

AMBIGUITIES IN *LUMEN GENTIUM*. CHALLENGES TO SYNODALITY

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*The Second Vatican Council represents a watershed in the history of the Catholic Church in the area of clergy-laity relationships. *Lumen Gentium*, in particular, has exalted the laity to an ecclesial status equal to that of the clergy grounded on the sacrament of baptism. The move of the council fathers is a concomitant call to more meaningful and active lay participation in the Church that resonates with Pope Francis' strong push for a synodal Church. However, there are internal challenges to hurdle. A textual analysis of *Lumen Gentium* reveals that in the pages of the conciliar document can be found apparent discrepancies that becloud the document's positive teaching on the theological principle of equality of dignity and co-responsibility in the Church. In particular, the synodal Church is challenged to address the fundamental issues of character theology affirmed in *Lumen Gentium* and the undefined being of the layperson in the Church.*

Keywords: *Lumen Gentium*, synodal Church, character theology, ministerial priesthood, common priesthood

INTRODUCTION

Nearly sixty years after *Lumen Gentium*. . . One day in the southern Philippines not so long ago I bumped into a former president of a parish pastoral council, now a Eucharistic lay minister. I asked him if he was familiar with the word synodality. Answer: *Unsa na Sir?* (What is that Sir?). I pressed: Hasn't your parish priest mentioned that to you and your group? Answer: *Wala Sir. Unsa man diay na?* (No Sir. What is that really?).

The parish priest of the Eucharistic lay minister I conversed with is not anti-Vatican II. He taught part-time in a local seminary. From the moment he assumed office in the parish, his personality, autocratic and bossy quickly spread among the more active parishioners. The more critical parishioners opted out of the parish

activities and are just waiting for the next parish priest to be assigned.

Thousands of miles away from Cebu a group of American hierarchs, critical of Pope Francis' inclusive vision and pastoral thrusts, vehemently disagree to include in high-level discussions issues such as women's empowerment and LGBTQ. In a foreword to a recent book critical of the synod, a Cardinal "warned (that) the synod was part of a 'revolution' to radically change what the church has always taught. Another church leader, a bishop – critiquing the synod on social media – said, 'It is a travesty that these things are even proposed for discussion.'"¹ A cleric canon lawyer took to task Pope Francis' decision to accord 'non-bishops' as priests, religious, laymen, and women full membership with voting rights in the Synod of Bishops' conference on synodality. The change, he was quoted as saying, ignores "the essential distinction between the ordained and non-ordained in the church. Christ's establishment of a hierarchical church means that certain roles pertain to the shepherds that do not pertain to the sheep."²

The differences in terms of understanding LG with practical implications could be explained by an interpretive lens a Catholic uses. One may also employ insights coming from the human sciences like psychology to account for the personality, idiosyncrasies, preferences, and dispositions of the ordained priest, or one may use cultural analysis to make sense of clerical superiority that refuses to die in the post-Vatican II times.³ Arguably,

¹ David Crary, "Ideological rifts among U.S. bishops are in the spotlight ahead of momentous Vatican meeting," September 24, 2023, accessed October 5, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/catholic-us-bishops-lgbtq-women-pope-francis-81a602274dd604b7cc532425a289b00c>. See also Pedro Gabriel, "Vatican II and 'weaponized ambiguity,'" October 1, 2020, accessed October 5, 2023, https://wherepeteris.com/vatican-ii-and-weaponized-ambiguity/?fbclid=IwAROKj4gNKti9rpglJid_3kAREKJgO9YKPOIpRUO3QLOcsbhAg-N44MijxWQ; David Gibson, "American conservatives are not more Catholic than the pope," September 4, 2023, accessed October 3, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/09/04/pope-wars-against-american-bishops/>.

² Cindy Wooden, "Cardinal Burke says his concerns about synod are signs of faith," October 3, 2023, accessed October 10, 2023, "<https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/cardinal-burke-says-his-concerns-about-synod-are-sign-faith>."

³ On the application of the latter tool of analysis to the clerical Church, see Aloysius L. Cartagenas, "The problems of our own making. . . born from the sins

theological and secular sciences are helpful to help guide readers in interpreting a reality or a text from a particular angle. In the field of theology, to be sure, when dealing with documentary texts divergent hermeneutic lenses can give rise to tensions but the latter are healthy if they eventually strengthen the synodal church.

In this paper, I present another layer to offer an account of the seemingly negative attitudes and reactions of some hierarchs to Pope Francis' version of synodality. They seem bent on preserving remnants of the pre-Vatican II pyramidal Church whose institutional walls separate the clergy (above) from the laity (below). It is to be noted that these ordained clerics are not necessarily wholesale anti-Vatican II.

A textual analysis of *Lumen Gentium* will show that the tensions being experienced today can be explained by the ambiguities inside its pages which may be used as an ideological weapon by those who love to emphasize the hierarchical nature of the Church, thus indifferent even resistant to the progressive realization of the ecclesiological principle of synodality. This presents a challenge to the synodal Church to revisit the document particularly its teachings on the clergy-laity distinction and the undefined being of the layperson.

***LUMEN GENTIUM* SHOWING THE WAY**

Vatican II's major document *Lumen Gentium* has recovered the biblical roots of the Church and casts the latter in fundamental terms as the People of God. In the new People of God model, there is common dignity and consequently equality among the members. The common dignity derives from the members' "rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope, and undivided charity. In Christ and the

within the Church': A Reading of Benedict XVI's Admission of the Crisis of the Church's Corporate Identity," *Philippiniana Sacra* XLVI, no. 138 (September-December 2011): 631-648. The author recommends the constructively critical work of Michael Papesch, *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004).

