

Sr. Maureen Sullivan, OP
Future Church
Vatican II Series
June 14, 2021

VATICAN II: THE COUNCIL LOOKS AT THE LAITY

INTRODUCTION

Good evening and welcome back to our series on Vatican II.

Last week we examined Vatican II's contribution to the church-world relationship.

Tonight we will discuss the Council's contribution to the role of the lay person in the church.

Whenever I speak about Vatican II, I always examine my audience to see what age groups are represented.

For those people my age or older, there is definitely a connection because – like me – they grew up in two churches so to speak...the one before VII and the one after.

They really do see the kinds of changes or developments that occurred after the Council.

But for those who are younger – say like the undergraduates I used to teach or young adults – they inherited the church after Vatican II.

They have no experience of the model of church which prevailed before the Council.

They cannot appreciate the achievements of Vatican II unless they are offered an overview of before and after...

...only then can they possibly come to believe that Vatican II was indeed a gift of the Holy Spirit.

There is no other way to explain this Council and the impact it had without reference to the Spirit working in and through the Council participants.

But regardless of the age groups in tonight's audience, it is still worth reviewing how the laity was viewed before Vatican II.

Of course, since Vatican II, the laity has enjoyed a position of importance in the life of the church. With the decline in vocations to the priesthood and religious life...

...who had been the primary evangelizers in the church – the laity have now embraced a variety of ministries.

But this has not always been the case.

There is no doubt that before Vatican II, the laity struggled to find a voice in the church.

STRUGGLING TO FIND A VOICE

When asked about the role of the laity in the mid-nineteenth century, Monsignor George Talbot, an English church official who had served as secretary to Pope Pius IX, responded:

“To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters, they have no right at all.”

This quote is a good indication of how the laity was viewed leading up to the Second Vatican Council. There was a marked division between the clergy and the laity, between the sacred and secular.

This separation of clergy from laity was further enhanced by the model of church that emerged during the second millennium, one that would prevail right up to the eve of Vatican II.

We are familiar with that model, known as the pyramid model. The higher one's place on this pyramid, the holier one was – or so we thought. Those at the top had the truth, those below received the truth.

It was understood that the mission of the church was in the hands of the hierarchy. It was “their” apostolate and any involvement of the laity in this work was understood as “assisting” the hierarchy.

That the layperson had the right, even the duty, for an apostolate of their own in the church's mission, was simply not considered.

Fortunately, at the same time there were those theologians whose insights and efforts were about to change this image. Dominican Father Yves Congar was one of the first theologians to begin working out a theology of the laity, obviously a very controversial move during his day.

The efforts of Congar and others like him resulted in a significant and long overdue development in the vocation of the layperson in the church.

RETURN TO THE SOURCES

The church is divinely founded and divinely guided – but it has been in the hands of humans for two thousand years.

As an organization, it runs the same risk of all organizations. The farther away it gets from the moment of its original founding and from the charism of the founder...it sometimes loses touch with that charism...hence the constant need to reform, renew and restore.

Our prophet theologians saw the need to return to the original sources of the Christian Church: Scripture and the Church Fathers of the first five centuries.

And they came to distinguish some distortions that had crept into the life of the church. One such distortion was the sharp distinction between the clergy and the laity.

Their study of the New Testament yielded many theological insights. One would have a direct bearing on the development of a theology of the laity.

In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15, we read about the Council of Jerusalem, the first council in the church's history. It was called to settle the dispute regarding the admission of gentiles into the church. As we read in Chapter 15, agreement on this issue was reached not **only** by the apostles and the presbyters, but with "the consent of the whole church."

During their discussion, Peter stood up and offered a theological foundation for the inclusion of the gentiles, stating: "And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us." (Acts 15)

This “giving of the Holy Spirit” to all believers would become the cornerstone of a theology of the laity.

Through their reading of the New Testament, theologians came to realize that for years the church had neglected an essential component of its original foundation. It is called the “pneumatological component” ...the role of the Holy Spirit.

