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Catholic Identity and the Laity

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Maturity and the Lay Vocation

From Ecclesiology to Ecclesiality

Paul Lakeland

Reflecting on a lifetime of involvement in Catholic theology, Yves Congar once opined that "Today it is the case ... that the clergy need to be defined in relation to the laity."¹ Congar's mature work on the role of the laity in the church, expressed in three key articles written in the 1960s, seemed in some ways to close the circle, to return the church to the healthier understanding of what it is to be a Christian that had prevailed in the first centuries.² Before the specialization of "priestly" roles and the advent of monasticism had reduced the laity to what Congar called "negative creatures," everyone was part of the *laos*. But later people came to be defined by what they were *not*, in other words, not religious professionals and not professionally holy. Now, thought Congar, after the great work of the Council, upon which he had been so influential, and indeed in the light of his later thinking that could not have been part of the conciliar vision, it was evident that the layperson was the standard Christian. Perhaps today he would have used the phrase "default Christian." Since Congar, many others have taken up the conciliar rediscovery of baptism and recognized that it is through baptism that we become a new creation, that baptism is our entry into the priestly and apostolic character of the whole faithful people, that baptism is entry into Christian mission.³ As Cardinal Suenens never tired of saying, "The proudest moment in the life of a pope is not his coronation as supreme pastor, his consecration as bishop or his ordination as a priest, but his baptism as a Christian."

This essay explores some elements of the "full circle" that we

have traversed, in my view, from the first centuries of the church to the present day. In the beginning, the involvement of the whole faithful people in responsibility for their community was palpable. Today we have reached a point, at least in so-called "first world" Catholicism, where the emergence of an educated lay Catholic community providentially coincides with the appearance of challenges to the survival of our church. To deal with these enormous challenges it will not be enough to harness the energies of clergy and laity, for the very division between these two groups is much of what has occasioned the problems in the first place. It will be necessary, perhaps, to abandon the very terms themselves, to re-translate *laos tou theou* as "the faithful," and to rebuild a church on Congar's model of "different ministries."

I am dividing this essay into five brief sections. The first will present some of the particular challenges in and to American Catholicism today, focusing on my view that "the laity" are infantilized by oppressive ecclesial structures. Second, I will very briefly recall three familiar ideas from Vatican II that are especially germane to this inquiry. Third, I want to make the case that the emergence of an educated laity requires a shift in how we think about what the church is—in my terms, from "ecclesiology" to "ecclesiality." Fourth, I want to see what sociological data has to offer to fill out this picture of the life of faith. Finally, I will offer one example of the way in which this shift might be undertaken.

Essentially I argue that a thick description of the life of faith is the way to "do" what has traditionally been called ecclesiology. This more inductive approach implies that polity or church organization is much more important than Catholics have traditionally thought and, in particular, that it leads to an ecclesiology that emerges from the consciousness of the believing community rather than one that is imposed from above as some abstract and essentialist representation of "the mind of Jesus" or "the plan of God." Moreover, this must be how ecclesiological understanding emerged in the early church; first the community, then reflection upon it. To anticipate: ecclesiality precedes ecclesiology and is, therefore, determinative of it.

The Crisis in American Catholicism Today

While Dietrich Bonhoeffer was sitting in prison awaiting his fate at the hands of the Nazis, not so far away Yves Congar

languished in a German prisoner of war camp. They were both about the same age, both ecumenically minded, both deeply concerned about the role of the church in the modern age. It would be wonderful to have an exchange of letters between them, but we don't. It would be exciting to read the comments of one upon the other, but there are none. If I were a novelist I would imagine some, but I am not. Yet I think it is safe to say that, had they met, their conversation would sooner or later have turned to the idea of "coming of age." Bonhoeffer's notion of "the world come of age" is what anyone who knows anything at all about him knows he wrote, and Congar's work on the role of lay people in the church effectively addressed the question: how shall the church be, now that the laity have come of age? Congar was of the opinion that the very idea of "laity" as a distinct group in the church only emerged when the Enlightenment canonized the separation of the sacred and the secular. For Congar, "the secular" begat "the laity." Admittedly, Congar would not have gone along with Bonhoeffer's contention that Catholics were too closely allied with their church rather than the world, but there is much common ground in their different calls for a new way of being the community of faith, one that mirrors the world come of age.