Church there is, then, no inequality arising from race or nationality, social condition or sex . . .”⁴ (LG 33).

Attached to the principle of basic equality in the Church is the responsibility of all the members to offer their entire lives to the Lord in prayer and praise for they are a “kingdom of priests” consecrated to God while sharing in the priesthood of Christ (LG 10). Endowed with the same Spirit they are all called to holiness (11, 40, 41),⁵ while their spiritual rebirth entails witnessing to Christ (10). Being witnesses is a participation in the prophetic office of Christ. This is illustrated in at least two instances. The first has something to do with belief. This is exemplified in the so-called *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful)⁶ which belongs to the whole people of God manifesting a universal consent in matters of faith and morals. Another instance that “has a special importance in this prophetic office” is the married and family life, “an outstanding school of the lay apostolate” (LG 35). This is the proper vocation of married persons: “They must be witnesses of faith and love of Christ to one another and their children. The Christian family proclaims aloud both the present power of the kingdom of God and the hope of the blessed life. Hence, by example and by their testimony, they convict the world of sin and give light to those who seek the truth” (35).

The laity does not only share in the same dignity and are not only equal to the clergy, they likewise are also co-responsible agents in the salvific mission of the Church (33).⁷ The mission of the Church is the mission of the laity which is not simply a sharing in the apostolate of the clergy. The Lord himself, not the hierarchy, ultimately appoints them as subjects of the mission through their (lay) apostolate, and they perform their responsibility in the secular world where they normally are. This is what the Council refers to

⁴ See Gal. 3:28; see Col. 3:11.

⁵ See Teodoro C. Bacani, *The Filipino Laity: Called To Be Holy* (Makati: LB Trades, 1988).

⁶ See John J. Burkhard, “*Sensus Fidei*: Theological Reflection since Vatican II: I. 1965-1984,” *The Heythrop Journal* XXXVI (1993): 41-59; *ibid.*, 123-136; Emmanuel de Guzman, “Exploring the Terrain of *Sensus Fidelium* among ‘Root-crops’ Christians,” *MST Review* 6, no. 2 (2004): 1-17.

⁷ See also *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 3.

as the secular character peculiar to the laity (LG 31; AA 2; GS 43), wherein they are challenged to evangelize and sanctify the world by their works; give witness to a dedicated life resplendent in faith, hope and charity and to gospel values; become salt of the earth; and direct worldly affairs towards God's will (LG 31; AA 2, 6; LG 33).⁸

Indeed, *Lumen Gentium* has recovered the sense of equality and co-responsibility that ought to mark the People of God which brooks no discrimination. There is no fundamental difference between the laity and the clergy in the Church in terms of status, that is, one does not occupy a more exalted status than the other for there is only one priesthood: the priesthood of Christ in which both clergy and the laity share.

Each member in the body of Christ in deep fellowship with one another and having Jesus the High Priest as the head has a particular role and function to fulfill. There is a plurality of ministries but the overall goal is to build up the Church and to be at the service of the Kingdom of God. To edify and help build up the community, the Holy Spirit gives each member a particular gift or charism. While the Council has affirmed the hierarchical structure of the Church, this has to be balanced by an optimistic and healthy recognition of the presence of charisms in the community. The church does not only have a hierarchical structure; it also has a charismatic structure. Both are gifts of the Spirit "who dwells in the Church and the hearts of the faithful as in a temple" (LG 4). To neglect the charismatic aspect "leads to clericalism, abuse of authority and power in the church, and the depreciation of the role of the laity."⁹

FOGGY SPOTS IN *LUMEN GENTIUM*

Thanks to LG no one today will view the laity, at least in principle, that they are second-class citizens or mere assistants in the ministry of the hierarchy. They are the Church and as such

⁸ See Dominador Bombongan, Jr. "Signposts for Lay Empowerment in Vatican II," *Hapag* 2, no. 2 (2005): 221-225.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

share equally with the clergy as far as enjoying equal dignity in the Church and exercising co-responsibility of its mission and ministry are concerned. Gone is the medieval understanding of the laity as a passive flock. Building up the Church the Body of Christ is as much the task of the laity as the clergy (LG 32). Their being Church, like that of the clergy, is ultimately rooted in the sacrament of Baptism and strengthened in Confirmation. Thus the living out of their ecclesial personality and their participation in the concrete ministries and activities of the Church are not merely contingent upon the shortage or the numerical availability of the clergy. Both are constitutive of and are a consequence of their baptismal commitment.¹⁰

However, despite the salutary assurances of the landmark document, there are several apparent inconsistencies or ambiguities inside its pages that becloud than clarify its beautiful teachings illuminating the ecclesiological nature of the People of God-Body of Christ. Their presence is due to the compromises that arose from two different approaches represented by the progressive (majority) group who were pushing for a Church open to *aggiornamento and resourcement* and the conservative (minority) group who, informed by traditional sensibility, preferred to privilege the hierarchical Church. To keep the process moving, “*Lumen Gentium* had to satisfy these two constituencies and did so by interweaving both approaches into one document.”¹¹

Albeit presumably balanced the teachings of Vatican II are in the area of clergy-laity relationship, the obscurities when weaponized by some in the hierarchy upset the balance and serve to slow down what otherwise is a beautiful walking together towards the realization of the synodal church.

