

Calling and mission of lay people after Vaticanum II

Helmut Krätzl, auxiliary bishop emeritus of Vienna

Without getting lost in historical observations, first a very short survey of the changing position of lay people in the Roman Catholic Church.

From “Catholicism of organisations” to “common priesthood”

Confronted with the Liberalism arising in the 19th century the Catholics united in order to defend the interests of the Church and to represent their ideas in public.¹ Under Pius XI the Catholic Action got special priority. He defined it as “collaboration and participation of the lay people in the hierarchic apostolate of the Church.”² At the same time the youth was to be strengthened against the growing National Socialism by means of this union. Thus during the Nazi time the CA was the only form able to survive, very near to the Church, around the altar, as the other associations had been closed down by the regime. After the war there was disagreement in how far the former associations should be revived or not and which relationship they had to the hierarchy. To a large extent the CA was still given priority.

Like a lot of other things the position of the so-called “lay people” – I will show later why I speak of “so-called lay people” – within the Church has been changed essentially by the Council. The Church is no more seen as mainly hierarchical, but first of all as God’s people, in which all members have the same dignity. Theologically that is based on the “common priesthood”.

In art. 10 of LG the common priesthood of the faithful (*sacerdotium commune*) is explained in a way “arousing attention” and opposed to the priesthood of service (the hierarchical priesthood). O. H. Pesch says, that is the first time in an official church document.³ That is so astonishing because “common priesthood” reminded too much of the “general priesthood” such as Luther emphasized it in opposition to the Catholic doctrine. But now “Common priesthood” was the logical consequence of the new view of the Church professed by the Council.

In LG 10 it says: “Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men (cp. Hebr. 5, 1-5), made the new people “a kingdom and priests to God the Father” (cp. Rev. 1, 6; 5, 9.10). The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvellous light (cp. 1 Peter 2, 4-10).”

Therefore by baptism consecrated to a holy priesthood. Consecration by baptism is the basis of all other sacraments, of ordination, too.

And in LG 32 the distinction from ordination is described in this way: “And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others,

¹ Cp. P. Becher, Art. Katholische Aktion in: LThK ³ 1996, vol. 5, 1347 f

² Pius XI, Address to the youth in Germany, 27/10/1933

³ O. H. Pesch, Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil. Würzburg ² 1994, 174

yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ. For the distinction which the Lord made between sacred ministers and the rest of the People of God bears within it a certain union, since pastors and the other faithful are bound to each other by a mutual need. Pastors of the Church, following the example of the Lord, should minister to one another and to the other faithful. These in their turn should enthusiastically lend their joint assistance to their pastors and teachers. Thus in their diversity all bear witness to the wonderful unity in the Body of Christ. This very diversity of graces, ministries and works gathers the children of God into one, because “all these things are the work of one and the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12, 11).”

Those compact theological words must be summarized as follows:

- 1) By baptism and confirmation everybody first of all has the same dignity. It must be noticed that here there is no word of *lay people*, but of pastors and the other faithful.
- 2) The distinction in the vocation does not exclude the union, but *include* it. A union of all in the unity in the body of Christ.
- .3) The pastors should minister the others following the example of the Lord, these, however, should work together with them very closely.
- 4) The mission to the common priesthood is not delegated by church officials, but by the sacraments of baptism and confirmation.

Who, then, is a lay person?

This question is put by the post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles laici* nr. 9 referring to LG 31: “The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.”

By the term “layman” a “non-expert” is meant in everyday language. But as there are more than a milliard Roman-Catholic Christians, the ordained persons together, however, constitute less than 1 %, lay people are so to say the whole people of God. Isn't the term lay people in this case misleading? ⁴ Thus after the Council one should not talk about lay people any more, as all have been consecrated as “priests” by baptism and confirmation.

Sharing in the threefold functions of Christ

At the Council the re-discovery of the common priesthood was no stopgap solution in front of the ever more threatening shortage of priests. The Council on the contrary went back to the apostolic and early church fundamentals: every baptized and confirmed person has got a present, but is also taken into duty by his/her communion with Christ. ⁵ And in this communion he/she shares in the threefold service of Christ himself.

⁴ Th. Schneider, *Die aufgegebene Reform. Vergessene Impulse und bleibender Auftrag des Zweiten Vatikanums*. Ed. Grünewald 2012, 154

⁵ Schneider 156

Sharing in the priestly function of Christ

Elmar Mitterstieler, for many years spiritual assistant at the seminaries at Vienna and Brixen, has written a very impressive book on the common priesthood.⁶ When describing the sharing in the priestly service of Christ he especially emphasizes the free access to God. In the Jewish and heathen environment the priest had a preeminent position, because he was allowed to approach the holy and holiest districts of the deity, and thus constituted a mediator between the human being and the godhead. In many respects the priest of the New Testament, too, enjoys such a special position, very near the inner sanctum, which he imparts. For that special respect was owed to him, and “reverend” titles.