There is a well-worn story of the famous preacher whose annotated sermon notes were left in the pulpit one day and found to have the marginal comment, "argument seems weak here, so speak louder." The story of the post-Tridentine Catholic Church and especially the church of the nineteenth century sometimes seems like the preacher's desperation stratagem writ large. From Gregory XVI's 1832 encyclical letter *Mirari Vos*, condemning Lammenais in particular and the obscenity of "freedom of conscience" in general (the same pope famously banned railroads from the Papal States on the grounds that they were a dangerous innovation, "*chemin de fer, chemin d'enfer*" or "the iron road, the road to hell"), to Pius IX's 1864 "Syllabus of Errors" condemning freedom of religion, to Vatican I's dogmatic definition of papal infallibility, the less the church was listened to, the louder it shouted. Modernism was banned and Pius X told the laity that their "one duty" was "like a docile flock, to follow their pastors."⁴ But Vatican II still happened and its spirit, while under stress, continues today. The message of Esdras by way of Thomas Jefferson might be a good antidote to the beleaguered

preacher or the beleaguered church: "Truth is great and it will prevail, if left to itself."⁵

While the church through the Modernist crisis and to a degree still today has been expending energy resisting change of all sorts, the developing complexion of the Catholic laity escapes ecclesiastical control. Even allowing for the impact of the extraordinary influx of Catholic immigrants in recent years, the American Catholic community today is one of the most successful religious groups measured both by affluence and education. It is also by far the largest division of American Christianity, some 65 million people, about the same size as the next twelve denominations combined. Yet the entirety of competent professional lay Catholics in today's church continues to have absolutely no formal role or voice in any governance or leadership positions. Where they are invited and even encouraged to participate in situations like parish pastoral councils or parish or diocesan finance councils, the last word—indeed the only executive word—is that of the pastor or bishop.⁶ There is one canonical structure that could encourage a measure of shared responsibility, the diocesan synod in which canon law mandates significant lay representation. However, the 1984 revision of the Code of Canon Law removed the requirement that a synod be convened every seven years, probably because no one was paying any attention to it anyway, and replaced it with the stipulation that it should convene whenever the bishop deems it opportune. That does not seem to be very often. If Catholicism in America ever needed a synod to address a crisis, the early years of the twenty-first century surely qualify. The combined impact of declining numbers of clergy, growing numbers of Catholics, declining levels of church attendance, the fall-out from the sexual abuse scandal and the financial challenges that have led to five dioceses, to date, declaring bankruptcy ought to encourage a prudent bishop to pool our collective Catholic wisdom. To my knowledge, no diocesan synod has yet taken place in this century.

American Catholicism today is thus in a somewhat explosive and distinctly frustrating situation. Many educated lay professionals have countless gifts to lend to the church but no formal avenue through which their voices and expertise can be brought to bear independently of the invitation from the clerical leaders of a hierarchical institution in which they have no voice whatsoever. Thus, to use my own term, they are "infantilized" by oppressive

structures. This situation will end only when the laity themselves take steps to bring it to an end, and while this is not yet occurring in numbers sufficiently large to get the attention of bishops, the response to the scandal of clerical sexual abuse has brought it closer. Anger can often lead to courage. On the other hand, one well-documented alternative avenue of response to oppression is depression. The much-noted passivity of the laity is a fact. The energies of relatively few are driving movements for ecclesial reform and, if they remain the work of a few, they will eventually languish. Lay passivity needs to come to an end, but it is hard to overcome centuries of theology and pastoral practice that have induced layfolk to embrace their own oppression.

Theological Principles: Consent, the "Sense of the Faithful," Secularity

Three important ecclesiological notions deserve fuller treatment than I can give them here, but a summary should suffice. They are (1) the "principle of lay consent" stressed so forcefully in Congar's *Lay People in the Church*; (2) the conciliar rediscovery of the *sensus fidei*; and (3) the assertion that the true defining characteristic of the laity is their secularity.

First, I am persuaded that it is important to recover the ancient principle of lay consent for our adult Catholic Church of today. Lay consent was and is the means by which what is taught as true actually comes to life in the community of faith. Or not, of course. It also was—and should be again—an actual mechanism through which the whole community chose or assented to the nomination of a new bishop or pastor. Second, then, the principle is revived in *Lumen Gentium*'s treatment of the *sensus fidei*, especially as glossed in *Dei Verbum*. Third, the "secularity" of the laity makes sense as a statement about the way in which the mission of the church occurs in the world, not internally to the community of faith, so that it is the laity, not the clergy, who are primarily responsible for that mission. In this sense, the church itself is secular.