Two instances may evince the presence of ambiguity in *LG*, a reality that, for me, gets in the way of Pope Francis’ vision of a synodal church. These are “in-essence and in-degree” ontological

¹⁰ See also Part IV of *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* on “The Community of Disciples: Workers of Renewal” (n. 402-657). This section of the document rightfully begins with the fundamental notions of one common vocation and mission shared by everyone in the Church.

¹¹ Paul Lakeland, *A Council That Will Never End: Lumen Gentium and the Church Today* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), 88.

distinctions between the clergy and the laity and the undefined status of the layperson in the church.

A. The “in-Essence and in-Degree” Distinction

Section 10 of the major council document begins with these beautiful words (minus *LG*-cited sources in parentheses):¹²

Christ the Lord, a high priest taken from among men made the new people “a kingdom of priests to God, his Father.” The baptized by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, that through all the works of Christian men, they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the perfection of him who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light. Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a sacrifice, living, holy, and pleasing to God. They should everywhere on earth bear witness to Christ and answer everyone who asks for a reason for the hope of an eternal life which is theirs.

The next paragraph, however, has created a fog serving to obscure an otherwise straightforward teaching of *LG* about the “kingdom of priests” the “new people” made by Jesus Christ “to God his Father.” Here is the verbatim quotation of the second part of section 10:

Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless ordered one to another; each in its proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest by the sacred power that he has, forms and rules the priestly people; in the person of Christ, he effects the Eucharistic sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people. The faithful indeed by virtue of their royal priesthood, participate in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise their priesthood, too, by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, abnegation, and active charity.

¹² All cited Vatican II statements in this paper are from Austin Flannery, O.P., gen ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2001).

In the statement, there are two kinds of priesthood: the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood.¹³ Each is ontologically different from each other but sharing “in the one priesthood of Christ.”¹⁴ “Faithful” is supposed to be inclusive but the council fathers qualified it “to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church” (LG 31).¹⁵

The earliest official reference to the “not only in essence but in degree” differentiation, according to Father Melvin Michalski was Pius XII’s use of the phrase in 1954 in his *Magnificate Dominum*.¹⁶ One is hard-pressed to find a firm New Testament basis of the ontological distinction.

Theologians call the in-essence and in-degree distinction between the laity and the clergy “character theology.”¹⁷ The theological model underscores the ordained priest’s *sacred power*

¹³ The usage of the terms, “lay”/“laity” (from the Greek *laos*) and “cleric”/“clergy” (Greek *kleros*) in the early church was very limited and both had meanings in the early church different from what the hierarchical church mean today. *Kleros* means “portion” or “lot;” *kleroi* are not the presbyters but the “charge” which has been given to them to tend (see 1 Pt. 5:3). They, *kleroi*, are actually what we would call the laity, all Christians, whom Paul speaks about (Gal, 3:29). Needless to say, in the time of Jesus and in the early Church of the 1st-2nd centuries, no member, who were all lay, was ordained. *Laikos* is not found in the Bible, but *laos* which is “the people of God.” In the vocabulary of the New Testament, “there is not distinction between ‘lay people’ and ‘clerics’” (Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1965), 4).

¹⁴ John Paul II, before his elevation to the papacy, believed that the essence-and-degree difference was the central message of the Vatican Council (Lakeland, *A Council*, 81).

¹⁵ The Code of Canon Law basically describes the “faithful are those who, in as much as they have been incorporated in Christ through baptism, have been constituted as the people of God. For this reason, made sharers in their own way in Christ’s priestly, prophetic, and royal function, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world, in accord with the condition proper to each” (Can. 204 §1).

¹⁶ The reference is cited in the “Preface” section of the book published in 1996 by Father Melvin Michalski in his book – a version of his 1986 dissertation at the Leopold Franzens University at Innsbruck (Mark Fr. Fischer, “Ontological Difference between the Communal and Ministerial Priesthoods,” accessed May 25, 2023, <https://www.pastoralcouncils.com/about-mark-fischer/vita/essence/>).

¹⁷ Defenders of character theology may lump the doctrine as traditional. “‘Traditional,’ of course, is a term that often hides the fact that an idea or practice grew up for particular reasons in definite historical circumstances. . . .” (Lakeland, *A Council*, 81).

that *forms and rules* the priestly people. Granting that the line must be read *within the whole context of Lumen Gentium* using circuitous arguments the formulation still appears as one that hardly, if at all, reinforces the positive teachings of the council document on the laity.

Arguably, the sacrament of baptism for all the faithful makes us become a “new creation” that makes all priests share in the priesthood of Christ. We can rightly claim thus that baptism produces an ontological change in the new Christians (that is, we become a new being), even if this reality is inexplicably not explicitly stated in LG 10. On the other hand, the character theology of priesthood projects the priestly ordination as stamping an indelible mark upon the soul of the ordained resulting in an ontological change of his being.¹⁸ The ordained coming from the baptismal experience undergoes ontological change for the second time at the moment of ordination. He now becomes different or distinct from the common priesthood of the faithful both in essence and in degree. This, in effect, resurrects the two-tier church of the medieval era which Jesus did not want at all.¹⁹ The assurance that the hierarchy exists to serve God’s people does not negate the two-class constitution of the church.²⁰

In practice, “hierarchy” is the official designation of the bishops, priests, and deacons in that descending order with the hierarchy forming one clerical class that is distinct and separated

¹⁸ See Vatican II’s *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Presbyterorum Ordinis* 2 as recommended by Lakeland, *A Council*, 62.

