

## ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE LAITY<sup>1/</sup>

In light of the plan of the Archdiocese of Detroit to move from a structure of corporate sole to private incorporation of each parish as a non-profit corporation, the parishioners of a parish become accountable for the success and sustainability of the parish.

What are the hurdles that laypeople face in taking responsibility for their church? What are the warrants for taking responsibility? And what are some of the forms that this responsibility should take? By and large, laypeople have not exercised responsibility for their parish beyond the financial demands that are made of us. This is a product of many centuries of neglect of the lay role in the Church.

Every sector of the Church has its particular strengths. Laypeople bring many gifts to the community, but right now the most important contribution that laypeople as laypeople have to offer the Church is the testimony to the value of personal accountability. Right now, this may be the prophetic dimension of lay life.

In everything laypeople do, they are accountable. In our work lives, we are accountable to employers, clients, students, patients, those who work for us. But more important, in our personal lives, most of us are accountable to partners, spouses, children, extended family. Short of actual criminal activity, clerical futures are assured in ways that ours are not. The clerical lifestyle in the Church is morally unaccountable, which is not to say that the clergy are any less moral than laypeople. It may be that moral accountability is not demanded of the clergy, particularly diocesan clergy, where the great majority who live morally exemplary lives are to be commended. Poor moral choices are easier to make when no one else is apparently going to know or care. Many parochial clergy thrive under the law of celibacy, though for a lot of them it is a cross bravely borne for the sake of the priesthood, not a conscious preference for a lifetime. It is not that priests would be better priests if they had sex without guilt or needed to pay a mortgage, but that their lives would be more fruitful and more moral if their personal choices had to be made in the context of family or spousal obligations. Marriage is neither paradise nor a panacea; but it is a significant school of accountability.

The human person is from the first moment of life intended by God to be embraced by a loving community within which he or she will come to be the person one is. No community, no truly formed individual.

Before the law of celibacy is changed, laypeople are distinguished from clergy by the more direct accountability that goes with the lack of ultimate security and the presence of domestic responsibilities. This is a good thing for the Church. Its presence in lay life is one of the reasons that laypeople have been shocked by the crisis of leadership revealed by the clergy sexual abuse scandal. The abusers are sick and psychologically immature people who have preyed on the innocent; but the enablers are our leaders in the faith, who have too often given evidence of irresponsible inattention to accountability, both for their own actions and those of the perpetrators. The laity are the experts in accountability. The laity are the teachers. The laity need to teach.

Trying to take responsibility for our Church, we immediately find that there are no formal structures through which the voice of the laity can be articulated. Canon law provides for diocesan synods through the voice of the laity could be presented, but there is no requirement for a bishop to have a synod, nor is there any distinction how the voice of the laity can be selected for such synods.

If what makes it so difficult to take responsibility in the Church is the lack of formal structures through which the voice of the laity can be expressed, then we need to ask why. The short answer is the Church is the site of structural oppression. Structural oppression is the way in which any society or community can have its options limited or its freedoms circumscribed within its particular culture, particularly structures that we may not be aware of and have no direct investment in perpetuating. Breaking out of this situation occurs when consciousness is raised among the oppressed class to the fact of their oppression, and movement for change is initiated. Therefore, we call for reconsideration of issues of authority, governance and accountability through which the laity may reclaim our rightful roles as responsible agents in the Church and not merely passive subjects.

The exclusion of lay experience from leadership and decision-making impoverishes the whole Church, but it is the laity who feel the oppressive structures most directly. The wisdom and experience of laypeople in issues of marriage and family simply overwhelms whatever the clergy may know; yet laypeople have no say in the formation of ethical teaching on these issues. There is no way for the situation to change without those in positions of power marginalizing their own privileged position, since laypeople have no formal way of influencing Church structures.

The language of structural oppression raises for some the specter of liberation theology. Liberation theology gets bad press in the Church because it challenges structural oppression. Jesus Christ expresses a preferential option for the marginalized.

The challenge is to see current ecclesial structures as sinful. Whatever impedes our full humanity is sinful because it impedes the will of God. Structures that settle for or impose a lesser humanity are sinful. Clericalism is sinful too. It divides the Church into two classes of people, where one has voice in the Church and one does not. Until the whole people of God truly have a voice, we are all of us – laity and clergy alike – trapped in the sinful structure of clericalist oppression.

Why should laypeople take responsibility? There are at least four good reasons:

- We are adults and adults take responsibility. Adult behavior among the laity is non-negotiable for laypeople themselves, and that acceptance of the laity as adults is non-negotiable for bishops. Often enough, clergy view laity as talented adolescent people with skills they themselves may not possess, but not people called to leadership in the Church. Centuries of infantilization have taken their toll on lay consciousness, and the laity are likely to acquiesce to treating the clergy as a child treats adults. But in fact, the whole Church desperately needs the adulthood of the laity. The clergy need to let it happen, and the laity need to claim it.
- Laypeople in the Church will achieve adulthood when they see that the accountability they practice in their daily lives needs to be extended to the life of the Church. Laypeople have to call the Church to accountability, but they also have to be accountable themselves. And that means speaking out, doing the hard work of making oneself and others uncomfortable in the local community of faith until what needs to be done is in fact in progress. The real work of Church reform takes place in the local parish, and that can be uncomfortable, whether it means confronting the pastor or one's fellow parishioners.