The ecclesiology of the pre-Vatican church had emphasized the Christological component, the role of Jesus Christ in the founding of the church, but it seemed to forget the Holy Spirit.

After all, the actual founding of the church would only reach its conclusion on the feast of Pentecost...when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles.

With this rediscovery of the Holy Spirit’s role, coupled with the theological implications of the granting of the Spirit to every believer at Baptism, the road to uncovering the very essential place for the laity in the church was underway.

A THEOLOGY OF COMMUNION

Yves Congar had worked for decades in anticipation of this moment and he left his mark on many of the council’s teachings.

Vatican II’s treatment of the laity would be one of them.

When Congar and his colleagues studied the New Testament they found that the prevailing understanding of church in the NT was not the pyramid model...but rather the “communion” model.

Communio means fellowship, responsible fellowship, and this is the hallmark of NT ecclesiology.

As early as 1937, Congar was writing about the role of the Holy Spirit in a theology of communion.

The significance of this theological principle cannot be overstated.

If, as Congar believed, the Holy Spirit is the “soul” of the church, given to each member at baptism...then the notion of the church as the people of God means that each member has a truly significant role to play in the mission of the church.

-Each person, cleric or lay, has a legitimate voice.

-Each member can be a source of truth.

All that I have said about each member having a voice and being a source of truth is valid. But this does assume that each member is developing a mature understanding of the faith and what it means to be the people of God.

This leads us to the next important element in Vatican II's theology of the laity, the meaning of the *Sensus fidelium*.

THE SENSUS FIDELIUM

This term translates as “the sense of the faithful.” It is a very important concept and it is essential that it not be misunderstood. This principle holds that the Holy Spirit is active in the **whole** church.

It indicates that the church's teaching emerges out of the faith of the entire church and there is to be a mutuality between hierarchical authority and the faithful in the formation of doctrine.

The *sensus fidelium* has a long history in the tradition of the church.

However, due to, among other things, the emergence of the pyramid model of the church...this concept has been neglected and generally forgotten.

According to the great John Henry Newman, who in 1859 published his work entitled *On consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine...*

“...the body of the faithful, by virtue of their baptism, have an infused sense of the faith, a kind of instinct, by which they accept authentic teaching and reject false teaching.”

Newman’s view was not received well at all by the hierarchy of his time. Some were infuriated by Newman’s claim that the laity should be consulted in matters of the faith.

But Newman’s vindication on this point would finally come one hundred years later at Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium*. It spoke of a supernatural sense of the faith possessed by the whole people of God.

It must be noted that for the *sensus fidelium* to function effectively, the members have to receive a sound religious education. They need to be educated and encouraged to think critically, to allow reason to inform faith.

They need to know the existence of a “hierarchy of truths”, that some truths of the faith are more central to the core of the faith than others. Believers must understand – for example – that assenting to the dogma of the Trinity is on a different level than abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent.

But these kinds of distinctions were not effectively made in the church before the council.

Most lay persons would not have been sufficiently aware of the three levels of official church teaching: Dogma, Doctrine, and Discipline. Nor would they have been sufficiently aware of the distinction between infallible and non-infallible teaching.

In 1953, Yves Congar was concerned about the problem of “creeping infallibility,” a situation in which there was a growing tendency on the part of the laity to regard any and all church teaching as infallible.

A laity without a solid theological education was the rule rather than exception before Vatican II. For the *sensus fidelium* to serve as a living and powerful force in the whole body of the church of Christ, the laity must be offered a solid theological foundation for the faith.

We are reminded of something else John Henry Newman said in his day regarding this theological formation:

“I want a laity, not arrogant...but men and women who know their religion, who enter into it...who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it.”

At the Second Vatican Council, Bishop John J. Wright of Pittsburgh said:

“The faithful have been waiting for 400 years for a positive {official church} statement of the place, dignity and vocation of the layperson.”

We look now to examine Vatican II’s response to this request.

THE HOUR OF THE LAITY

Just to put Vatican II's contribution into some context...

