

ROLE OF THE LAITY - CHURCH TEACHING

Following the Synod, we produced the DIOCESAN PLAN FOR MISSION. Part of this refers to the role of women in the Church – “it is a matter of justice, a matter of valuing people and empowering them to use their God-given gifts and talents”. Today, I want to relate that to all the laity, not just to women.

In all these documents, references to Man or Men (Mankind) are read as referring to Human beings in general.

The BASIC PRINCIPLES of the role of the laity were established by LUMEN GENTIUM, the Decree on the Church, of Vatican II, as -long ago as 1965. The most important chapter on this subject, is chapter 4 of that Document, THE LAITY.

KEY POINTS:

CO-OPERATION:

§30 The Sacred Pastors ...are aware that they were not instituted by Christ to take on themselves in isolation the whole of the Church's mission of salvation to the world ...On the contrary, it is their glorious task... to secure the unanimous co-operation of everyone in his own way in the common task.

MISSION:

§31 - Lay folk - the members of Christ's faithful who are engaged ... in their allotted role in the mission of the whole Christian people, because they have been incorporated in Christ by baptism, established in the People of God, and have their own way of sharing the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ.

RESPONSIBILITY:

§37 - the Sacred Pastors must acknowledge and advance the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the Church. They must be willing to make use of their prudent advice, confidently to entrust them with functions in the service of the Church, to leave them freedom and scope for action.

ONLY GOOD, THINGS CAN HAPPEN AS THE RESULT OF REAL COLLABORATION BETWEEN PRIESTS, AND LAYMEN (Grail version, in which the English is more straightforward.).

THE WHOLE EMPHASIS of the chapter on the Laity in *Lumen Gentium* is on working together, with the hierarchy – the clergy- CO-RESPONSIBILITY. NOT any idea of ‘taking over’, but COLLABORATION in the mission of the Church.

Other relevant documents from Vatican II – *Gaudium et Spes* – Vatican II document on the Church in the Modern world, and especially chapter 2, The Community of Man.

(Key theme - the laity should take an active part in church affairs.)

There is also a Grail version for the Vatican II decree on the lay apostolate – *De Apostolatu Laicorum*; concerning the Lay Apostolate. I shall not refer to this as it has been brought up to *Christifideles Laici*.)

In 1985 the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops emphasised the vision of the Church as COMMUNIO, KOINONIA, - our sharing in the life of God. From this communion comes our MISSION – as the baptized, we are each sent, by God to proclaim His love and truth in our world. This mission ...is therefore the work of the whole Church, priests and lay people alike. (This I am quoting from the foreword to CL by cardinal Hume)

The 1985 Synod of Bishops then discussed the vocation and mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the world. This in turn led to *Christifideles Laici*, Christ's faithful people, an Apostolic Exhortation from pope John Paul II. Think what an exhortation is: it is an encouragement, an urging of us, to take action.

In addition to the key points made in Lumen Gentium, which are repeated in this document there is also strong emphasis on the need for PARTICIPATION - ACTIVE lay commitment to the life of the Church. Not just sitting around, talking about things, but DOING something about our mission.

Page 11- The whole point of the Synod, its chief hope, is that the lay people will heed Christ's call to work in His vineyard, will become ACTIVE and RESPONSIBLE workers in the mission of the Church. NO-ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO STAY IDLE.

Page 14 – people are not things to be used but responsible beings endowed with conscience and freedom and tending towards spiritual values. One of the needs of today is the growing need for participation ...above all, there is a growing need for women and young people to participate.

Page 16 – role that only the laity can play.

Page 17 – the laity are far more than mere workers in the vineyard; they are part of it, (part of the mystery of the People of God. Think about the Gospel that you have just heard - John 15.)

(Definitions of the lay faithful – in the past, these have been negative; ‘what we are not’; we have been ‘not clergy’, and so on. Must now be positive – quotation from Vatican II – the laity belong fully to the Church and to its mystery. We are united to Christ in baptism; we are baptised into one body by the Spirit; we are one body in Christ. (Romans; the first reading in today's Mass reminded us that we all have different gifts, but they are all from the one Spirit. I Corinthians))

Therefore every baptised person shares the same mission as Jesus (p. 20)

Page 24 - Both Lumen Gentium and *Christifideles Laici* emphasise that VOCATION is something we all have. We used to think of vocations as meaning only the priests and the religious; no, we all have a vocation - a calling from God to whatever He wants us to do. In particular documents insist that we all have a Vocation to holiness - and this is linked with MISSION and with RESPONSIBILITY in the Church.

Page 29 – CL differentiates between the Ordained ministries; meant first of all, for the service of the whole people of God; and the Lay Ministries, - this section is very important; bishops must promote lay ministries which spring from Baptism and Confirmation, and for many people from Matrimony as well.

Page 30 – when necessary and expedient the clergy can entrust to the laity various roles and offices which, they normally carry out themselves ... Carrying out these roles does not turn lay people into clergy.

(The frequent use of MUST is not me; these are the words of the Holy Father; the documents repeatedly say we MUST do these things).

Page 32 - Lay Participation in the Church's life - a very important whole section, through to page 34. Participation in the Diocese, and in the parish. Section on commitment in the Parish, p. 35 on, the opening sentence §27 - Vatican II said that lay activity within the Church is so vital that where it is lacking the ministry of the clergy cannot be fully effective.

Also – ‘ the solving of problems through general discussion should be made easier when people have a deeper appreciation of the parish pastoral councils ON WHICH THE SYNOD INSISTS.

CRITERIA FOR LAY GROUPS ~ for all of us who want to be involved in this way - we must have the call to holiness, must be responsible for professing the whole Catholic faith, must be in communion with the Pope and the local Bishop, must be ready to accept their teaching and Pastoral initiatives, must be committed to the Church's apostolate, must be committed to being an active presence in human society.

Page 42 - chapter 3, on co-responsibility: ‘the pastors of the church know only too well that Church’s mission is to be carried out by all the faithful...’. Headings for the rest of this chapter, on different areas in which the laity must be involved.

Chapter 4 - on the roles of men and women. MANY DIFFERENT VOCATIONS – (contributions can be made by anyone - children, old people, women and men, the sick and suffering. We all have a part to play).

Key point, page 66, §49; because women now share more fully in the life of society, it is important that they share more fully in the Church's apostolate. There is also a recent document, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the church and in the world. Written by Cardinal Ratzinger, approved by Pope John Paul II. This came out in May 2004.

Chapter 5 of *Christifideles Laici* is very important – on the formation of the laity. On the need for lay formation! We need spiritual formation; doctrinal formation; a better understanding of the Church’s social teaching.

Similar points are made in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; e.g. §1913 – It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person.

These are the key words: CO-OPERATION, MISSION, RESPONSIBILITY AND PARTICIPATION. We must take an active part in our Church; we cannot leave our priests, who are already over-worked, to shoulder the whole burden. I hope Bishop Mark will not mind me quoting his words in the sermon he preached this morning; ‘Christ’s work demands total commitment ... It cannot be left to any one set of people, be they priests or deacons’.

One final point – and this is from me, not the documents. Christifideles Laici is a 15 to 16 year old document. In any other branch of human life that I can think of – in education, politics, trade, law, health, industry, whatever – if a 15 – year old document had not yet been implemented, there would be a massive outcry. LET’S GET DOWN TO IT!

Jackie Wykes
20th November 2004