with authority and fidelity.

To confess one's faith is a universal obligation, as universal as faith. Preaching on the other hand is incumbent only on those who have been the object of a choice and in consequence of this choice have received a mission. To confess the faith is the condition of salvation. It is impossible for a man to be saved unless he is bound to Christ by faith and thus manifests his faith by confessing it. Preaching, on the other hand, is not a condition of salvation, except for those who have expressly been sent. Whereas all Christians are bound to believe and to confess the faith, all Christians are not bound to preach in order to be saved.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Jerome Hamer, O.P., *The Church is a Communion* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1964), p. 130.

The laity give testimony to the faith by actively practicing their religion. The priest gives testimony to the faith by actively preaching the message of Christ to the faithful in the pulpit and to the non-Christian in the mission field. This distinction between the *homologia* and the *kerygma*, between the layman and the priest, is not to be explained merely as the result of historical and sociological development. It originated in the will of Christ himself and is not subject to change.<sup>5</sup> The conferral of the *kerygma* coupled with orders sets a man apart from the world, including the laity. The distinction between a doctor, lawyer and baker is only an accidental one. They differ from one another according to their profession. An ordained priest is not just following one of the professions. The distinction between the layman and the priest is an essential one. They differ from one another in essence and not only in degree. (10)

### **The Prophetical Title**

“And I fell down before his feet to worship him. And he said to me, ‘Thou must not do that. I am a fellow-servant of thine and of thy brethren who give the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! for the testimony of Jesus is *prophecy*’” (Apoc. 19:10). Jesus Christ, the divine Prophet, proclaimed the Kingdom of his Father through the testimony of his life and the power of his words. The prophetic mission of Christ did not cease. It is continuously being fulfilled in the world through the hierarchy and through the laity. Both have a prophetic mission to evangelize the world. The hierarchy accomplish this mission of evangelization by teaching in Christ’s name and with his authority. The laity evangelize the world by permitting the truth of the Gospel to show forth in their daily social and family life. For the laity, the mission of evangelization takes on a specific quality and special force in that it is carried out in the ordinary surroundings of the world. (35)

It is of interest to note the emphasis given to the prominent position of the Christian family when the *Constitution on the Church* discusses the prophetic role of the laity. The prophetic role of the laity urges the evangelization of the world. How is this man-

---

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Yves Congar, O.P., *Laity, Church and World* (Baltimore, Maryland: Helicon Press, 1960), p. 38.

date to be effected? The Church gives her perennial and simple answer: through the family. She refers to the Christian family as an excellent school of the lay apostolate, for in the family which is permeated with Christ, not only will each member of the family be a witness of the faith and love of Christ to one another, but the family as a whole will *loudly* proclaim both the present virtues of the Kingdom of God and the hope of a blessed life to come. (35) An all too common part of today's scene is rioting, juvenile delinquency, disrespect for constituted authority. This is magnified on a larger scale when nation rises up against nation. The Church gives her perennial and simple answer: the Christian family.

A presupposition to the laity's participation in the evangelical mission of the Church is a knowledge of the faith. Merely to know the catechism is not sufficient. If the layman is to evangelize the world, he must not only show the world that God exists, but be able to show a skeptical world the credibility of this position. The laity should devotedly strive to acquire a more profound knowledge of their faith. Many newspapers and magazines have become devoted to this objective, especially since the beginning of the Ecumenical Council. The great success of theological courses offered to the laity in several of our larger cities demonstrates their generosity and willingness to learn.

### **The Royal Title**

In their Baptism, the People of God are reborn into Christ, the divine Priest, Prophet, and King. The laity participate in the royalty of Christ the King, for he has communicated his Kingship to his disciples that they may be constituted in royal freedom and that by true penance and a holf life they may conquer the reign of sin in themselves, and in the world. Further, he has shared this power so that, serving Christ in their fellowmen, the laity may, by humility and patience, lead their brethren to that King for whom to serve is to reign. (36) The laity, through their royal title, help to spread the Kingdom of God, which is a Kingdom of truth and life, a Kingdom of holiness and grace, a Kingdom of justice, love, and peace. In this Kingdom, creation itself will be delivered from its

slavery to corruption into that royal freedom of the Kingdom of God. (36)

To transform creation from the reign of sin to the reign of Christ demands a comprehensive knowledge of the meaning and value of creation. The laity, by their competence in secular training, and motivated by charity, should contribute their knowledge and skills for the betterment of all creation—including the betterment of the Church.

The laity can help extend the Kingdom of God in the world by putting Christ back into business, politics, the communications media, culture, and even the recreational and athletic media. They should actively see to it that all these activities are guided by Christian justice. By so doing, they will imbue culture and human activity with genuine moral values; they will better prepare the field of the world for the seed of the Word of God; and at the same time they will open wider the doors of the Church by which the message of peace may enter the world. (36)

The *Constitution on the Church* exhorts the laity not only to place their knowledge and skill at the service of their fellowmen but also at the service of the Church. The laity is asked to participate in a more direct form of cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy. (33) Fr. Schillebeeckx gives us some concrete examples of cooperation of the laity with the hierarchy on the spiritual and the temporal planes:

. . . assistance in public worship, acting as sacristan or altar server, the administration of Church property, keeping Church accounts . . . acting as secretary to a bishop or priest, as a member of the choir, as a reader at church services . . . lay representation among the officials of the diocesan court, lay agencies which would be commissioned by the ecclesiastical authorities to undertake religious sociographical studies.<sup>6</sup>

There is also the possibility of professional theologians among the laity, even to the point of teaching in the seminaries. This is not contrary to canon law and it is a common practice in Eastern Rite seminaries. Many of the above-mentioned forms of active partici-

<sup>6</sup> E. H. Schillebeeckx, O.P., *The Layman In The Church* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1963), pp. 54-55.

pation in the life of the Church are a reality in this country, but they are small and isolated incidents.

The Church wants the opinions of the laity expressed and she is willing to listen to them. She only lays down two common-sense rules for this. The opinions must be based on the layman's knowledge and competency and concern the good of the Church.

The reader can perceive a singular theme in the three titles of the laity. Each title emphasizes an aspect that he shares through his regeneration in Christ. What the Church is asking all the faithful to do is give their response to these three titles by assuming a dynamic participation in the salvific mission of Christ in their own lives, in the world, and in the Church.

Each individual layman must stand before the world as a witness to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus and a symbol of the living God. All the laity as a community and each one according to his ability must nourish the world with spiritual fruits. They must diffuse in the world that spirit which animates the poor, the meek, the peace makers—whom the Lord in the Gospel proclaimed as blessed. In a word, "Christians must be to the world what the soul is to the body." (38)

Although this article is based primarily on *The Constitution on the Church*, the reader's attention is referred to the first document to be issued by the Council exclusively on the role of the layman, *The Apostolate of the Laity*. Bishop Franz Hengsbach of Essen, Germany, stressed that this document cannot be separated from other conciliar documents dealing with the role of the laity, especially *The Constitution on the Church* and the schema on the Church in the modern world.

This most recent decree on the laity, which received the conciliar Father's overwhelming support, further explains the role of the layman in spreading the Gospel in today's world. Among the more notable points of this decree is a broader participation by women in the life of the Church; the recognition of youth's desire for responsibility; the insistence that the expression of personality in social and cultural life can make an effective contribution to the lay apostolate; and the need for adults to leave nothing undone to establish a dialogue with the younger generation. A post-conciliar commission has been established to help implement the layman's participation in the affairs of the Church.