

Where do lay apostolate's sacramental roots lead?

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY



By Father Richard C. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

In the days before Vatican II, the lay apostolate — sometimes known as Catholic Action — was defined as the participation of the laity in the work of the hierarchy. Lay persons served the church and its mission as helpers and deputies of the bishops.

Although it was surely better for the laity to have been involved in the mission of the church as helpers and deputies of the hierarchy than not to have been involved at all, the definition and the theological mentality behind it happily did not survive the council.

According to Vatican II, the laity are as much a part of the church as are the hierarchy: "Everything which has been said so far concerning the People of God applies equally to the laity, religious, and clergy"

(Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, No. 30).

"The lay apostolate," therefore, "is a participation in the saving mission of the Church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation, all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord himself" (No. 33).

For the council, lay persons are not simply helpers of the hierarchy, nor is their engagement in the mission of the church made possible only by episcopal deputation. The laity's call to mission and ministry is sacramentally rooted: in baptism and confirmation.

Some lay persons, however, have expressed concern about certain post-conciliar developments in the church because of their apparent effect on the lay apostolate.

Catholics associated with the National Center for the Laity in Chicago, for example, have consistently warned against a clericalization of lay ministry within the church and a clericalization of social ministry outside the church.

Such Catholics complain that when the laity are invited to ministry, too often it is only for the sake of keeping the church's internal machinery going. Lay persons, they say, are not being encouraged to transform political, social, and economic institutions beyond the church, nor to assume positions of intellectual leadership in science, literature, and the fine arts.

What is worse, the clergy, and especially bishops, have taken over the laity's proper role in the temporal order. Thus, while many U.S. Catholics have applauded the bishops for their leadership on issues of peace and economic justice, Catholics associated with the National Center for the Laity seem to view these episcopal initiatives as an invasion of the laity's rightful apostolic territory.

If one presses such complaints too far, however, we could find ourselves once again trapped in the false clergy/laity, church/world, sacred/temporal dichotomies of the past. All of us, clergy and laity alike, are coequal partners in the life and mission of the church. It's not the clergy's job to mind the church-store, while the laity mind the world-store.

The clergy, including the bishops, have an important role to play in the so-called temporal order. They have "the right to pass moral judgment, even on matters touching the political order, whenever basic personal rights or the salvation of souls make such judgments necessary" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 76).

Conversely, the laity have an important role to play in the internal life of the church: in its worship, in its religious education, in its ministry to the needy, and yes, even in matters of governance (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Nos. 34-37). Indeed, in earlier centuries the laity had a decisive role in the selection of bishops.

If we draw the line too sharply between the church and the world, we run the risk of excluding lay persons, and especially women, who constitute the great bulk of the church's ministerial force, from any meaningful involvement in the internal life and work of the church.

Moreover, by rejecting any significant temporal leadership role for clergy, and for bishops in particular, we run the risk also of individualizing the social apostolate. It would no longer be a matter of the church speaking and acting officially — and therefore with some political clout — but more often of individual members of the church striving to Christianize a particular plot of temporal ground on which they happen to stand.

The internal life of the church is every Catholic's business. And so, too, is the church's external mission to the world at large. The two are not mutually opposed. On the contrary, the transformation of the world is essentially linked with the transformation of the church.

Because of its sacramental nature, the church must practice internally what it preaches externally. The one is ineffective apart from the other.

Liberation from sin's spiritual slavery

By Father Albert Shamon
Catholic Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) John 8:1-11; (R1) Isaiah 43:16-21; (R2) Philippians 3:8-14.

The Book of Isaiah was written by at least three different authors. Chapters 1-39 were written by Isaiah, son of Amoz, in Jerusalem around 740 B.C. It contains warnings and announcements of calamity. Chapters 40-55 were written by one called a Second-Isaiah in Babylon around 545 B.C. It was a book of consolation to the Jews in captivity. Chapters 56-66 were composed by one called a Third-Isaiah in Jerusalem around 500 B.C. The temple had been rebuilt, but not the city walls. The book deals with sin, grace, and the messianic era as a new creation.

Sunday's first reading is from Second-Isaiah. He had arrived at one of the clearest concepts of the oneness and uniqueness of God. He saw all history as a unity, because it was an unfolding of God's plan. His God-view of history enabled him to see all events, past, present, and future, as carrying out the will of God, which was to liberate all mankind.

In the past, one of God's greatest interventions in the life of His people was His freeing them from Egyptian slavery under Moses. The exodus from Egypt was indelibly stamped on the minds of all Hebrews. Speaking to his countrymen languishing in the Babylonian Captivity, Second-Isaiah interpreted their future in the light of the past exodus from Egypt. He foretold their liberation; but he foresaw it as something new: a vast improvement on the Egyptian exodus. There would be no blood-

A WORD FOR SUNDAY



shedding, no plagues, no hurried escape in the night, but a joyful, leave-taking from Babylon with the blessings of Cyrus the Great.

In a similar fashion, Christians viewed God's intervention in the New Testament in the light of the Exodus. They too saw the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus as a new "exodus": a liberation, not from physical slavery, but from the spiritual slavery of sin.

St. Paul warns that this liberation is not to be effected through knowledge — even a knowledge of Christ. Three times he speaks of knowledge, for Paul was rebutting gnosticism, a heresy teaching that perfection could be found in knowledge alone.

Paul admits that the only worthwhile knowledge is of Jesus Christ. But for Paul, this is not a purely intellectual thing, but an experiential matter, not just a theory, but a sharing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. "I wish to know Christ ... likewise to know how to share in his sufferings ... Thus do I hope to arrive at the resurrection of the dead." For Paul the Christian life is not an arriving, but a striving that ends only at the end of life.

Paul portrays himself as a pilgrim searching. "I do not think of myself as having reached the finish line," a phrase borrowed from the Greek mystery religions. The Christian is a pilgrim; the church, a pilgrim church.

In the Gospel incident, the scribes and Pharisees image a church that "had ar-

rived," that was unalterable, that seemed to put law above persons and doing above being. Perhaps it was St. Luke and not St. John who authored the story of the adulteress. It could have been a midrash on the Susanna story (Daniel 13). In the Susanna story, the woman accused by two old men is innocent of adultery and is saved by the prophet Daniel. In the Gospel story, the scribes and the Pharisees are the old men and Jesus is the new Daniel. But there is this difference: the woman is not innocent; she is truly an adulteress. Daniel vindicated an innocent woman, but Jesus a guilty one. The point is that Jesus was ushering in a new era: one of grace and pardon.

The Law judges acts. Jesus judges persons. The adulteress represents us as sinners. Like her, we can transcend sin and accept the chance encounter and dialogue offered by Christ. Thus we can be led to sin no more and learn to obey a conscience that has known love. "See, I am doing something new."

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