But by our consecration in baptism we have all been received in Jesus’ personal relationship to God, “which is unique in its confidence and proximity and which he shares totally unconditionally, open-minded and lovingly with us, his sisters and brothers. For that’s why he has become one of us”⁷. In him we all are priests, have free access to God, to his and our father. We ourselves have access and can open it for others.

In the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (AA) the right and the duty to the apostolate is derived from this union.⁸ By baptism incorporated in the mystical body of Christ and by confirmation confirmed with the strength of the Holy Spirit, they are confided with the apostolate by the Lord himself. “They are consecrated for the royal priesthood and the holy people (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10) not only that they may offer spiritual sacrifices in everything they do but also that they may witness to Christ throughout the world.”

Although Christ’s sacrifice was offered once for all times and we could not add anything at all to that, the Letter to the Hebrews demands of us in spite of that “to offer sacrifices through him”.⁹ The Council explains that in this way. It enumerates the deeds which we consecrate to God in Christ: prayers, apostolic undertakings, marriage and family life, daily work, spiritual and bodily relaxation, but also the burdens of life. They are “spiritual sacrifices, pleasing to God, through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2, 5). And at the celebration of the Eucharist they are offered to the Father in awe together with the offering of the Lord’s body. Again the Council says: “Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.”¹⁰ Thus lay people consecrate the world!

In this context there must also be seen the call in the Constitution on the Liturgy SC 14 to participate actively in the liturgical celebration, as the essence of liturgy itself demands it and the Christian people, the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, God’s own people (1 Peter 2, 9; cp. 2, 4-5) have the right and the duty to realize it by virtue of their baptism.

Participation in Christ’s priestly function opens up a new understanding of the celebration of the mass. As our whole life is offered, that concretely means the apostolic undertakings, too. And I ask myself, if at a mass in which a lot of ordained priests take

⁶ E. Mitterstieler, Das wunderbare Licht, in dem wir leben. Gleichheit, Würde und Priestertum aller in der Kirche. Würzburg² 2012

⁷ Mitterstieler 55

⁸ AA 3

⁹ Hebr. 13, 15

¹⁰ LG 34, 2

part those – apart from the priest presiding at the mass - couldn't, better shouldn't absolutely celebrate together with the other faithful. He need not almost ostentatiously put himself opposite the people among the group of ordained priests.

Sharing in the prophetic function of Christ

Prophets are not those who predict the future, but those who know how to interpret the signs of the time, but also call to repentance by the testimony of their lives and point to the promises.

The Council teaches us: “Christ, the great Prophet, ... continually fulfils His prophetic office until the complete manifestation of glory. He does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority, but also through the laity whom He made His witnesses and to whom He gave understanding of the faith (*sensu fidei*) and an attractiveness in speech, so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life.”¹¹

Here the faithful introduce into the world of the hierarchy their sense of faith and the attractiveness in speech with which they have been provided. It is good that here the faithful are directly promised the sense of faith and the attractiveness of speech, and there is not immediately, as usual, reference to the guidance by the “sacred teaching authority” (LG 12). Here it becomes obvious to which extent the very faith of the simple people can be “prophetic”. And Jesus’ praise comes to one’s mind: “I praise you, father, because you have concealed all that from the wise and the clever ones, but revealed it to the immature ones.” (Mat. 11, 25) For thus the prophecy of Joel is fulfilled: “In the last days it will happen, I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, your sons and daughters will be prophets.”¹² And in the first community speaking prophetic words was indeed a gift of the spirit, which was estimated still higher than speaking in tongues.

How important, therefore, would it be today to respect the sense of faith of the lay people and to believe in their attractiveness in speech, of women, too, as Joel speaks of sons and daughters. Only in this way we can get to know and interpret the signs of the time directly out of life.

But we must consider the testimony, too. The testimony of life in total dedication to other human beings, especially to ill and poor ones, the faithfulness in faithless or even hostile environments, the often incomprehensible strength in the trials of life, but also, not least, the trust in what is still lying ahead, being with God. Prophets have the last things in mind, too!