- The laity need to fill a responsibility gap. Lately, in the American Catholic Church, our leaders have not been doing a good job. Someone has to fill the credibility gap that the bishops' failures have created. Over six hundred years ago the Church was in the grip of the Arian heresy, and its future was by no means secure. Bishops espoused the views of Arius; and if the Church had been forced to follow their lead, today's orthodoxy might look very different. The faith of the Church was maintained for the best part of a century by the laity, not the bishops and presbyters. It is the right and the responsibility of laypeople to speak out when necessary for the good of the Church (Canon 212).

The laity of the early Church likely had a less difficult time mobilizing themselves in defense of the faith because they were used to having a significant voice in church governance. Bishop Cyprian of Carthage stated, "It is our custom when we make appointments to clerical office to consult you beforehand, and in council with you to weigh the character and quality of each candidate. Hippolytus was quite clear that the bishop should be chosen first by all the people and subsequently approved by the bishops and presbyters. Leo the Great stated, "Let the one who is to rule over all be elected by all."

The great French theologian, Yves Congar suggested that doctrines could be true without the consent of the people, but they have no living role in the Church. This principle of consent is reborn in the Church in Vatican II's teaching role of *sensus fidelium*, by which God's Spirit guides the Church by means of the practice of the whole faithful people. Laypeople today have the example of history and the warrant of Vatican II to take their responsibility for the good of the Church seriously.

- Baptism entails responsibility. We are baptized Christians, and baptism into the community obliges us to take responsibility for the community's integrity. Vatican II rediscovered the importance of baptism as more than simply a rite of initiation into the community of faith by overcoming a number of obstacles that history had placed in the way. Once the Church was revised as an essentially missionary community, then initiation was also an entry into mission. The Council had to look past the longstanding Catholic tradition of infant baptism, which whatever its merits, tends to obscure the sense that the baptized are called to mission. The reemergence of baptism leads inexorably to restoration of the priesthood of all the baptized

The Council's teaching on baptism as the basis for all mission does not eliminate the particularity of ordained priesthood; it clarifies the status of ordination, however, as one kind of ministry alongside others, one that involves the charism of leadership of the local community. The ordained priesthood is explicable only in relation to that of the baptized. As Cardinal Newman said of his fellow clergy, "We look foolish without the laity."

In baptism we are inserted into a missionary community and in principle called to mission. Our mission grows from our particular talents, and the Church can recognize this mission in a variety of ways. Ordination is certainly one of these ways. The priest is placed in a particular relationship to the community he did not have before. It may be the responsibility of presiding at Eucharist or leadership of the local church. It might be taking charge of catechetics for the parish. Baptized adult members of the faith community are called to place their talents at the service of the whole. These talents must be in evidence before the call comes, and the call must come from the community. The focus on the christological origins of the priesthood can serve to obscure the pneumatological basis for ministry as a whole. There are many gifts, but one Spirit.

The work of laypeople is not simply a response to a shortage of clergy. More and more, pastoral necessity will make us see that the work of the gospel belongs not only to the clergy, but to the clergy and the laity together. Apostolic activity in its fullness requires the involvement of the laity. The relative profusion of priests in the past has served to hide the apostolicity of the laity. The baptismal paradigm raises important questions about the relative roles of community and bishop in calling people to ministry. The ancient church insisted that ordination was ordination in service of a particular community.

- Because the roles that ordained leaders play in the Church does not make sense as symbols of responsibilities that we all possess, their leadership points to our responsibilities. Ordained leadership points to lay leadership. Bishops, priests and deacons have particular responsibilities in the Church. Bishops have oversight or care for and leadership of the local Church. Priests preserve and uphold Church teaching in word and worship. Deacons serve the needs of the local community. If there is a common priesthood, then there is also a common episcopacy and common diaconate, notes ecclesialogist Michael Himes. We are all called to care for the Church, to teach and proclaim the word of God, and to serve one another.

Accountability is the public face of responsibility. This accountability for the laity will come into sharper focus as Cardinal Maida incorporates all 288 parishes of the Archdiocese of Detroit into non-profit institutions by the end of 2007. Whether a parish prevails and is sustainable will depend on the accountability of its parishioners. What is in store for us? How will we prepare?

*Tom Kyle*

20071004

1/ Adapted from *Catholicism at the Crossroads*, Paul Lakeland, Continuum International Publishing Group, NY, NY; © 2007 by Paul Lakeland.

Paul Lakeland holds the Chair in Catholic Studies at Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT. Other related subjects in his book include: The Role of the Laity; What's So Important about Accountability; Understanding the Sex Abuse Scandal; An Open Church in an Open Society.