In 1906, Pope Pius X made the following statement in one of his encyclicals (*Vehementer nos*, On the French law of separation):

“In the hierarchy alone resides the power and authority to move and direct all the members of the (church) to its end. As to the many, the laity, they have no other right than to let themselves be guided and so follow their pastors in docility.”

We find a very different observation about the laity in Vatican II's **Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay Person:**

“In its desire to intensify the apostolic activity of the People of God, the Council now earnestly turns its thoughts to the Christian laity...indeed, the Church cannot never be without the lay apostolate; it is something that derives from the layperson's very vocation as a Christian.” (Introduction)

In the eight decades separating these two very different observations on the laity...a radical development had occurred regarding the role of the lay person in the church.

And it would be at Vatican II that the hour of the laity would ultimately be recognized. Vatican II was the first ecumenical council in the history of the church to deal with the topic of the laity.

In fact, the term layperson (actually layman) occurs 206 times in the council's documents and all the references are favorable.

Three council documents in particular contribute to a renewed understanding of the vocation of the laity in the church: *Lumen*

Gentium, Gaudium et Spes, and Apostolicam Actuositatem. (English translation, The Decree on the Apostolate of the Layperson)

In these documents we can discern some of the key topics that would affect an authentic theology of the laity:

- the significance of baptism
- how the layperson is defined and...
- the *sensus fidelium*
- the relationship of the laity to the hierarchy.

In the years of preparation leading up to the opening of Vatican II, the laity had not enjoyed any major participation in that preparation...but they did have a number of bishops who had a genuine sense of the needs of the laity.

Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens of Belgium was one of those bishops.

At the Council he claimed:

“We need a major declaration on the role of the laity in the church...all we have at present are three lines in the articles of canon law! An important statement should be drafted recognizing the rights and obligations of lay people by virtue of their baptism.”

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity would ultimately be promulgated and it was devoted entirely to the place of the laity.

However, this document had its roots in both *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

So, before looking at the Decree on the Laity – let me point out some of the profound insights in these two documents that would pave the way for the Decree on the Laity.

For one thing, chapter 5 in LG asserts: “Therefore, in the church, everyone, whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness.”

This universal call to holiness was a remarkable moment for the church. In the pre-Vatican II period, with its sharp division between the clergy and the laity, it was simply assumed that priests and nuns were expected to attain to a higher level of graced perfection.

But Vatican II had retrieved a NT position, one that emphasized the importance of the church as a communion of grace rather than that of institution.

And the ministry engaged in by the laity is not something “given” to them by the hierarchy. Rather it is something they are called to by their God, by virtue of their baptism.

This was a defining moment for the lay person in the church.

LG also addressed the relationship of the laity to the hierarchy.

Knowing the kind of relationship that prevailed before the council, one marked by the laity’s obedience, docility, and passivity, what might we expect now given the Council’s acknowledgment that we are **all** the people of God?

Given the laity’s long journey to have their voice heard in the church, LG provides a remarkable moment in that journey.

The document does speak of the need for the laity “to accept in Christian obedience the decisions of their spiritual shepherds.”

It also encourages the laity to pray for their spiritual leaders.

But article 37 also contains some suggestions that would come as a surprise, given the status of the layperson before the council.

LG states:

“The laity, by reason of their knowledge, competence, or outstanding ability are permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the church.” (LG, 37)

And, with regard to how the hierarchy should respond to the laity’s new-found voice, we read:

“Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the church...let them encourage lay people so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative...a great many wonderful things are to be hoped for from this dialogue – in the laity...a sense of responsibility...and the hierarchy – aided by the experience of the laity...can more clearly come to decisions regarding both spiritual and temporal matters. In this way, the whole church, strengthened by each one of its members, may more effectively fulfill its mission for the life of the world.” (LG, 37))

Indeed, the laity had finally received some very positive official recognition.

But we know that, at the time, not all the council fathers were pleased by the privileges, rights and responsibilities given to the laity.