We simply cannot overstate the importance of *Dei Verbum*'s assertion that the Holy Spirit guides tradition in several ways, including "through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts" and "from the intimate sense

of spiritual realities which they experience.”⁷ The vehicle of the *sensus fidelium* and the engine of reception/rejection is nothing other than the faithful sociality of the whole believing community. It cannot, of its very nature, be assigned to the voice of authority or the teaching office of the magisterium. In the final analysis, the long-term effective rejection of a teaching by the whole body of the faithful, which is precisely the exercise of the *sensus fidelium*, must be determinative of the magisterium, and not the other way around. Of course we can argue at length about how long-term is long-term, and what constitutes wholesale rejection, but the principle is sound because the magisterium is, in the final analysis, a dimension of tradition, and not tradition itself. A teaching that has not been received can only be explained in one of three ways, as bad teaching that is not the work of the Spirit, as good teaching that is being poorly taught, which is a wake-up call to the magisterium, or as good teaching well-taught that the sinfulness of the human condition resists accepting. The longer the resistance to reception continues and the more widespread it is, the less likely is it that the third option can be invoked.

From Ecclesiology to Ecclesiality

The most significant change in recent years within the intellectual tradition of Catholicism has been its shift from a deductive to an inductive approach to theological reflection. It was probably the Canadian Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan who was the first to be clear about this shift, writing in 1968 that theology has “become largely an empirical science” and that “Scripture and Tradition now provide not premises, but data.”⁸ In the end, in the Catholic Church, real change will always involve a theological component, and the move to an inductive method (and its corollary, historical sensitivity) has enormous implications for the practice of ecclesiology. Seeking an inductive ecclesiology or an “ecclesiology from below” means attending to the actual practices and beliefs of Catholics, to what I have elsewhere called “faithful sociality”⁹ and that here I am designating by the term “ecclesiality.” Ecclesiality, the community’s life of faith, must be determinative of ecclesiology, which is second-order reflection. Ecclesiology is theological knowledge that is at least as much descriptive as it is prescriptive.

■ Ecclesiology, like theology in general, can be conducted deductively or inductively. *Deductive* ecclesiology can be oriented prescriptively and proscriptively. Oriented *prescriptively*, deductive ecclesiology proposes theoretical models or derives models from scripture and the tradition and employs them to make normative claims about what the church is, who is part of the church and who is not, what its mission and destiny are, and how it is related, if at all, to the wider world and to the extended family of other Christian and non-Christian religious communities. This is the accepted mode of ecclesiology even today, and while its preference for models over an earlier orientation to definition is a distinct improvement, it remains a fundamentally deductive enterprise.

■ Oriented *proscriptively*, ecclesiology takes the normative claims of prescriptive ecclesiology and sanctions those who do not accept the canonized models. In centuries gone by, normative ecclesiology would stoke the pyres prepared for heretics whose sin, in the end, was always defiance of authority, hence always ecclesiological apostasy. Prescription usually leads to proscription, and proscription to sanctions. Then you were burned at the stake; now you are relieved of your responsibilities. Inductive ecclesiology, on the other hand, is always descriptive; it is, indeed, a "thick description" of ecclesiality or faithful sociality that not merely describes practices and patterns but that places them in a larger context, for example, within power relations. It makes its task a faithful account of the *sensus fidelium* in a particular time and place. It locates "church" wherever the living Spirit is at work in the community, and it derives ecclesiological principles from the grassroots context of faith in the life of the believing community.

■ To the distinction between deductive and inductive ecclesiology and the nuances of prescriptive, proscriptive, and descriptive forms of attention we can add three further pairs of characteristics. First, ecclesiology that is deductive is of its nature elite, while inductive ecclesiology is more popular. Second, inductive ecclesiology will be pluralistic, since there are many concrete ecclesial contexts out of which it will emerge, while deductive ecclesiology is bound to lean toward the univocal and the putatively universal.¹⁰ Finally, while deductive forms of reflection are more abstract and theoretical, inductive approaches tend toward concreteness. In sum, then, the distinction is between a form of ecclesiology (deductive) that is derived from the texts and history of the tradition's reflection

upon them, and a form of ecclesiology (inductive) that begins from a thick description of actual ecclesial life. If this form of ecclesial reflection eventually uses the terminology of the tradition, it is because those images and concepts seem to fit the ecclesiality under consideration.