¹⁹ See Herbert Haag, *Upstairs, Downstairs: Did Jesus Want a Two-Class Church?* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 37-68, 73-108.

²⁰ The two-level Church manifests itself when lay communicants prefer receiving the Body of Christ from the presiding priest over the lay ministers. It is as if the ordained priest is more qualified, more effective, and, perhaps, holier than the latter. The author knows of a parish priest who has lay ministers assisting him during communion time but he makes sure that he alone distributes communion at the center aisle. ²⁰ Defenders of character theology may lump the doctrine as traditional. “Traditional,” of course, is a term that often hides the fact that an idea or practice grew up for particular reasons in definite historical circumstances. . .” (Lakeland, *A Council*, 81).

²⁰ See Vatican II’s *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Presbyterorum Ordinis* 2 as recommended by Lakeland, *A Council*, 62.

²⁰ See

from the laity.²¹ But “this division between the clergy and the laity cannot on any account be justified from the New Testament evidence.”²² The term and concept of ‘hierarchy’ as it is understood “is conspicuously absent in the New Testament and the earliest Christian literature!”²³

Moreover, the appellation “priest” that is normally identified with the hierarchy was never used in the New Testament to refer to individual Christians including their leaders. The designation “Chief Priest” (*archiereus*) exclusively applied to Jesus Christ and with him and in him to his body, the whole Church. He was the one who sacrificed himself and offered his life for humankind (See Heb. 1:4-4:13; 4:14-7:28; 8:1-10:18). Every Christian is a co-priest with Christ and is called to offer himself/herself to God, hence “co-victim.” “Priest” in the New Testament is *hiereus*, which refers to a sacred person set apart for a cultic function.²⁴ Such function is not found in the list of services or ministries of the post-Easter communities because it is not rooted in the identity of Jesus who served as the criterion for developing what ministries are vital to the life of the Christian communities.²⁵

²¹ “The clergy/laity distinction has set up many false problems for the Church, and will go on doing so as long as it is retained, since it represents a principle alien to the nature of the Church as a society. Talk of a ‘distinctively clerical’ or a ‘distinctively lay’ point of view is nonsense” (Doohan, *The Lay-Centered Church*, 24, footnote 73).

²² Aloysius Pieris, *Give Vatican II a Chance: Yes, to Incessant Renewal, No to Reforms of the Reforms* (Gonawala-Kelaniya, Sri Lanka: Tulana Jubilee Publications, 2010), 159.

²³ *Ibid.*, 15. The neologism “so alien to Christ and his disciples” occurred for the first time in Pseudo-Dionysius (5th century A.D.). The “graduated scale of ‘dignity’ and ‘power’” was “attributed both to the celestial beings that governed the heavens and to the ecclesiastical rulers. . . . The latter “had by that time adopted some of the juridical and administrative models of the secular state.” This resulted in “an ecclesiology where the hierarchy would be almost identified with the episcopate (see LG, ch. 2)!” *Ibid.*

²⁴ Herman Hendrickx, C.I.C.M., “Christ and the People of God in the New Testament,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* XXIII, no. 3 (1986): 223 and Pieris, *Give Vatican II a Chance*, 178-179.

²⁵ See Kenan Osborne, *A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 24-29. 40, 43; see Paul Bernier, *Ministry in*

With the identification of *hiereus* to the ordained clergy, (the latter) became a group apart, a separate priestly caste. This clericalization influenced the process of theologizing about the ordained ministry. This led to the use of *hiereus* (*sacerdos*) in reference to the ministers of the church. The ministers began to be viewed in terms of the Aaronic and Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament. By the fifth century, the *presbyters* began to take on more liturgical leadership. The view of the Eucharist as cultic sacrifice (similar to other pagan religions) contributed to the “sacerdotalizing” of ministry – a ministry associated primarily with offering the holy sacrifice of the Mass in the altar.²⁶

The term “sacerdotal ordination,” a twin of the “priestly ordination,” persists up to this day.

The qualifying phrase “in degree” implies that one is higher or lower than the other depending on the scale. Unfortunately, in the document, there is no explanation of the “in degree” qualification. But in the institutional logic of the hierarchical Church, the ordained priesthood seems to be higher than the universal or common priesthood. Even assuming with great difficulty that the former is not higher than the latter, the view that there are now two existing priesthoods parallel to each other is theologically indefensible. Thus, the in-degree distinction becomes meaningless.

John O’Malley puts the LG teaching in forthright terms: “Baptism. . . is the basis for equality in the church, and the sacrament of Orders the basis for the inequality.”²⁷ The clergy are a separate, higher class because they are not part (anymore) of the laity by virtue of the ontological distinction. In addition, the clergy

the Church: A Historical and Pastoral Approach (Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), 31-104.

²⁶ Amado L. Picardal, CSsR, *The Priesthood in a Church Renewed: Priestly Ministry & Spirituality based on Vatican II & PCP II Vision*, foreword by Archbishop Socrates Villegas, DD (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundation, 2016), 16-17.

²⁷ John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 186.

has undergone two ontological transformations: the first one as baptized believers (actually, lay) and the second one as ordained creatures. No theologian will argue that the ordained priesthood has written off the ordained minister's baptismal being.

