

# The Task of Lay Persons with Regard to the Propagation and Defense of the Faith

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By Leo J. Elders s.v.d.

Ever since the Second Vatican Council lay people in the Church have become more and more conscious of the extent of their responsibilities. On more than one occasion certain groups addressed themselves to Rome, asking the Holy Father to intervene in particular situations in their respective local churches which, in their view, could not be tolerated. A rapid excursion in history shows that in past centuries lay people have frequently carried out such tasks as evangelization of non-Christians and the defense of the Christian faith. At the beginning of the Church this apostolate was quite common. One may recall the contribution of merchants, soldiers, officials and other citizens to the spreading of the gospel message in the Roman Empire, as well as the writings of the apologists of the first centuries. St. Justinus opened a school in Rome where those who had been baptized could perfect their Christian education. While still a layman Origenes directed the catechetical school of Alexandria. Lactantius, Tertulian and Minucius Felix were laymen.

However, as from the time of St. Gregory the Great, the activities of lay people on behalf of the faith lost in importance. A clericalization of the schools of catechetics and of the education in theology set in. The Decree of Gratianus mentions two classes of Christians, clerics and lay people. Nevertheless, many kings and queens were instrumental in promoting conversions, founding churches and monasteries and urging a more solid formation of the clergy, even to such a point that in the tenth and eleventh centuries the organization of the dioceses and the appointing of bishops were to a considerable extent controlled by secular authorities. The reform of Gregory VII (1073-1085) reversed this situation. In order to suppress abuses Gregory decreed that lay persons could not take part in the designation of Church dignitaries. But a less fortunate effect of this reform was the birth of the spirit of laicism, the conflict between

Bonifatius VIII and King Philip Le Beau, the claim that the temporal order is wholly independent from the spiritual.

The Protestant Reformation of Luther is in part a prolongation of this movement toward the radical independence of the temporal order: since all the baptized are priests, what do we need priests for? The Council of Trent replied by defining the distinction between the priesthood of ordained ministers and that of the baptized. In face of the heterodox views of Luther the council fathers defined the faith and re-established to some extent the lost equilibrium. However, the task of lay persons in the field of the instruction in the faith was considerably reduced. In keeping with the praxis of the post-conciliar period, the former Codex of Canon Law limited itself to the statement that lay persons have the right to receive spiritual goods from the clergy. The encyclical *Vehermenter* of 1906 goes so far as to say that the faithful just have the duty to let themselves be guided and to follow its pastors as a docile flock.

The pastors of the Church began to realize that this kind of restriction of the role of lay people in the church *de facto* led to a certain separation of the Church from public life. To change this situation the genial pope Pius XI promoted the idea of the Catholic Action. Yet at the doctrinal level not everything was very clear. Instead of grounding the task of the Christian people on the triple office of Christ, one spoke in this case of a participation in the mission of the hierarchy.

Vatican II revolutionized the theology of the lay people in the Church: the latter have their own task in the Church, sharing as they do in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ. They must testify of Christ and sanctify the temporal order. Their mission is the evangelization of the society and the construction of the temporal order in keeping with the Gospel.

The new Codex formulates this mission of the lay people as follows: lay Christians must be active in order to make the salvation offered by God known

to all so that it is received by all the nations of the world (Canon 225). Canon 229 stipulates that lay Christians in order to be able to live up to the Christian doctrine, to announce it and when necessary to defend it, have the obligation and the right to acquire knowledge of this doctrine<sup>1</sup>. Canon 212 states that on certain occasions the faithful can and must inform the pastors of the Church about those things which concern the good of the Church, and may also inform the other Christians. It would seem that this text states the right and the duty to be vigilant with regard to the doctrine and the ecclesiastical order.

## I. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The theological foundation of this mission of lay people is the very nature of Christian life. The baptized partake in the priesthood, prophetic and even the royal office of Christ. They receive the “gift of the Spirit” to announce Him who “replaced darkness by light” (1 Peter 2, 8-9) and “to announce to the nations the great deeds of Jahweh” (Jes. 12, 1-4). The Holy Spirit lives in their hearts in order to give them understanding of the faith and strength to propagate it.