This approach to ecclesiology leads to a new understanding of the priority of the community's faith experience over the more abstract determinations of the deductive approach. This is evident from the role of censor that ecclesiality plays relative to received ecclesiologies. To take one obvious example, the longstanding definition of the church as an institution or "perfect society," most commonly associated with the sixteenth-century Jesuit Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, has been sidelined in current ecclesiology.¹¹ Of course the church bears certain institutional elements, but while the model was displaced for a number of reasons, the clinching argument is that it does not correspond to ecclesial reality. The faithful as a whole do not accept that the church needs nothing beyond itself and that those outside the church are beyond salvation, still less that the mechanical application of church attendance and reception of the sacraments says the last word on faithfulness.

In any stand-off between the *sensus fidelium* and theological concepts or teachings, the last word must go to the *sensus fidelium* because the other ecclesial *loci* of the work of the Holy Spirit—episcopal collegiality and papal primacy—require for their legitimacy that they reflect the "faith of the church" and therefore that they are in the last analysis in service to that faith. Of course, collegiality and primacy have an important role in correcting evident and severe aberrations, though this service to the church is more a matter of discerning where the Spirit is truly at work in ecclesial life than in identifying deviations from some theoretical norm. In the four hundred years between the Council of Trent and Vatican II, the institutional church willfully misunderstood a series of efforts within Catholicism for the reform of the church. Jansenism, liberal Catholicism and the work of the Catholic Tübingen School, Americanism, Modernism, the twentieth-century theological renewal movement of *la nouvelle théologie*, the worker-priest movement in France, and the emergence of liberation theology were all resisted and mostly swept aside. The great pioneers¹² of the French "new theology" were subject to severe ecclesiastical sanctions under the papacy

of Pius XII, only to be subsequently rehabilitated. Three of them were later named to the College of Cardinals. When the bishops at Vatican II recognized the theological importance of "reading the signs of the times" (an inductive impulse *par excellence*), the valuable insights of all these movements became clearly etched in the conciliar documents.

If the best example of inductive ecclesiality available to us is the church of Latin American liberation theology, one closer to home to which we need to attend is that of the contemporary Roman Catholic Church in the United States. Borrowing from John Thiel's typology of senses of tradition for my ecclesiological purposes, I want to examine the American church as an example of "incipiently developing" ecclesiality.¹³ Such a designation is, it seems, arguable if the American church offers an occasion for truthful novelty that with the passing of time may gain the recognized authority of tradition. Among significant changes in the American church at the present time that provide a context for truthful novelty are an aging and numerically declining parochial and religious clergy; a rapidly growing work force of lay ecclesial ministers; significantly declining concern for weekly mass attendance among self-professed Catholics, missing generations of "millennials," Generation Xers, and some of their parents; a somewhat lower valuation of episcopal leadership; and a noticeable increase in interest in prayer and spirituality. To this we can add a discernible shift on the part of some more affluent and some more conservative Catholics, though the move is perhaps temporary, away from traditional Democratic political identification toward the Republican Party. But the more significant social and political shift may be that increasingly Catholics are indistinguishable from Americans in general in terms of their positions on political, socioeconomic, and personal ethical questions. On abortion, stem cell research, immigration, capital punishment, same-sex civil unions and marriages, premarital cohabitation, welfare programs, and so on, Catholics mirror American public opinion in general.

Since the Catholic Church in its traditional teaching role has very clear positions on most if not all ethical questions that concern Americans today—some of them, like immigration, remarkably radical, and some, like the question of same-sex unions, very conservative—the fact that Catholics are all over the map on

precisely these issues makes it safe to say that the hold of church teaching authority over the ethical and political consciences of contemporary Catholics is rapidly weakening. On the issue of ecclesial authority alone, contemporary ecclesiality is obviously at odds with received ecclesiology. As a consequence of the arguments above about the role of the *sensus fidelium* and the priority of faith life over pronouncements of the church leadership, we cannot assume that the views of American Catholics are wrong where they conflict with official church teaching. Nor can all their views be correct, if they are as divided as seems to be the case. Resolving this issue requires us to turn our attention to some hard data on the state of American Catholicism.