Many Catholics know that the commission headed by the ultra-conservative Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviano tasked to write the initial draft for the assembly discussions produced a working document that was heavily criticized by a group of bishops who were relentlessly pushing for a Church that was open to *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*.²⁸ The overhauled draft now which had the chapter on People of God came ahead of the chapter on hierarchy followed by the chapter on the Laity. Putting People of God in front was meant to serve notice that the hierarchy (positioned at the beginning of the conservative draft) was in the service of the Church, the People of God, a challenge to the centuries-old hierarchicalism as well as clericalism that had weighed heavily on the Church which considerably diminished her institutional credibility as a witnessing religious entity to the gospel's discipleship of equals.

Paul Lakeland, however, shares an astute observation that "turning to the hierarchy before discussing the laity is a reversion to a pyramidal understanding of the Church" although he clarifies "that is by no means implied in a proper understanding of hierarchy."²⁹ It looks like, to me, a modified version of the gospel's "The first will be the last, and the last will be the first" which is: "the first will still be the first even if they serve for the good of the church." Lakeland suggests that if the material in the current chapters 2 and 4 are to be placed ahead of the discussion on

²⁸ The conservatives represented the "[t]raditional sensibility that would prefer a structure that began by treating the hierarchical nature of the church and then went on to discuss each level, starting with the 'highest' and proceeding to the laity at the bottom of the pyramid. A more theologically contemporary approach would want a document that started from scriptural imagery and then treated the character of the church thematically rather than structurally, perhaps stressing the marks of holiness, community, and universality" (Paul Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* (New York/London: Continuum, 2003), 88).

²⁹ Lakeland, *A Council*, 63.

hierarchy this “would have been even more revolutionary.”³⁰ The re-ordering would *immediately* (italics mine) “suggests, among other things, that hierarchy is an element within a baptismal understanding of the whole priestly community.”³¹ As things appear in LG a “different vision, in which the *rooting of hierarchy in apostolic authority* (italics mine) cannot but make us see lay people as subordinate if not second-class members of the community of faith” is reinforced.³²

The concept of apostolic succession which is exclusively applied to the hierarchy appears repeatedly in Chapter 3 of LG’s Chapter 3 On the “Hierarchical Structure of the Church” and in particular on the “Episcopate.” As per my count, the words “succession” and “successor” applied exclusively to the hierarchy recur 18 times in the chapter. The first section of the chapter has immediate reference to the more clergy-friendly concept:

This Sacred Council, following closely in the footsteps of the First Vatican Council, with that Council teaches and declares that Jesus Christ, the eternal Shepherd, established His holy Church, having sent forth the apostles as He Himself had been sent by the Father;(136) and He willed that their successors, namely the bishops, should be shepherds in His Church even to the consummation of the world. . . (T)his Council is resolved to declare and proclaim before all men the doctrine concerning bishops, the successors of the apostles, who together with the successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ,(2) the visible Head of the whole Church, govern the house of the living God (18, n. 2).*

The above formulation can shield the episcopal office and authority enjoyed for many centuries by the bishops from a more lay-friendly hermeneutic that favors an inclusive understanding of the concept of apostolic succession. The latter is what Congar was arguing for. Apostolicity in its apostolic origin is not just an episcopal characteristic but a mark of the whole community of faith, which the laity possessed. In practice, it is not something delegated by the bishop or the ordained cleric due to the shortage

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. Actually, the root meaning of “hierarchy” is not ordering or ranking in importance but as ‘ordering to mission.’ Everyone has a place in the hierarchy originally understood (Ibid., 79).

³² Ibid., 63.

of ecclesiastical personnel relegating the laity to being second string.³³

In the New Testament, the designation ‘apostle’ (Gk. Ἀπόστολος, *apostolos*) means “somebody sent” or “ambassador.”³⁴ It has various shades of meaning: it can refer to the twelve (Mt. 10:2; Mk. 6:30; Gal. 1:17), to the ambassadors of the Church (Acts 14:4; See. 13:3), to the authorized messenger or messengers of the Churches (Jn. 13:16; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25), to missionaries (1 Cor. 12:28; 15:7; 2 Cor. 11:5; Rev. 2:2), or to Christ himself (Heb. 3:1). The Pauline writings suggest a twofold meaning of the word: (1) those who are witnesses of the risen Lord, to whom the crucified Lord has revealed himself as living; (b) those who have been commissioned by the Lord for missionary preaching.³⁵

The apostles, actual witnesses of Jesus’ ministry, passion, and resurrection, occupied a unique irreplaceable role in the living tradition of Christianity. They symbolized not the ordained clergy but the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Apostolicity, in its inclusive sense, refers to the whole church - witnesses of the Word - being commissioned and sent by Jesus Christ to proclaim the good news of salvation.

The exercise of the apostolate in the world outside official hierarchical commissioning is of the laity. The laity by his/her baptismal calling does not have to be officially commissioned by the hierarchy to be able to exercise their apostolate in the secular world. For instance, laypersons who commit themselves to human rights, justice, or ecological causes as their conscious response to their baptismal calling are acting as true apostles.

To be sure, many tasks inside the Church cannot be done on the plane of the autonomous lay apostolate. Official tasks like

³³ See *Ibid.*, 95-97.

³⁴ Gerald O’Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and exp. version (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2001), s.v. “apostle.” See Hans Kung, *The Church*, 346. The concept of apostle was derived from the Hebrew “*schaliach*” [e.g. 1 Kg. 14:6, where a prophet appears as God’s messenger], which during the post-exilic period technically referred to the envoys of Jewish authorities.

