



The Time to Move on Is Now!

BY R. SCOTT APPLEBY | AUGUST 27, 2007

Catholicism at the Crossroads

By Paul Lakeland

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Without the laity, Cardinal Newman once remarked to his fellow clergymen, we would look quite foolish. If the faithful and forthright theologian Paul Lakeland is to be believed—and I confess that I do believe him—the clergy and hierarchy are not alone today in looking foolish. We lay Catholics also wear the dunce cap. How else to characterize the best educated and most sophisticated generational cohort of Catholics in the history of the United States, the apathetic majority of whom continue to accept religious “infantilization” within an ecclesial structure that privileges hierarchy at the expense of community, fosters clerical elitism and condescends to the laity in matters theological, spiritual, ethical and (even) financial and administrative?

Catholicism at the Crossroads is a less technical, more widely accessible version of Lakeland’s recent, incisive treatise *The Liberation of the Laity*. In both works, clericalism is judged to be the prevailing sin of the institutional church. The gross episcopal mishandling of priestly sexual abuse and the nearly complete failure of the U.S. bishops to proclaim doctrine in a morally persuasive way to the majority of Catholics (who blithely “dissent” on matters ranging from sexual morality, war and the sanctity of life to the exclusion of women from the priesthood) are best understood as “presenting” symptoms of our deeper ecclesial dysfunction. The underlying problem is structural—the absolute lack of a formal voice for the laity in the teaching or the governance of the church.

The bishops, not the laity, are the official teachers of the church, of course, but the practice of “consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine,” as Newman put it, is the sine qua non for the effective reception of the teaching, not least for Catholics fighting distraction amid the de-centered, pluralist, materialist and secular culture of the United States. And while the bishop is also called to “govern” the ecclesial community, governing and administering is not the same thing, as any bureaucrat knows. The laity can and should be consulted on governance and empowered to a greater degree on personnel and financial matters.

Practices and attitudes vary from diocese to diocese and parish to parish, with strong parish councils a sign of healthier ecclesial communities. The national picture, however, is grim. With the notable exceptions of the preparation of the pastoral letters on war and peace (1983) and the U.S. economy (1986)—eruptions of top-to-bottom collegiality that today seem as distant as Bishop John England’s bicameral, lay-clergy diocesan congress in antebellum South Carolina—precious little consulting has occurred in the 39 years since the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI’s reassertion of the ban on artificial birth control. Faced with the horror of the sexual abuse crisis, some bishops, rightly concerned that their teaching has fallen on deaf ears, made precisely the wrong decision by suggesting that those ears be cut off (“pruned”). The ear-restoring Lord would seem unlikely to endorse this pastoral strategy.

Lakeland, not alone in offering a diagnosis of dysfunction, finds the situation untenable and unacceptable. He is most compelling when challenging the theological and ecclesial arguments bolstering the preference of some younger clergy (a.k.a. the “John Paul II priests”) for a kind of preconiliar dualism that ends in elevating and thus alienating the ordained from the (merely) baptized. Marked by a mode of interaction among priests and between priests and laity that arrogates religious authority and insight exclusively to the ordained, the new clericalism is based on the erroneous assumption that ordination confers upon the recipient an “ontological change” that need not find expression in an ever more profound openness to the other in mutuality and dialogue.

For Lakeland, by contrast, the “real change” effected by the sacrament of holy orders is relational, not ontological. “In ordination,” he urges, “the priest acquires a new ordo, a new set of relationships to the community.” Thus, the distinctiveness of

ordained ministry lies “in the particular quality of the relation of the priest to the rest of the community, not in some inner, magical change in his very being.” Any such “change in being” occurs when a person first becomes a Christian, that is, when she is baptized into the death of the Lord, inherits the mission of the church and eventually assumes one or more of the numerous ministries preparing the world to receive the Gospel.

In promoting a communal/horizontal ecclesiology over a hierarchical/vertical model of the church, Lakeland draws effectively on Trinitarian theology:

Just as the call to Christian discipleship should suggest to us a life lived according to the values and choices of Jesus of Nazareth, so you would think that the church of God would reflect what seems to be the divine preference for relationship. What would happen if we modeled the church on the life of God instead of on the structures of the Roman Empire or the Ford Motor Company? One would think that it would be a good thing.... When Vatican II made the hierarchical structure of the church secondary to understanding the church as the People of God, it took a giant step toward growing closer to God. Hierarchy does not reflect the divine life; mutuality does.

With its occasional invocation of contested terms such as “the spirit of Vatican II” and hot-button issues such as the dehumanizing effects of global capitalism, *Catholicism at the Crossroads* will not convert (neo-) conservatives who insist that the way forward is not first and foremost the “liberation” of anyone (the poor, women, the laity in general), but rather the restoration of a purified clergy—men who embrace the “eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ” into which they have been initiated as into an ancient mystery cult.

So be it. Within Lakeland’s Trinitarian and critical-liberationist framework, the hot-button issues take on renewed meaning. His presentation of “accountability,” for example, as an act of mutual stock-taking and ethical boundary-setting that prevents individuals from sliding into morally dangerous self-absorption, thickens that hackneyed term, giving it a resonance for spouses, parents and children—that is, for anyone who has ever been a member of a family. And far from arguing for ecclesial lay ministers to replace the ordained, Lakeland affirms the distinction between the ordained ministry to the church and the lay ministry to the world, while rejecting the dualism that often accompanies it.

Nor does he blame individuals for the dysfunction, but targets unapostolic structures, suggesting in a riveting passage that “the structural oppression at work in the church” oppressed even so great a soul as John Paul II.

Moreover, Lakeland’s audience is not readers of the periodical *First Things*, but rather people like the energetic new grandmother I met recently, who holds a degree in religious education, takes courses at the local Catholic university, is politically active in her community, admires her pastor and loves the church—and worries not a little that prodigious lay talent is being squandered by inadequate structures and unimaginative leadership, precisely at a moment in U.S. Catholic history when we need all the creative dynamism we can muster.

Her worry is for the loss of her granddaughter to the church she loves.

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