One cardinal actually objected to the idea that the spiritual gifts so important to St. Paul (1 Cor 12:14) were still widespread in the church and even argued that today they were very rare!
(1 Cor. 12:14)

In fairness, we need to try and understand the mindset of those who objected to this new-found voice of the laity. Since the beginning of the second millennium, the prevailing model of church was hierarchical.

And it is not a matter of thinking that some of the bishops were wearing white hats and others wearing black hats. It was just more difficult for some to accept the changes that were emerging.

As to how *Lumen Gentium's* statements on the laity-hierarchy relationship would be played out in real time in the months and years to follow...I think the jury is still out.

But – for our purposes, it is clear that the council fathers were truly opening the door for the potential “age of the layperson” in the church.

THEOLOGICALLY PREPARED FOR THE MISSION

But in order for the laity to assume their rightful place in the mission of the church – there must be an opportunity for them to grow in their understanding of the Christian story.

Lay participation in formal theology programs was rare in the years leading up to Vatican II.

This was considered the domain of the clergy. The council proposed a change that would significantly improve the laity's involvement in such programs. As stated in *Gaudium et Spes*:

“It is to be hoped that many of the laity will receive a sufficient formation in the sacred sciences and that some will dedicate themselves professionally to these studies...In order that they may fulfill their function, let it be recognized that all the faithful possess a lawful freedom of inquiry, freedom of thought and of expressing their mind with humility and fortitude in those matters on which they enjoy competence.” (GS, 62)

In another section of GS, we read:

“Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem which arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission...Since they have an active role to play in the whole life of the church, laymen are not only bound to penetrate the world with a Christian spirit, but are also called to be witnesses to Christ in all things in the midst of human society.” (GS, 43)

Dominican Father Marie Dominique Chenu viewed all members of the church as continuations of the incarnation and co-creators with God in the transformation of the world.

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity was promulgated on November 18, 1965 during the final session of Vatican II.

It passed with 2,340 votes in the affirmative, 6 in the negative. It was the only council document entirely devoted to the lay person in the church.

APOSTOLICAM ACTUOSITATEM **The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity**

Perhaps the statement that best sets the tone for this Decree was the one made by Cardinal Cento, who presented the draft of the document to the council fathers in 1964:

“It is the heart of this text, and our deepest desire, that all the baptized may become aware that no one can be a genuine Christian until he or she thinks of themselves as an apostle; this would be the greatest triumph of Vatican II.”

Here we are, almost 60 years after this Decree was promulgated, and one has to wonder: do the faithful think of themselves as apostles?

The First Letter of Peter, Chapter 3, vs. 15 tells us: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands an accounting for the hope that is in you.”

If someone were to ask us: Why are you a Catholic? could we answer that question sufficiently?

The Decree on the Laity exhorts the lay person to be more diligent in doing what they can to explain, defend and properly apply Christian principles to the problems of our era in accordance with the mind of the church.

The whole people of God must come to own the Christian story and witness to that story by their lives.

Only then can they truly be leaven in the modern world.

Only then can they offer an effective apostolate for the mission of the church.

Only then can they be considered “apostles” with an apostolate of their own.

Vatican II finally acknowledged what so many already knew in the years leading up to the council...that we are all the people of God by virtue of our baptism, that we all have gifts to use in the mission of the church.

Like no previous council in the history of the church, Vatican II invited the laity to assume their rightful place and...to contribute to the transformation of the world.

Some of the theologians who had spent so many years working toward this moment lived long enough to see their theological aspirations fulfilled at Vatican II.

Yves Congar was one of them. Reporting from Rome during the second session of the council, he wrote:

“It is with immense joy that I have witnessed with fine results a maturing theology of the laity...Emphasis has been laid on the fundamental equality of all in Christian dignity.”

He also believed that “seeds planted today will give their fruit later, in thirty to fifty years.”

Vatican II set the stage for the “age of the layperson” in the church.

Time will tell if and how far these seeds will indeed bear fruit.

And each of us has a role in caring for these seeds.

Vatican II came to see the church as a communion of grace rather than that of institution...focusing on a theology of charisms that would understand the church as the people of God...a church with a diversity of ministries, but a unity of mission.