Public Opinion, Gallup Polls, and the "Sensus Fidelium"

While the importance of the *sensus fidelium* is well attested in *Lumen Gentium*, actually gauging the way in which it forms, shifts, and develops is quite another matter. Since the understanding of the tradition and even of major doctrines is subject to historical development in the view of the Catholic tradition, the practical awareness of authentic faith must also be on the move, however imperceptibly, if only to reiterate by its continuing practice the unchanging truth beneath changing historical conditions. Once again it makes sense to read *Lumen Gentium's* words on the sense of the faithful through the more dynamic, process-oriented references of *Dei Verbum* where it is "through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts" and "from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience" that the sense of the faithful remains a living reality. Attesting to the reality of the sense of the faithful is one thing, but delving more deeply into it will require some reliable means for measuring how teaching is being received and how practice is, or is not, attesting to its truth.

One very common approach in today's world to the problem of obtaining data about human behavior and beliefs is through responsible polling. There seems no reason in principle to imagine that somehow this kind of method would not work when we are asking people about their religious beliefs and practices, and in recent years much work has been done in this area. For our purposes here, we will restrict ourselves to the investigations of

a small group of sociologists of religion: William V. D'Antonio, James D. Davidson, Mary L. Gauthier, and Dean R. Hoge. In four books published over the last fifteen years—namely, *American Catholic Laity in a Changing Church* (1989), *Laity, American and Catholic: Transforming the Church* (1996), *American Catholics: Gender, Generation, and Commitment* (2001) and *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (2007)—they have produced extensive data and analysis that lead to conclusions both reassuring and challenging.¹⁴ Their work uses the best Gallup Poll methods and is likely to be as reliable or as unreliable as polling in any other area of questioning. While the data is certainly not the last word on anything, it provides us with the best available information about the shape of American Catholic ecclesiality as a whole, and over the twenty years a fairly reliable picture of how that ecclesiality might be shifting in one direction or another.

Among the many fascinating findings in the latest book (*American Catholics Today*), some bear directly upon our questions about ecclesiality. The first has to do with Catholic identity. Of all of those questioned, 85% said that being Catholic was “a very important part” of who they were, 78% thought it important that younger generations of their families grew up as Catholics, and 70% said they couldn't imagine “being anything but Catholic.” When the data was analyzed by generation it showed, not surprisingly, that only 7% of millennials rate Catholic identity high, as compared with 25% of Vatican II Catholics, and 47% of the younger generation rated it low, as compared with 31% of those from the Vatican II era.

The second revealing set of data emerges when the authors produce a list of twelve prominent teachings and practices and ask which were most important to the respondents. The four receiving the most positive response were helping the poor (84%), belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead (84%), the sacraments such as the eucharist (76%), and Catholic teaching about Mary as the Mother of God (74%). These replies prompted Jim Davidson, one of the participant sociologists, to quip when making a presentation at Fairfield University, “So, what are the bishops worried about?”

What they are worried about, however, may be clearer when we look at the four items that received the lowest grades for im-

portance. Only 44% rated church teachings opposing abortion, followed by Vatican teaching authority (42%), church teaching opposing the death penalty (35%), and a celibate male clergy (29%). All four of these items represent direct challenges to recent proclamations of the magisterium, and while the authors of the survey may be right in concluding that the laity "may simply be taking seriously Vatican II teachings on freedom of conscience informed by reason and faith,"¹⁵ it seems highly unlikely that the U.S. bishops or Rome would see it in quite the same way. The present pope would also be very disquieted to hear that although a small majority of those questioned (53%) agreed that Catholicism has "a greater share of truth than other religions," a whopping 86% said that "if you believe in God, it doesn't really matter which religion you belong to."¹⁶

One further set of questions looks at the local parish. Here we find those questioned strongly believing that on the whole pastors do a good job (91%), though most expect laity to be "just followers" (53%). Some 40% believe Catholic parishes are too big and impersonal, and 63% think "Catholic church leaders are out of touch with the laity." In an area in which lay Catholics have no canonically recognized role, it is very instructive that they believe overwhelmingly that lay people should have a say in how parish and diocesan income is spent (89% and 84% respectively), in deciding about the increasingly common and difficult issue of parish closings (80%), and in the selection of priests for their parish (71%). On the question of the role of women in leadership in the church, those asked support their place as parish administrators caring for a parish in the absence of a resident priest (93%), as deacons (81%), and even as priests (63%).