The text of the *Acts of the Apostles* presupposes the participation of the simple faithful in the ministry of the word of God. The rapid spreading of the faith and the presence of Christian communities in numerous cities of the Roman empire can only be explained by the evangelizing work of dynamic laymen. The word *didaskalos*, so often used in the *New Testament* probably denotes well educated Christians, charged by the leaders of the communities to instruct the catechumenes and to initiate them to the Christian doctrine.

St. Thomas Aquinas stresses the threefold mission of Christians<sup>2</sup>, the Church being the *pleroma*, the fullness of Christ. This unction of all Christians is a certain anticipation of the end of time, when the magistry will have fulfilled its task and the sacraments will no longer be administered. St. Augustin reminds us that parents must direct and instruct their children and so to say perform an ecclesial and episcopal function<sup>3</sup>.

For some people this mission is beset with difficulties. In their view lay people are subordinated to the magistry of the Church, they cannot conceive

how the latter could possibly teach the Christian doctrine. But one must distinguish between a) preaching divine revelation with authority both in public and in private; b) admonishments to convert and to lead a Christian life; c) the study and theological teaching of Christian doctrine. When these three forms of instruction are exercised at the public level, an explicit or implicit mandate by the magistry of the Church is required. In this respect we nowadays speak of the *missio canonica*, but already during the Middle Ages the need of this mandate was acknowledged. One may recall the interventions of the popes with regard to the Waldenses and other lay preachers. But with regard to admonishing people to convert or for instructing the scientific aspects of theology such a mandate seems less necessary.

We must not conceive the magistry as the only depositary of the treasure of Christian doctrine since that belongs to the Church as a whole. The Spirit of God descends on the entire Church and makes it remain faithful to revealed doctrine. As the illustrious theologian Matthias Scheeben wrote, the Tradition, that is the Christian life in its entirety is transmitted by the entire Church<sup>4</sup>. The modernists understood this fact as a reduction of the mission of the magistry which should do no more than express and formulate the opinions prevalent among the faithful<sup>5</sup>. This opinion is also held by some contemporary authors who suggest that bishops should not and cannot prescribe or regulate anything without haven previously consulted the faithful. Some even go so far as to say that bishops must only express the concerns of the faithful<sup>6</sup> and follow the people rather than direct it.

What is right in this opinion is that the body of the faithful is one of the witnesses of the tradition of what God has revealed and that a consensus of all is the voice of the infallible Church<sup>7</sup>. As Paulinus of Nola said, it is necessary to listen to all the faithful, since the Spirit inspires them. Several of the Fathers made identical statements. It is a fact that prior to the solemn proclamation of the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and her Assumption the Popes consulted the faithful. For instance, in the letter *Deiparae Virginis*<sup>8</sup> the Pope writes “in unison with the clergy and your faithful”.

The duty to consult the faithful does not exclude at all that the faith of the Christians is based on the preaching of the apostles, but means that only the

Magistry of the Church can define what in one way or another is present in the faith of the entire Church. In the article of J.H. Newman which we have just quoted the cardinal explains what is the meaning of this consciousness of the Christian people. Their consensus is a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit and witnesses to the doctrine of the apostles. It is a sign of a supernatural instinct deep in the heart of the Mystical Body. The faithful are subject to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and await from Him an answer to their prayers. They show zeal to maintain the purity of the faith.

## II. LAY PERSONS AND THE DEFENSE OF THE FAITH

In his *Lecture on Anglican Difficulties* Newman illustrates the almost spontaneous rejection by the faithful of certain errors by what a healthy organism does in rejecting what is alien to it. As a matter of fact down through the ages the Christian people have repeatedly chosen the orthodox faith and distanced themselves from false pastors. St. Hippolytus notes that the Holy Spirit grants to those who have the right faith the grace to know how those at the head of the Church must instruct it<sup>9</sup>. Well known are the words of St. Hilary of Poitiers when talking about Arianism: “Sanctiores aures plebis quam corda sacerdotum”<sup>10</sup>. In the confusion of those years the divinity of Christ was confessed rather by the *Ecclesia docta* than by the *Ecclesia docens*. The faithful supported St. Athanasius, St. Hillary and Eusebius of Vercelli. The Christians of Alexandria would rather die than subscribe to the heresy of Arianism. St. Basil writes that the lay people with the right faith did not visit the churches presided over by an Arian bishop and which had become schools of impiety<sup>11</sup>.

