

of the rejection of the council and its teaching, a movement no longer confined to the fringes of schismatic and sedevacantist groups. To face these new trials, Paul Lakeland's work represents a major contribution from which the new generation of ecclesiologists must begin.

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### III. Lakeland on the Laity, That Is, on the Church

#### *Introduction*

At this festive gathering to honor Paul Lakeland on the occasion of his retirement, we could not possibly do justice to all his theological contributions. My colleagues on this panel have already given you some idea of the scope and depth of his work. In the short time allotted to me, I want to zero in on one subject I consider perhaps Paul's most original contribution with continuing importance today, and that is his theology of the laity.

As is obvious to all, the Roman Catholic Church is led and controlled by a small group of clergy, all men, celibate men, as Paul consistently and critically points out. Church structures give this group preeminence not only in presiding over the sacraments and preaching the Word, but also in governance and juridical matters, such as handling finances, making personnel appointments, deciding policies, and decreeing what is and is not allowed in doctrinal and ethical matters. So strong is this structure at the present time, Paul notes ruefully, that when people hear the word "church" they usually think of the hierarchy, the Vatican, Rome, the institution, although in reality 95 percent of people who comprise the church are not part of that group. What else can be said about these people besides the fact that they are "not clergy"?

In numerous works Paul has been working out a strong theological answer to that question. He wrote books such as *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* (2003), which won the Catholic Press Association Award for Best Book in Theology, and *Catholicism at the Crossroads: How the Laity Can Change the Church* (2007).<sup>33</sup> His probing articles address subjects such as raising lay consciousness, lay participation in decision-making, maturity and the lay vocation, and lay ecclesial ministry.<sup>34</sup> He builds a rich picture

<sup>33</sup> Lakeland, *Catholicism at the Crossroads*.

<sup>34</sup> Some examples of Paul Lakeland's writings on these subjects are: "Raising Lay Consciousness: the Liberation of the Church," in *Changing Churches: The Local Church and the Structures of Change*, ed. Michael Warren (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press, 2000),

of the positive religious identity, the vocation, and the mission of the majority of baptized people who live their lives in the midst of the secular world.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, Paul works with the thesis that a renewed theology of the laity is actually a new theology of the church.<sup>36</sup>

To put this theology in context, I would like to highlight Paul's view of his own role as a theologian, which will frame why he pursues the question of the laity with such urgency. Then I will present, all too briefly, four highlights of his theology of the laity. I note at the outset that Paul thinks about the laity from the inside, so to speak, as someone with the experience of being himself a layman, while in younger days he once was clergy. Very few people have done such serious work on this subject, and Paul's biography gives him a special wisdom.

### *The Calling of Theologians*

In 2019, when Paul was president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, he chose to deliver his presidential address on the role of theologians, both as individuals and as a collective learned society. He laid out a compelling case that the theologian's main calling is to be a servant, a servant of the gospel, working to counter forces that dehumanize people. This address was, I think, an act of public self-definition. Even if working in a college or university setting, the theologian, instead of being wrapped up exclusively in academic affairs, needs to engage crises where people are being harmed. In the midst of troubles, the theologian should walk a path of spiritual resistance on behalf of the humanity of all people, in the name of the God of love.

It was very moving to hear him describe how he took this phrase, "spiritual resistance," from a small group of French Jesuit theologians, all priests, who resisted the Nazi occupation of France in the 1940s by secretly publishing an anti-Nazi journal. Some critics skewered the venture, saying it meant that the

163–84; "Potential Receptive Learning Within Catholicism: Lay Participation in Decision-Making," in *Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 226–40; "Maturity and the Lay Vocation: From Ecclesiology to Ecclesiality," in *Catholic Identity and the Laity*, College Theology Society Annual vol. 54, ed. Tim Muldoon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009): 241–59; and "The Lay Ecclesial Minister: Is S/he a Theological Monster?" *Concilium* 40, no. 6/1(2010): 55–63.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Lakeland, "The Laity," in *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations*, ed. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 193–208; "The Laity" in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, ed. Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge (New York: Routledge, 2008): 511–23; and *Church*.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Lakeland, "Theology of the Laity Is an Ecclesiology," *The Ecumenist: A Journal of Theology, Culture and Society* 41, no. 1 (2005): 1–6.

theologians were getting involved in politics. To the contrary, the theologians saw it as a fight inspired by the gospel for the very soul of people so they would not be seduced into collaborating with evil. The effects of this spiritual resistance were daunting. One brave Jesuit involved with the project was captured and executed by the Gestapo.