Assessing the significance of these and the many other items of information that can be gleaned from these fascinating books is by no means easy. However, one or two tentative conclusions can be offered. First, one can say that Catholics as a whole seem to be firm on basic doctrines of the church, though they are more tolerant than they used to be of those who may in conscience dissent from one or other, and they certainly do not believe that regular mass attendance is any indicator of being a good Catholic. Second, it is clear that more and more Catholics are asserting the primacy of their consciences over church teaching in most if not all fundamental ethical issues. This seems to be true whether

or not church teaching is perceived to be too conservative (birth control, abortion, extra-marital sex) or too liberal (capital punishment). Third, lay Catholics are increasingly discontented with their historic and still mostly *de facto* positions as somewhat passive recipients of the grace and favor of the clergy and the institutional church.

What these conclusions mean for our consideration of ecclesiality is even more complex. Clearly, there is no *consensus fidelium* where there is no real overwhelming agreement on this or that doctrine or practice. However, where prayerful discernment is taking place, there surely is *sensus fidelium* exactly as *Dei Verbum* described it. The probable response of the bishops to this kind of data would be to dismiss the opinions as ill-informed, disobedient, dissenting, or skewed by the inclusion of many people who are "not really practicing Catholics." Much of this, however, begs some questions, the most important being *who* determines the relationship between being Catholic and attending church on a regular basis. You or I may think it is valuable, even important, to worship in the faith community, but the deeper question is this: who is Catholic?

The charges of dissent also seem insecure when the numbers are as large as they apparently are. My local bishop refuses to talk with members of the lay organization Voice of the Faithful (VOTF)¹⁷ in his own diocese on the grounds that they hold unacceptable views on hot-button issues like mandatory celibacy, the ordination of women, and the selection of bishops. The data presented here suggest that even if this is true, their "unacceptable" views are more or less mainstream.

Finally, if the opinions are dismissed as ill-informed, this invites two responses. The first would be that the *sensus fidelium* is the voice of the Spirit acting independently of the magisterium, always in process of formation, and that difference from current magisterial teaching can in some circumstances be an appropriate corrective to outmoded theological approaches. The second is to point out that if indeed numbers of this magnitude merely represent ill-informed people's opinions, then the effectiveness of church teaching, especially in ethical areas, is far from acceptable. If people "dissent" from church teaching, then shouting louder is not the answer. The responsibility clearly lies with the magisterium if faithful Catholics moved by the Holy Spirit and acting in

conscience do not "receive" their teaching. The teaching authority needs to ask itself: are we teaching poorly, or are we teaching the wrong thing? Or is sinfulness really *so* pervasive? If prayerful and sincere people apparently cannot receive the teaching, can it really be possible that church authority is fighting a rearguard action on behalf of the Holy Spirit against the sinfulness of the (mostly lay) majority?

All of the above discussion suggests a very different inductive ecclesiology from the dominant deductive version. "Communion," "mystical body of Christ," "sacrament," "institution," and even "people of God" are certainly suggestive models for understanding ecclesial reality, but they are helpful only if they coincide with and are appropriately supportive of the actual life of the church as it is being lived today. The American Catholic Church of today is increasingly made up of much larger numbers than those who attend church regularly. Both those who do and those who don't continue to affirm basic beliefs like resurrection and the real presence of Christ in the eucharist. However, they are also much less likely to take their cues on ethical issues from church authority, and they are more and more unlikely to listen to the magisterium uncritically. All of this is entirely consistent with the demographic shifts with which we began that have produced a mostly middle-class and increasingly affluent, well-educated, and professional laity who affirm the cultural values of the American public square. The laity are come of age. The bigger question is whether the "parents" are ready to recognize it. True, some laity need incentive to develop critical approaches to the practices of their faith, and some still seem to be waiting for ecclesiastical permission, but the data suggests that these are far fewer than we might imagine. Unfortunately, if the "parents" cannot welcome and affirm these developments, more and more will take wing and never come home again.