Sharing in the kingly function of Christ¹³

Jesus has come to spread God’s kingdom. LG 36,1 “But the Lord wishes to spread His kingdom also by means of the laity, namely, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace. In this kingdom creation itself

¹¹ LG 35

¹² Quoted in Acts 2, 17

¹³ Mitterstieler 127

will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God.”¹⁴

During his questioning by Pilate Jesus professes to his kingdom. His kingdom is not of this world. But after the repeated question of Pilate he answers: “You say so, I am a king. For that I have been born and come into the world that I give testimony for the truth. Whoever is out of truth, listens to my voice.” (John 18, 37) And at his first appearance in Galilee Jesus says: “The time has been fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near.” (Marc 1, 15)

CFL 14: “Because the lay faithful belong to Christ, Lord and King of the Universe, they share in his *kingly mission* and are called by him to spread that Kingdom in history.”¹⁵ What consequences that could mean in practice!

The reign which Jesus exercises differs totally from all forms of power in this world. It consists in the unperturbed offering of his life for the human beings of this world. Such behaviour is “service, without exercising power and without relations to subjected and conquered people.” Here St. Paul’s word fits in: “We don’t want to be masters of your faith, but we are helpers to your joy.” (2 Cor. 1, 24) “Means of violence, of positioning oneself, of exploitation and humiliation of weaker ones should not be allowed to exist among us.”¹⁶

But sharing in the kingly function of Christi doesn’t only grant the right, but also impart the duty to the lay people to take co-responsibility in the church. They have to orientate themselves in the spirit of Jesus, but also have the duty to admonish, where grave mistakes are made in the exercise of power in the church administration. They are backed by the word of Jesus: “You know that the rulers suppress their peoples and the men in power misuse their power over men. Among you it should not be so, but he who wants to be great among you, should be your servant.”¹⁷

The spirit of such a kingdom must also be brought to bear in their world at large by the lay people, in their families, in their occupations, but certainly also energetically in public life and in politics.

The word rule also reminds of the story of creation. There God blesses man, whom he appoints as ruler over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all animals. (Gen. 1, 28) That was often misunderstood. Understood in God’s sense it is a rule as he himself exercises it over the creation and all human beings, over his people, “a kingly shepherd, who is concerned with the flock and its welfare”. And who shares in the kingly function of Jesus, will also contribute to the conservation of the creation in great responsibility.

Where is he right place of the “laity”?

Though all the baptized constitute God’s people and therefore everyone also has to fulfil tasks in this people according to his/her talents, the “lay people” are assigned the “character of being in the world” in a special way. “They live in the world ... They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the

¹⁴ LG 36,1

¹⁵ CFL 14,7

¹⁶ Mitterstieler 130

¹⁷ Mat. 20, 25 f

Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of their lives.”¹⁸ In the time after the Council this character of the “lay people” of being in the world was more and more interpreted in a one-sided way: as if the ordained priest had to take responsibility for church matters within the community completely, the lay people, however, had to take over the “service to the world”. In the post-synodal exhortation *Christifideles laici* (CFL), published after the bishops’ synod on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World in 1987, there was even a warning at the very beginning that the way which the lay people had taken after the Council had not been “without its difficulties and dangers”. The Pope was thinking of two temptations. “The temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world.”¹⁹ Some people expressed that in a rather polemical form: “The lay people crowd around the altar instead of fulfilling their tasks in the world.” Quite opposite to the spirit of the Council here a separation of two classes seems to reappear, the ordained clergy on the one side, the lay people in the world on the other side. Yet the lay people are standing in the midst of the Church, the Church as a whole, however, including the ordained ones in the middle of the world as well. - As the second temptation the Pope spoke about “the temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world.” Is there really no confidence in the lay people in the world, whose experience of the world is mentioned quite frequently, that they can also point out obvious differences between orders of the Church and the lives even of convinced Catholics?

How little the consequences of the common priesthood and thus of the new relation between priests and lay people was worked up after the Council, is shown by the Instruction of August 15th, 1997 “On some questions about the collaboration of lay people in the service of the priests”, which was very restrictive. It was published by 8 Roman Congregations and approved by the Pope himself “in forma specifica”. You almost get the impression that here frontiers are drawn which lay people should not cross. Do they by any chance enter into competition with the priests, who have dominated so far?

How independent are the lay people in their service to the world?

On the one hand the special task of the lay people is stressed, and also their wide experience there, on the other hand, however, the questions arise how independently the Catholic may act in the world, in society and politics.

How large is the space for a politician’s decisions following his/her conscience, if there is a question of matters on which the magisterium has already spoken? Is he/she then still allowed to “vote” differently, because he/she supposes (often correctly) to be able to avoid a greater evil by a compromise?

¹⁸ LG 31 ,2

¹⁹ CFL 2, 9

Are Catholic scientists allowed to enter into a dialogue open in its results with others in such complex questions as those of bioethics, although the Church has already spoken up refusing by means of traditional answers?

Or the other way round: Have Catholic politicians the right to ask for innovations in the Church which they are convinced of? Or is that considered an unjustified intervention in procedures inside the Church, as it was objected to some CDU and CSU politicians in Germany?