Drawing parallels between the psychic force of Nazi propaganda and the strength today of neoliberal capitalism, which tames those of us who benefit from its safety and luxuries, Paul insisted that the task of the theologian is to engage in a similar kind of spiritual resistance. “When you believe in a God of love and you define love as justice, there really is no other course of action, if indeed each individual today or the whole of occupied France back then is not to lose their soul.”<sup>37</sup>

Into the breach, then, Paul urged his colleagues! Let us be servant theologians who struggle for the humanity of people under threat and for the natural world in danger with all the vigor of our learning, of our minds, and of our hearts. And because our task as theologians is to act courageously in defense of authentic human selfhood and of the whole creation, as church theologians we also need to bring the institution along with us. This means foregrounding the gospel in ecclesiology in order to relativize structure to life.

Paul takes his own advice when he mounts “spiritual resistance” to the malaise in the church by developing a robust theology of the laity. Here I will highlight only four key points: history, identity, mission, and structure.

### ***Theology of the Laity***

#### *History*

Paul has a clear-eyed view of church history and it is radical. In the first two centuries, there were no laypeople, only Christians, he declares. Think of it! Of course, there were leaders. Paul is clear that although church structure did not come from a blueprint in Jesus’s mind, *episcopoi* (overseers or bishop leaders in the tradition of the apostles) were part of the early organization of the church and should remain so for the sake of continuity in the faith. But these leaders did not function within the powerful system of celibate clerical culture separated from the laity that currently marks the church.

In the first two centuries, there were no laypeople, only Christians. Then due to historical circumstances, the community began to take on the structure of the Roman Empire, setting up an internal top-down, hierarchical system of governance. In subsequent centuries clerical celibacy was mandated, the

<sup>37</sup> Paul Lakeland, “Crisis and Engagement: The Role of the Servant Theologian,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 74 (2019): 71–81, at 77.

papacy was isolated, and other changes crept in. The result is that laypeople today have little or no voice in the way things are run, and no vote (except with their feet). Indeed, much of the church's dysfunctionality is tied to how it squanders lay experience. This state of affairs is not essential. It has come about because of historical decisions. And it can change.

### *Identity*

In resisting this situation and seeking a remedy, Paul is very much a thinker in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and its constitution on the church, *Lumen Gentium*. First and foremost, before division into different ministries or functions, the church is basically the community of the holy people of God. There is a universal call to holiness in the church. Every baptized member of this community receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, which makes them a child of God and a sharer in the divine nature. "In this way they are really made holy."<sup>38</sup> Moved by the same Spirit, every baptized person is entrusted with the mission of Christ, to permeate the world with the love of God so it will be transformed in justice, charity, and peace. In view of their competence in secular matters, "The laity have the principal role in the overall fulfillment of this duty."<sup>39</sup> Indeed, it is "the laity who consecrate the world itself to God."<sup>40</sup>

Drawing deeply on the theology of Yves Congar, who greatly influenced these insights, Paul argues that "the baseline for understanding the People of God is as *a community of radical equality before God in virtue of a common baptism.*"<sup>41</sup> This is the starting point for a theology of the laity. Each person who is baptized puts on Christ, is consecrated by the Spirit, and is called to the mission of making God's love effective in a world of need. All together, such people form the community of the church. The core of what binds them is the experience that the loving care of God for them is supremely available in their intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ.

### *Mission*

The experience of God's loving care for them through Jesus Christ is not given to the baptized for their own good alone. They have a mission, to share and spread the love of God for the world, which means to call the world to its own deepest selfhood as a human community. Here is where a

<sup>38</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), §40, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

<sup>39</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, §36.

<sup>40</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, §34.

<sup>41</sup> Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity*, 90.

theology of the laity reshapes understanding of the church. Unlike the clergy, the life of the laity is oriented to the world. Their lives are enmeshed in the stresses of everyday life, the joys and struggles of family, finances, employment or unemployment, parenting, neighbors, politics, education, business, health care, sports, entertainment, and so forth. In these secular settings, laypeople are the ones who carry out the mission of the church, which is to share and spread the loving presence of God in the world, spiritually resisting the forces that dehumanize people and promoting human dignity.

This happens today in a pluralistic and complex society where many people get along just fine with no religion at all. The mission of the laity is not to make everything all churchy. Rather, acting with mature independence and practical self-direction, they are called to enact the love of God precisely in a secular world. Betraying a very Catholic sensibility, Paul argues that the secular world does not necessarily mean a godless world opposed to the sacred. He draws on Bonhoeffer, Habermas, and others to show that the secular world has its own integrity and basic goodness, though sin is ever-present. He recalls that regretfully the institutional church did not speak out against but encouraged slavery, antisemitism, and the subjugation of women, thereby failing catastrophically in its mission. It learned the demands of the gospel in tandem with the growing human wisdom of the secular world. This is the world created by God and suffused with the presence of Christ and the Spirit, while fully operational by natural laws. A lay spirituality locates the primary mission of the church, conducted daily by laypeople, squarely within this world loved by God.