Whole-body Ecclesiology

What, then, will a focus upon ecclesiality suggest as an appropriate ecclesiological model? An inductive approach can have no *a priori* preference for one received model over another, but will act to filter out models that are unhelpful. First to go is the model of "institution," closely followed by any models that seem

to suggest a subordinationist understanding of hierarchy. Chapter one of *Lumen Gentium*, for example, includes "sheepfold" and "flock" among the biblical images it lists, but these are not good candidates for today's ecclesiological modeling, even though in the document it is very definitely Christ and not the local parish priest who is the shepherd. Unfortunately, they are inescapably reminiscent of Pius X's deplorable declaration that it is the "one duty of the multitude" to "allow themselves to be led and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors." It is also increasingly unlikely that models that stress the "nuptial metaphor" of groom (Christ) and bride (church) will reflect the realities of a community that understands the marital commitment very differently from a traditional head/body duality, and may increasingly be questioning the traditional understandings of marriage altogether.

An important model like "communion" could be more useful if it were dislodged from the institutional emphasis on "communion with the head" and focused more on "communion between the parts." It would, moreover, need to be loosened up so that degrees of communion with other Christian churches might be admitted into the model. It would be not so much a tapestry as a quilt, as at least some feminists might suggest. Of all the received images, "people of God" is surely the best candidate for further consideration, since its fuzziness around the edges allows for a greater variety of persons and opinion, and since it reaches out to the whole world, in the vision of *Lumen Gentium*, as a reality to which everyone is somehow related. People of God, in other words, goes beyond church. However, its very imprecision has made it more suspect in the institutional church, so that these days it is more commonly respectfully cast aside in favor of a communion model with a distinctively more conservative spin.

A candidate for consideration as a model more adequate to the emerging reality of American Catholic ecclesiality today is afforded in the concept of "whole-body ecclesiology" that became a focus in 1999 of British ecumenical discussions on conciliarity among Anglican, Methodist, and United Reform Church representatives.¹⁸ The United Reformed Church used the term "whole-body ecclesiality" to denote the particular blend of "representation, constitutionality and consent" primarily expressed in the church meeting, a monthly or quarterly meeting of all the members of a local congregation. The use of this term enabled the United

Reformed Church to come to broad agreement with the Anglicans, who preferred the term "synodical" and naturally saw a role for episcopal oversight that didn't have a place in United Reformed considerations. But the two churches, together with the Methodists, were able to conclude that "conciliarity involving representation, constitutionality and consent could be seen in all three churches. All exercised oversight through councils as well as through personal leadership and all saw their life as in faithful continuity with the apostolic church."

In whole body ecclesiality it is the praxis of the community that determines ecclesiology. The model of American ecclesiality struggling to emerge today is one that is appropriate to a church of adults, one in which the laity—to use the memorable phrase of Bishop Geoffrey Robinson—are citizens, not merely civilians. All we have to do is look at the best of our faith communities. A vibrant parish will include a pastoral council and a finance council that operate to the full extent permitted by canon law and perhaps a little beyond. The care and concern of the parish will extend not only to the active members of the parish and to the wider world, but also to the young and the disaffected who are not present, or not so present, and who yet are a part of the community of faith. The survey data provided by D'Antonio and his colleagues support this view that the church is so much larger than the rolls of registered parish members. While there is no question that the vibrant and perhaps overly optimistic enthusiasm of the immediately post-conciliar years has been supplanted by a more sober awareness that the church is perhaps different from an open and democratic American vision of Catholicism, it remains true that the more enterprising and active voices in the faith community continue to find the personal resources to press for greater voice. The over thirty thousand lay ecclesial ministers are a good case in point. These mostly female full- or part-time church workers in official positions within the parishes are staunchly Vatican II in their ecclesial understanding, while working within a clerical church in rapid decline.¹⁹ They gain enormous job satisfaction working with the people of the parish but are far less comfortable with many other aspects of the still-clerical church.

The beauty of whole-body ecclesiology is that it sees ecclesiology grounded in a polity that takes modern people seriously

and that is appropriately adjusted to the cultural expectations of adults. The average American Catholic is no less professionally successful or less well educated than her Protestant counterpart, in fact statistically more so. She is also in all likelihood better educated than her clergy, and quite possibly better adjusted and more experienced in important areas like financial responsibility and ethical discernment. American Catholics are come of age, but they are living their lives of faith in a church that does not show corresponding structural maturity and that wants to keep the laity from all those areas in which their love for the church, their professional expertise, and worldly wisdom could be of enormous value. It is hard to avoid using the word "dysfunctional" in this context.