One notices something similar in the age of the protestant reformation and after Vatican II, when lay people tried to defend the catholic faith, but not always found support from the side of their bishops. Not the great of this world and the powerful, but the humble conduct the Church to victory. God may use the intervention of lay people to confound the priests. But when we speak about lay people, certain things must be kept in mind: they must be persons who are in quest of a saintly life and have been educated in the correct doctrine. If over a longer period a community

or group has been exposed to an insidious propaganda, it may no longer have a clear vision. It is also possible that a considerable number of Christians abandon the moral doctrine of the gospel and follow the trends predominant in their society. This seems to have happened in the field of sexual life. If Christians refuse to walk on the narrow path of Christ they lose the grace of the holy Spirit and the capacity to judge correctly in matters of the faith. Newman once wrote that the Irish have saved the Church in Ireland, but that the Catholic people in England betrayed it<sup>12</sup>.

## III. LAY PEOPLE AND EVANGELIZATION

The new Code of Canon Law enumerates among the duties of the lay people the task to spread the gospel. It fills us with joy and gratitude to commemorate that many lay persons from the very beginning of the Church until our days have carried out this task in an admirable way. We pointed out that during the first centuries of the Church soldiers, merchants and officials were very active in the evangelization of the Roman Empire. One may add what the pagan Celsus (second part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.) said about their zeal: when they can round up children or silly women, as devoid of intelligence as they themselves, they begin to explain to them the miracle stories. They go to the shop of the wool comber and of the shoemaker to teach them their wisdom. That is the way Christians try to gain adepts to their cause<sup>13</sup>.

In the beginning of the Church missionary apostolate was hardly organized. Eusebius recounts that many Christians simply sold their belongings in order to preach the gospel in other countries<sup>14</sup>. There were also itinerant bishops. In the modern time examples of this zeal are not lacking. Marc Escarbot, a lawyer, worked with great zeal for the evangelization of Canada. Carlo Cuarteron, a ship captain, who in 1850 survived a shipwreck, established a mission in Borneo. A Chinese merchant, Tsen On Nje, converted the coolies who worked in the tin mines of the island of Banka. In this connection one must also mention Pauline Jaricot and Ferdinand de Bertier de Sauvigny, the founder of the Knights of the Faith. The enormous progress mission work made in Korea is due for a great part to the zeal of lay apostles.

If we leave aside the period from the ninth to the

fifteenth century, we see that numerous lay people collaborated in the defense of the faith. Silvio Piccolomini wrote apologetic tracts to defend the faith against deviations at the Council of Basel. Contarini, who at that time was still a lay man, wrote against the errors of Luther. One may also recall the influence of Cha-teaubriand's *Le génie du christianisme*, the works of Joseph de Maistre, of Louis Veuillot, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc and Christopher Dawson<sup>15</sup>.

#### IV INSTRUCTION AND CATECHESIS

Usebius tells us that Origenes' love of Holy Scripture went back to his infancy, when his father Leonidas, taught him a great love of the Word of God. It would seem that many family fathers taught their children religion at home completing the instruction received at the pagan schools<sup>16</sup>. The same practice was followed in the family of St. Basil, Macrina and Gregory of Nyssa. St. John Chrysostom elaborated a program for the religious instruction to be given in the families<sup>17</sup>. During the third century lay catechists in Rome helped prepare the catechumens. Bishop Demetrios of Alexandria invited Origenes to teach a course of Christian religion. Thus lay persons received an official mission to teach religion classes. However, when the catechumenate got a more liturgical character, it was entrusted more and more to the exclusive care of ordained ministers.