What freedom do lay organisations have with respect to their presenting opinions or also criticism about church procedures? It was such a painful experience that the Austrian Council of the Laity made, when it urged the necessity of long due changes and was reproached sharply by a diocesan bishop because of that.

This controversy flared up in the Federal Republic of Germany at the time of the foundation of the independent civil association *Donum vitae* in 1999. The Catholic bishops of Germany left the legal consultation system because of an order from Rome. The argument in Rome was that in these consultation institutions the certificate of the consultation could also be a precondition for an eventual abortion and that looked like assistance. Being convinced that an obligatory consultation open in its results, but directed at aims was the best possibility to reach women in conflict situations and to protect unborn life, Catholic Christians founded, together with Christians of other denominations, an independent association, which at this moment offers consultation institutions in 200 places of the Federal Republic. That activity was immediately criticized sharply by Rome, because a lay organisation could not be permitted to do something that had been forbidden to bishops just before. On the basis of that example the discussion flared up what independence lay people really have in their service to the world. Isn't it them who speak up, because of their expertise and their well-advised conscience, in essential questions of society, where the Church doesn't want or isn't able to do so officially? Doesn't that happen in a differentiated form in the spirit of their service to the world, but also in responsibility to the Lord?

“The familiar dialogue between lay people and shepherds” LG 37

First a rule of behaviour given by the Council itself! In LG 37 the correct relation between lay people and shepherds is described in a humane style unusual for a Council document. It shows how both are dependent on one another, and can only fulfil their tasks fruitfully together.

First there is mentioned what the Christian faithful have a right to. They have the right to receive from among the spiritual goods first of all the help of God's word and the sacraments in abundance from their spiritual shepherds. That's the moment to consider in which way they receive God's word. Probably first of all out of the Bible itself, as it is said explicitly in DV, and not simplistically, even restrictively mainly from the magisterium. And then the spiritual goods of the sacraments. When and from whom can they be withheld? For which reasons? In responsibility of whom?

Then the laity are called upon to “reveal to them (sc. the spiritual shepherds) their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which is fitting for children of God and brothers in Christ.” Here the important atmosphere of mutual encounter is touched. “With

freedom and confidence”, as is fitting for brothers in Christ. Therein I see the exhortation to a dialogue at eye level. A spiritual one, as both share in the priestly function of Christ. An intellectual one because of the special experience of the lay people in the various situations of their lives. And that’s what the Council emphasizes explicitly: “They are, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church.”

And at that point the Council document refers to two addresses of Pius XII, which have almost never got known. In 1950 at the first World Congress for the Lay Apostolate Pius XII admonished the ecclesiastical superiors to encourage the lay people to make suggestions and to accept those hereafter; for “in the decisive battles the best initiatives sometimes originate from the very front. The history of the Church shows enough examples of that.”²⁰, says the Pope.

In the same address the Pope points out to the Catholic journalists their responsibility for the forming of a public opinion in the Church. “Something would be missing in the life of the Church, if it lacked the public opinion; the blame for that would be put on both the shepherds and the faithful.” In that context you find a warning against both “a silent servant-like attitude” and “unrestrained criticism”.

But then LG 37 expresses very clearly what the shepherds should do: recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church - willingly employ their prudent advice - confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action - encourage them so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative - consider with fatherly love the projects, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity - respectfully acknowledge that just freedom which belongs to everybody in the earthly civil sphere.

Both lay people and shepherds benefit much from that familiar relation. For lay people their sense of personal responsibility is strengthened. The shepherds, aided by the help and experience of the lay people, can more clearly come to better decisions regarding both spiritual and temporal matters. “In this way, the whole Church, strengthened by each one of its members, may more effectively fulfil its mission for the life of the world.” How far is still the way to the realization of those decisions of the Council?

The Year of Faith – Recalling of the common priesthood

Thus every single Christian should in gratitude become aware of the root and the source of his/her faith, baptism. That’s, by the way, what the Austrian bishops pointed out explicitly at their last conference some days ago. But then everyone should also recognize his/her calling resulting from it and what he/she can bring to bear in the Church.

Moreover this memorial year could also lead to a still more fruitful relation between priests and lay people, between lay organisations and church administration, which is absolutely essential in the very process of new evangelization.

²⁰ In the footnote to art. 37 this address is explicitly referred to. The wording quoted here is presented literally by Ferdinand Klostermann in his commentary. Kommentar zum vierten Kapitel von LG in: LThk I, 280

May this meeting here refresh and increase your joy about the Church and offer you new strength and motivation for your irreplaceable commitment to this Church.