³⁵ See II Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25. See the first verses of I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Romans; see also Ephesians, Colossians, I and II Timothy, Titus.

being lay presiders in the celebration of the world, being Eucharistic ministers, or being lectors or sacristans are, in a sense, a sharing in the power of the hierarchy because they are delegated by the latter. As such these tasks, following Karl Rahner's thinking, are not genuine expressions of the lay apostolate that enjoys autonomy if we consider them as "lay."³⁶ Since the lay *co-worker* has shared clerical authority, then he can be treated as a cleric, albeit unofficially.³⁷ This kind of hierarchical arrangement can, in practice, make the serving laypersons vulnerable to an authoritarian or commanding style of clerical leadership.

The chapter on the laity almost ends with section 37. It spells out the right of the laity to avail of the services of the clergy especially that of the word of God and the sacrament. To the extent of their knowledge, competence, or authority the laity is entitled, and indeed sometimes duty-bound to express their opinion on matters which concern the good of the church. However, the right of expression should be done through the institutions established by the church for that purpose. While at it, the laity's actions should be done truthfully, courageously, prudently, reverently, and charitably. The document is silent again on who will institute the channels of dialogue at various levels from parish to diocese at least.

Lakeland asks in the same vein and presses further:

The laity should speak out, when necessary *through the institutions established by the Church for that purpose*. But what precisely are those institutions? Where in our current ecclesial life is there an institution through which laity may appropriately have a voice? These 'institutions' simply do not exist and when laity gives voice to their concerns in noninstitutional venues, it then becomes so easy to classify them as 'dissidents.' The evident message of the Council fathers is that there will be times when serious issues will lead lay people to take stands

³⁶ Karl Rahner, "Notes on the Lay Apostolate," in *Theological Investigations II, Man in the Church* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1963), 319-52.

³⁷ See Lakeland, *A Council*, 97.

for the good of the Church and will be critical of prevailing practices or past or present abuses. How to exercise this right and responsibility remains a serious challenge for responsible lay people today, and one that *Lumen Gentium* failed to address or perhaps left to the developing wisdom of the Church of the future.³⁸

Turning to the ordained ministers, section 37 advises them that while “the laity should promptly accept in Christian obedience what is decided by the pastors, the pastors in their turn “should recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity in the Church. They should willingly use their prudent advice and confidently assign duties to them in the service of the church, leaving them freedom and scope for acting.” To be sure the separation of function is mutually beneficial to both laity and clergy since “(l)ay responsibility is strengthened and their enthusiasm for cooperation is enhanced while the pastors in their turn are enabled to judge more clearly and more appropriately in spiritual and temporal matters.”³⁹

The above council points are well articulated. But there is one discordant note in the document. This is located in paragraph 2 of section 37: “Like all the faithful, the laity should promptly accept in Christian obedience what is decided by the pastors who, as teachers and rulers of the church, represent Christ. In this, they will follow Christ’s example who, by his obedience to the point of death, opened the blessed way of the liberty of the children of God to all of humanity” (37).⁴⁰

³⁸ Lakeland, *A Council*, 70.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁰ Pope Paul VI: “Indeed no one can take it amiss that the normal instrumental cause of divine design is the Hierarchy, or that, in the Church, efficacy is proportional to one’s adherence to those whom Christ “has made guardians to feed the Church of the Lord.” Anyone who attempts to act without the Hierarchy or against it . . . could be compared to a branch which atrophies because it is no longer connected with the stem which provided its sap” (Paul VI, “Allocutio Moderatoribus ac Membria et ‘Consilio de Laicis’ qui octavo plenario Coetui Romae habito interfuerunt,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 62 (1970): 213-216 quoted in Doohan, *Lay Centered*, 5).

This is a “reaffirmation of truth in traditional language” expressed in a “heavy-handed style.” Lakeland suspects that the hierarchy-friendly point is made “to satisfy those of a more traditional disposition” to account for the “unnecessary stress on obedience.”⁴¹ The virtue of obedience performed in the spirit of Christ as a response to the teaching authority of the Church on matters of doctrine and faith is good. But “to invoke Christ’s example to insist on a quiescent attitude in face of the local pastor’s prudential decisions. . . does not fit at all well with the recognition both of the lay person’s right and responsibility to be assertive when necessary and of the pastor’s needs at times to be guided by their good sense and expertise.”⁴²

B. Revisiting the Layperson Undefined

While the clergy’s ontological being is clearly defined in *LG*, the document is silent on the layperson’s fundamental identity. Paul Lakeland raises an apropos point vis-à-vis the unstated essence of a layperson as distinct from that of the ordained. He does not believe that the baptismal being of the ordained minister is gone. He affirms that “. . . while the newly ordained priest retains the baptismal priesthood” when he enters “the hierarchical priesthood, he is no longer a lay person.” But he hastens to add: “Not only does this prove the truth of the claim that baptism is not the mark of the layperson, but it also shows very clearly that sacramentally speaking, there is no mark of the lay status that lay people possess and the ordained minister does not.”⁴³

Lakeland continues:

Ordination to hierarchical priesthood comes later and is always related to the common priesthood of all Christians. It is the common priesthood that mandates, a priestly ministry for all, lay as well as clergy, in virtue of baptism. If there were no

⁴¹ Lakeland, *A Council*, 69.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 62.