As Michel Sauvage has shown<sup>18</sup>, many lay persons performed the functions of professors of religion and theology. They began to teach religion moved by the desire to share the truth they possessed. Many of them had been pagans, knew the weakness of the non-Christian world, but also the objections raised against Christianity. Their culture enabled them to speak the language of their time. But they were able to present the Christian doctrine. But one must also point out the appearance of heterodox lay teachers, even in Rome. The pastors of the Church attempted to keep the situation under control. Teaching Christian religion is not something to be left to the personal views of individual Christians<sup>19</sup>.

After the triumph of Christianity there was a rise of apologetic literature by numerous lay authors, such as Arnobius, Lactantius, Firmius Maternus, Victorinus and Prosper of Aquitania (who spread Augustine's doctrine of grace). The idea that the theological stud-

ies must be reserved to clerics found no supporters in the patristic period<sup>20</sup>. Because of the downfall of the Roman Empire theological studies came *de facto* to be more and more reserved to the bishops and monks<sup>21</sup>. But two laymen deserve to be mentioned who exercised a considerable influence, Boethius and Cassiodorus.

In the period between the sixth and the eleventh centuries religious instruction was reserved almost exclusively to the clergy. Lay people were illiterate, but a cultural renaissance took place in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the cities began to develop, lay preachers arose, criticizing unworthy priests and beginning to take their place, but often spreading erroneous doctrines<sup>22</sup>. As Innocentius III observed, when the priests keep silent lay people replace them but spread errors in many ways<sup>23</sup>. In this respect the movement of the Valdenses must be mentioned. They wanted to help the Church, betrayed as it was, they said, by the clergy, but soon refused to submit themselves to the authorities of the Church and wanted to do away with priests and bishops. They had very little theological knowledge<sup>24</sup>. The word *lay* had the sense of ignorant.

The upshot of our survey is that competence in the field of Christian doctrine is a condition for the ministry of the word, but that a mission by the hierarchy is also required. The Valdenses considered themselves as directly subject to God, refused to submit to the Church and so denied its very structure. One should notice that Innocentius III conceded to repented heretics the privilege of giving instruction in Christian moral doctrine, but they were not allowed to preach in the churches<sup>25</sup>. Durandus of Huesca received permission to enter into debate with heretics, so that a layman was directly associated with the defense of the faith<sup>26</sup>. St. Francis of Assisi and his brothers effectively preached but showed total submission to the authority of the Church. For preaching in churches even St. Francis needed a special permission.

In the Middle Ages as well as in classical antiquity the religious instruction of the youth was the task of the parents, who could delegate their task to suitable persons. Certain decrees of Charlemagne and several decisions by councils insisted on this point<sup>27</sup>. But in many cases this religious instruction was neglected. In the XVI<sup>th</sup> century a renewal set in<sup>28</sup>. Francis of Villanova, a wool comber, took the initiative to organize instruction in religion and elementary knowledge

for poor children. This was the origin of the Society of Christian Doctrine, whose members were for the greater part lay people and lived with their respective families but devoted their Sundays to dispense this free education. The Spanish Escolapios (St. Joseph of Calasanz), the Jesuits and many other religious groups began to answer to this need for religious instruction. In France the Brothers of the Christian Schools made a particular valuable contribution to the establishment of schools and to religious education

In this way a network of Christian schools developed in which school brothers and feminine religious were extremely active and still are. After the Second Vatican Council this powerful system began to show cracks because of the lack of vocations. Religious instruction had to be re-organized and the role of the parents became once more very important. Parishes resorted to lay volunteers to provide religious education.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Our rapid historical survey has drawn attention to the irreplaceable role of lay persons in the evangelization and the defense of the faith. Their engagement and influence change with the situation of the society and the Church. It is tempting to think that the tragic decrease of the numbers of candidates to the priesthood and religious life in our time will lead to a good, sc. that the lay people in the Church will more and more assume their role in the field of religious instruction, the defense of the faith and evangelization. But our Christian parents must also look for a solution of the frightening problem of so many of our youngsters drifting away from the faith and convert their families into centers of an intense religious life and of a high cultural level.