The continuing infantilization of the laity is not a conspiracy of the higher clergy against the people, but a product of inadequate ecclesiology. The place of the laity in the hierarchical church is an instance of structural oppression, in which everyone is implicated to some degree, and in which villains and victims are identified at our peril. Indeed, in some ways the very perpetrators of the situation are the biggest victims, acting out of their concern for the church while simultaneously hastening its decline. Their attachment to particular ecclesiological models, whether the people of God, communion, sacrament, or some other, is not a matter of choosing a better or worse model, but of misunderstanding the relationship between ecclesiality and the ecclesiological models. That each model might have something to offer is not determined in abstraction from the community of faith but rather in the way in which ecclesiality reveals this or that model to be at work. So, faithful ecclesiality in American Catholicism today has no place for the rigid hierarchical model of institution with its vision of a pyramidal church. An exploration of the sociological evidence suggests that the current situation is very fluid precisely because the older certainties have dissipated. This could be a cause for anxiety or excited anticipation, and there is surely room for both. But the way forward in the context of a mature Catholic laity has to be to let the Spirit work through the faithful sociality of the community. This is so Catholic and, let it be said, so American. Whole-body ecclesiology does not prejudice the outcomes. We are surely subject to the Spirit, to the scriptures, and to our own tradition, but

only as living components in the ongoing work of discernment that Vatican II identified as the Spirit-inspired "intimate sense of spiritual realities" of the whole believing community. Might we say, of the "whole body"?

Notes

¹*Fifty Years of Catholic Theology: Conversations with Yves Congar*, ed. with an introduction by Bernard Lauret (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 65.

²"Ministères et laïcat dans les recherches actuelles de la théologie catholique romaine," *Verbum Caro* 18 (1964): 127-48; "Ministères et structuration de l'Eglise," *La Maison Dieu* 102 (1970): 7-20; "Quelques problèmes touchant les ministères," *Nouvelle revue théologique* 78 (1956): 5-52.

³For recent thorough discussions of these issues see Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Ministries: A Relational Approach* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), and Susan K. Wood, ed., *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood: Theologies of Lay and Ordained Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).

⁴Pius X, *Vehementer Nos* (1906), 8.

⁵Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," *Jefferson Papers*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 2, 545-46. See Esdras 4:4.

⁶See Bradford E. Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

⁷*Dei Verbum* 8.

⁸Bernard Lonergan, "Theology in Its New Context," in *Theology of Renewal*, vol. 1 (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1968), 37-38.

⁹See Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 58-76 and 101-7.

¹⁰On this topic see Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), esp. 31-74.

¹¹Bellarmino writes: "The Church is one, not twofold, and this one true [Catholic] Church is the assembly of men united in the profession of the same Christian faith and in the communion of the same sacraments, under the rule of legitimate pastors, and in particular, that of the one Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff." *De Controversiis Christianae Fidei adversus Huius Temporis Haereticos*, Tom. 1, (Ingolstadt, 1586). *Quartae Controversia Generalis Liber Terisus, De Ecclesia Militante*, cap. 2, col 1263. English translation cited from "Scholastic Definitions of the Church", Part II, by Msgr. Joseph Clifford Fenton, *American Ecclesiastical Review*, August, 1944.

¹²Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, and Marie-Dominique Chenu.

¹³John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 129-60.

¹⁴William V. D'Antonio, James D. Davidson, Mary L. Gauthier, and Dean R. Hoge, *American Catholic Laity in a Changing Church* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1989); *Laity, American and Catholic: Transforming the Church* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1996); *American Catholics: Gender, Generation, and Commitment* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001); *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

¹⁵D'Antonio et al., *American Catholics Today*, 48.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷This Boston-based international organization of Catholics was founded in 2002 in response to the sexual abuse scandal, with the objectives of supporting victims, supporting priests and bishops of integrity, and of seeking modest structural reforms in the church.

¹⁸ Available at <http://www.urc.org.uk/conversations/conciliarity.htm>.

¹⁹ See, for example, the 1992 New Parish Survey of Lay and Religious Parish Ministers at <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NPMLRPM.asp>.

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