### *Structure*

Building on these theological insights, Paul articulates a vital principle. "Leadership must always be imagined as a function of the identity of the community being led, never the other way around."<sup>42</sup> Thus, the ordained, whose ministry is focused within the church on sacraments, preaching, and pastoral care, should be seen as *support staff*. Their work is vital, but it is in service to the church's mission, which is carried out mainly by the laity. In turn, the laity are not the simple faithful, obedient to their pastors. Informed by the gospel, they carry out the mission of the church in virtue of their baptism and confirmation independent of ecclesiastical oversight, exercising their status as priests, prophets, and servant leaders in the spirit of Christ. Acting with mature independence and practical self-direction, millions of laypeople make millions of individual decisions every day that make Christ present in the world and further the coming of the reign of God. Together with their pastors, they form the community of faith.

<sup>42</sup> Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity*, 90.

Paul's radical revisioning of the laity-clergy relation, only barely touched on here, leads him to argue that we need new patterns of ministry to match the idea of the church as a *communion* of the people of God first and foremost, rather than mainly an institution, and new structures to express the growing adulthood and maturity of the laity.

If you are inclined to disagree with this analysis, Paul has one more argument to offer. In the eschaton, at the end of the world, in heaven, there will be no more Vatican, no more Roman curia or church bureaucracy, no more institutional church. These are means to an end. Just as in the first two centuries there were no laity, only Christians, so too at the end. What will endure is the communion of faithful people amid the world redeemed.

### **Conclusion**

Paul's view of the calling of theologians to be servants of the gospel courageously engaging the forces that dehumanize people intertwines with his theology of the laity. Into the breach, laypeople! Inspired by the gospel and nurtured by the Eucharist, engage in "spiritual resistance" against the greed, lust for power, and violence that so harm human beings and the natural world we inhabit. Make God's love real in the world! All else in the church should get arranged to enable this to happen.

With this theology of the laity, a new world is possible. Whether there will be a vibrant church at all in the future might well depend on Paul's findings being taken seriously.

### **Question**

A point for further reflection that I would like to raise has to do with the word "laity" itself. This word is a collective noun. Like team or company, it encompasses different kinds of people while making their specifics invisible. My own experience as a theologian with feminist leanings leads me to see gender particulars hidden beneath generalized terms. When reading Paul's work, every time he writes "laity" I see women . . . men too, of course, but women are there as the majority of the 95 percent. Now, the current clerical system is cemented into place by a theology of gender complementarity that defines man by nature as one who leads and decides, and woman by nature as one who nurtures and supports. In fact, the current clergy-lay structure, as Paul describes and criticizes it, precisely mirrors the traditional male-female relationship: Father knows best. To argue theologically that those ordained to preside at Eucharist (all men) should be seen as *support staff* in service to the church's mission, which is carried out mainly by the laity (i.e., majority women), is to completely flip gender roles. The issue is further complicated

by those today who either reject complementarity in favor of equality or do not identify with the gender binary at all.

My question for Paul asks how he might further develop and deepen his powerful theology of the laity, both theoretically and practically, in view of gender theory and the very real gendered persons who are the church. Put another way, is it possible that we will never have a fully functioning *laity* until women participate fully in all the ministries of the church?

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#### IV. With Burning Words

Looking back, I am increasingly sure that I blundered into this life of four decades as a Catholic theologian, the last two focused on issues of ecclesiology. My first love was literature, and if I had not been a Jesuit at the time that I completed my Oxford degree “reading English,” as they quaintly like to put it, I would probably have continued on that path. Instead, I spent a couple of years working in religious journalism and then went on to theological studies at London University. By the time I left the Jesuits during my doctoral studies in religion at Vanderbilt University, I was well and truly trapped. Trapped and then got lucky, when Fairfield University’s first choice for a spot in the Religious Studies department declined their offer and they turned to this Englishman who had never actually applied for the job (that was done for him by his *Doktorvater*, to whom he is of course eternally grateful), and invited him to interview, though he would have to pay his own way from London to Fairfield. The rest, as they say, is history.

My friends and colleagues whose generous words you have likely just read have discerned a pattern and path in my career that one can, of course, recognize only in retrospect. Did I know that my academic interests would develop the way they did? I don’t believe so, and yet . . . and yet. The one book that none of them mentioned was my first book, not much more than a large pamphlet really, written before I ever studied theology, as some of its critics were only too eager to point out. Still a Jesuit, I was sitting in my room one evening and a senior Jesuit stuck his head around the door and posed the question, “Is there anything you would like to write a book about?” Yes, I said, and thus was born my first literary child, *Can Women Be Priests?* One of the first such books in English, it was dedicated to the argument that there were (and still are) no genuine theological obstacles to the ordination of women to priesthood. And, by