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ministerial priesthood, there would still be the common priesthood of all. But if there were no common priesthood in virtue of baptism, there would simply be no church.”⁴⁴

Lakeland highlights the problem of defining what it is to be a layperson. He continues:

It is quite easy to define what it is to be a Christian – a baptized believer – and equally unproblematic to identify a priest as one who has received the sacrament of orders. But while the ordained minister, again according to current rather traditional understanding is ontologically distinguished from the layperson, the layperson can be understood ontologically only as a baptized Christian (like the priest) who has not received the sacrament of orders.⁴⁵

Beyond that, defining the layperson remains elusive nearly 60 years after Vatican II.

Yves Congar is right on target when he asserts that the Church tended to treat lay people as “negative creatures,” that is, they are neither ordained, and, to insert the religious into the equation, nor vowed religious. Moreover, the ontological question cannot be reduced to distinguishing the ordained from the laity *simply based on the work* (italics mine) the laity does as their actual response to the Christian calling.⁴⁶

Since the conciliar participants did not address the question of the theological status of the laity head-on, they settled with the “important but secondary question” of the difference *in roles*. The clergy is clearly defined by their ordination added to the baptismal priesthood while the laity are described as just the baptized with no additional qualification. Yet, “the Council document is at great pains to stress the radical equality of all Christians in virtue of their common baptism and their common

⁴⁴ Lakeland, *A Council*, 80-81

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

responsibility for the evangelization of the world.”⁴⁷ After Vatican II, Congar made his point: “A classification of the layman by reference to the cleric” was no longer acceptable.⁴⁸ The vital question is to be addressed because if the sacrament of Holy Orders is added on top of the common priesthood, what is that which “does not make the idea of a lay person somehow a kind of a remainder concept, even a remainder who are more than 95% of the whole?”⁴⁹

Chapter 4 on the Laity right at the beginning connects it back to Chapter 2’s People of God. The former avers that *everything that has been said of the people of God is addressed equally to the laity, religious, and clergy* (LG 30). The laity is everyone, except clergy and those in religious life, who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are constituted the People of God, who have been made sharers in their own way in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ and play their part in carrying out the mission of the whole Christian people in the church and the world (LG 31).

The above rubric may be helpful in a way but it is not enough to fundamentally distinguish the laity on one side from the clergy and the religious on the other side for Article 31 applies as well to both classes.⁵⁰ LG does emphasize the secular character special to the laity (31) but people in the Holy Orders and the vowed religious may sometimes be engaged or do engage in secular activities – like paying their taxes, exercising their right to vote, etc. In particular, the religious bear outstanding and striking witness that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes (31). Is this not an invitation as well to the laity and the clergy by their baptism and confirmation? In addition, since the special secular character of the laity does not mean that they are disconnected somehow from their Christian life and its responsibilities, we “could just as easily maintain that clergy

⁴⁷ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁸ Yves Congar, *Laypeople in the Church: A Study for a Theology of Laity*, 2nd ed (Long Prairie, MN: Newman Press, 1965), 25.

⁴⁹ Lakeland, *A Council*, 71.

⁵⁰ See Ibid., 64.

and religious are secular, too, and indeed, that the Church itself is a secular reality.”⁵¹

The situation becomes even murkier when we interrogate the nature of the religious life. Is it an intermediary category between the laity and the clergy? Are the religious people “quasi-clerical” or “lay” as the occasion suits? The profession of vows of sisters does not affect ontological change parallel to that in baptism or holy orders. In this light, the religious sisters and the non-ordained religious brothers are theologically classified as lay. Their charitable works in the secular world testify to their being more laity than clergy. Hence, there is no fundamental theological reason why separate the religious (non-ordained priests and nuns) from the lay in terms of being.

Going back to the notion of ontological change vis-à-vis the vowed life in a religious order, there are many religious who are ordained priests. There are religious who are not ordained like the sisters and brothers, hence they are not ontologically changed. The religious have a vow of chastity which essentially includes celibacy, while the ordination to the ministerial priesthood requires only a promise to obey the law of celibacy of the Western Church. In some circumstances, the required celibacy could be dispensed.⁵² Yet it is a matter of historical record that the religious witness of celibacy it was that led to the imposed law of celibacy for the clergy in the Western Church again. “The way of life of the priest who is ontologically changed is in this respect at least patterned on the life of religious who are not ontologically changed.”⁵³ Lakeland presses his argument further: “Surely the vocation to religious life is similarly dramatic to that of the priest and canonically, at least, it seems that with solemn vows there is a kind of permanence. Yet the vows can be dispensed, and the individual can return to lay life, and there is never any hint of substantial ontological change in the language of surrounding religious profession.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 65.

⁵² A well-known example is the case of Episcopalian priests who are married and have become Catholics and are allowed to function with their priestly ministry.

⁵³ Lakeland, *A Council*, 82.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 83.