But our historical survey has also shown that the lay people did not always fulfill their obligations in this particular field without falling into errors. Sometimes they had insufficient knowledge, fell into heresy, were narrowminded or rejected the hierarchical structure of the Church. The lessons of the past may help us avoid the pitfalls of similar aberrations in our time. By the working of the Holy Spirit the XXIst century might well turn into an age where our catholic lay people will salvage the remnants of what once was Western Christianity and give a new impulse to evangelization and the defense of the faith<sup>29</sup>.

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> On the background of this canon see *Communicationes Pontificia Commissio iuris canonici authentice interpretando*, 17 (1985), 178-179.
- <sup>2</sup> *Lectura in Epist. ad Hebr.*, c. 1, lesson 4, 3.
- <sup>3</sup> *Epist. Parm.*, 2, 13, 28 : PL 43, 70.
- <sup>4</sup> *Dogmatik*, I, 13, n. 170; 15, n. 120.
- <sup>5</sup> One may compare the decree *Lamentabili* of 1907 which condemned this view.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. W. Goddijn, *The beheerste Kerk*.
- <sup>7</sup> J.H. Newman, *On consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (1859), ed. J. Coulson, London 1961, 63.
- <sup>8</sup> May 1, 1946.
- <sup>9</sup> *Traditio apostolica*, ch. 1.
- <sup>10</sup> "Contra Auxentium, 6: PL 10, 613.
- <sup>11</sup> *Epistula* 92. Cf. J.H. Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (1871), 445 ff.
- <sup>12</sup> See J. Coulson, J.H. Newman. *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, p. 21
- <sup>13</sup> Origenes, *Contra Celsum*, III, 49-55. cf. G. Bardy. "L'apostolat des laïques aux premiers siècles", *Masses ouvrières*, 1945, 5 ff.
- <sup>14</sup> *Hist. Ecl.*, III, 37, 2-3. See also o.c., V, 5, 10, on Pantenos, the brilliant director of the School of Alexandria, who, in his zeal to preach the gospel, traveled as far as India. Many lay persons wanted to imitate the apostles.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. Yves Congar, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat*, p. 430.
- <sup>16</sup> *H. E.*, VI, 2, 7.
- <sup>17</sup> See H.-I. Marrou, *L'histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité*, p. 565. See also Pope Gelasius, *Epist.* 97, 50: CSEL, 35, 425.
- <sup>18</sup> *Catéchèse et laïcat*, Paris 1962, 107. This section of our article is indebted to Sauvage's book.
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. G. Bardy, "Les écoles romaines, au deuxième siècle, in *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 28, (1932), 501-532
- <sup>20</sup> See H.-I. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture classique*, Paris 1938, 383.
- <sup>21</sup> Y. Congar, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat*, pp. 428 ss.
- <sup>22</sup> See P. Riché, "L'instruction des laïcs au XIIe siècle", in *Mélanges Saint Bernard*, Dijon 1954, 219-227.
- <sup>23</sup> PL 215, 819: "... canibus gregis Dominici latratum non dantibus, latrant et ipsi, non ut insidias lupi repellant, sed potius ut gregem errare faciant et dispergant".
- <sup>24</sup> See A. Dondaine, "Aux origines du valdisme", in *Arch. Fratrum Praedic.* 16 (1946) 192-232.
- <sup>25</sup> *Vetera Humiliatorum Monumenta II*, 133-134 (quoted after M. Sauvage).
- <sup>26</sup> Congar, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat*, 443.
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. PL 97, 247 ff.; PL 138, 3000; PL 151, 1170; Mansi, 14, 62; 541 (references according to M. Sauvage).
- <sup>28</sup> During the occupation of Hungary by the Turks lay people gave religious instruction. Cf. C. Juhasz, "L'apostolat laïc en Hongrie pendant l'occupation turque", in *Nouvelle revue théologique* 77 (1955), 849-859.
- <sup>29</sup> This essay was published in Spanish in *La misión del laico en la Iglesia y en el mundo*, Pamplona 1987, pp. 569-580.