CONCLUSION

From the start (before *Lumen Gentium* took its final shape), Vatican II was a battleground of two quite different paradigms represented by the minority (conservative) and the majority (progressive) groups respectively. The former informed by “traditional sensibility. . . would prefer a structure that began by treating the hierarchical nature of the church and then went on to discuss each level, starting with the ‘highest’ and proceeding to the laity at the bottom of the pyramid.” The latter impelled by “a more theologically contemporary approach would want a document that started from scriptural imagery and then treated the character of the church thematically rather than structurally, perhaps stressing the marks of holiness, community, and universality.” To keep the process moving, “*Lumen Gentium* (LG) had to satisfy these two constituencies and did so by interweaving both approaches into one document.”⁵⁵

The interwoven approaches could be expressed in the way Aloysius Pieris interprets *Lumen Gentium*: “The church is essentially hierarchical, according to the Council, though the essence of the church is not the hierarchy but People-hood.” He proffers this as “the ecclesiological perspective of Vatican II and it alone should serve as the ‘hermeneutical key’ to understand and interpret certain inconsistencies that have crept into its documents. . . .”⁵⁶

However, not all in the church hierarchy share Pieris’ hermeneutical lens. Privileging perhaps hermeneutics of continuity as they see fit, they could cite statements from *Lumen Gentium* to support their preference for a medieval version of the hierarchical church marked by a “highly centralized mode of operation, with its top-down style of management and apodictic mode of communication.”⁵⁷ The character theology, which has weak support, if at all, in the New Testament teachings and practice and the exclusive appropriation by the hierarchy of the principle of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁶ Pieris, *Give Vatican II a Chance*, 165.

⁵⁷ O’Malley, *What Happened*, 193.

apostolic succession so emphasized in the council document are potentially ideological ammunition to keep at bay meaningful and wider lay participation in the church being relentlessly pursued by Pope Francis' synodal Church.⁵⁸

The church's teaching on ontological distinction and the ecclesiological question of the non-definition of the laity call for a rethinking and reformulation given the synodal Church. This is to be done to progressively bridge the gap between the clergy and the laity, which persists up until today, or, in radical terms, to flatten the pyramid into a circle of communion. A way out of the council-taught ontological distinction that props up the pyramid is the proposals made by Leonard Doohan and Richard Gaillardetz. The former is convinced that "the term *laity* is now theologically dead. Originally it meant 'the people of God,' 'the ecclesial people.' The word now has many theologically erroneous positions attached to its normal everyday meaning and use, and so it seems to concretize within itself the history of our mistakes."⁵⁹ Gaillardetz suggests that the Vatican's theology of the laity does not have any future because "it is problematic in its fundamental conception," that is, that the lay is described merely as distinct from the clergy, their ecclesial ministry is not a ministry proper to the ordained. For him, the council's theology of the laity "functioned merely as but a transitional treatment of church membership that must eventually

⁵⁸ A good example is Allan Schreck's "back to basics" appeal as reflective of the group's ecclesiological leaning. He writes: "Sometimes those outside the church think of Catholicism as a very confusing system of belief. Or they are scandalized because, although Catholics have a 'hierarchy' - a 'chain of command' - and a fairly clear set of teachings, many Catholics act as if they can believe whatever they wish. (They often do this under the rubric of 'following one's conscience,' which they say Vatican II authorized. We Catholics need to be clear about what we believe and then act according to the faith we have received" (Allan Schreck, *Vatican II: The Crisis and the Promise* (Servant Books, 2005), 50). He puts stress on the apostolic succession solely applied to the college of bishops, from "college" (quotation marks, Schreck's) of apostles to the college of bishops (Ibid.); cf. Wooden, "Cardinal Burke."

⁵⁹ Doohan, *The Lay-Centered Church*, 23; Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Does Vatican II's Theology have a Future?," October 10, 2010, accessed October 15, 2023 <https://www.bc.edu/bc-eb/schools/stm/sites/encore/main/2010/theology-laity-future.html>).

give way to the council's halting but immeasurably more profound church vision, namely that the church is comprised first, last, and always, of the Christian faithful sent forth in baptism to preach the good news of Jesus Christ and serve the coming reign of God."⁶⁰

On the ground, Pope Francis has given us a clue on how to realize the from-pyramid-to-circle synodal vision at least on the institutional-official level. Bring in more lay participants to have a stronger voice in the decision-making process and structures of the Church. They comprise more than 95% of the population all over the Catholic world.

Hans Kung writing on behalf of the lay faithful boldly asserts: "For as long as I can continue advice and work, but being excluded from decision-making, I remain no matter how many fine things are said about my status, a second-class member of the family: I am more an object which is utilized than a subject who is actively responsible. The person who can advise and collaborate, but not participate in decision-making in a manner befitting that person's status, is not the Church, but only *belongs to* the Church."⁶¹

The above are practical steps that can pave the way for the sidelining of the lay-clergy distinction representing a two-tiered Church still.

The tradition of inclusive participation did not begin during the medieval period. In the context of the origin of the Christian movement contemporaneous with the evolution of the nuclear church, the first ever Church council recorded in the Acts of the Apostles had no clerics as we understand it now. In its historical context, the Council had only lay participants who were also 'clerics,' in the NT sense of the word united in one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (Eph. 4:5).⁶² There was no class of

⁶⁰ Gaillardetz, "Does Vatican II's Theology Have a Future?"

⁶¹ Hans Kung, *Reforming the Church Today: Keeping Hope Alive* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 75. More than 70 years ago, Pius XII already taught that the laity were the Church. Haag cites him: "The faithful, and more precisely the laity, stand in the foremost line of the Church's life. For them the Church is the vital principle of human society. Hence they, especially they, should have an even clearer awareness not just of belonging to the Church but of *being the Church* (italics, mine)" (Haag, *Upstairs*, 16, footnote 18).

⁶² See footnote 13 of the paper.

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ontologically changed ordained beings existing then, hence, there was no ecclesiastical authority enjoying primacy to dominate the discussions and vote. It was all a truly meaningful exercise of synodality.

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