

When all is done, Pharaoh will let my people go, the way he freed them once before. Death's kingdom on earth is forfeit, I have turned it upside down and emptied it like a woman emptying the morning's chamber. Take comfort, my people. All flesh is grass. The grass of the just man will bloom, secret like tundra, purple like maypop. The whole world, what is it? a sixteenth on the carpenter's rule. The whole law, what is it? mercy and faith. For God loves all things that are and he does not hate anything he has made. He spares all things because all things are his. Because his indestructible spirit is in all things. Death's kingdom is emptied.

APEMANTOS

## The Laity in the Life of the Parish<sup>1</sup>

DOM BENET INNES

Mgr George Talbot thought, in the last century, that the role of the layman was to hunt, fish and shoot and leave the running of the Church to the ecclesiastics. For better or for worse the laity are no longer fully occupied with these agreeable pursuits on their way to heaven and they have had to turn to more worldly affairs, acquiring on the way a variety of skills much needed in the service of the Church. At the same time, the laity have been able to measure the competence of ecclesiastics to manage worldly affairs and they have not invariably been impressed.

The clergy, used to managing all the affairs of the Church, have shown little determination to relinquish the burden and devote themselves exclusively to their spiritual vocation and office. They have, rather, seen a tide of criticism which they try to keep at bay. With the growth of an informed, educated and able middle class amongst the Catholic body in this country has also grown, then, a gulf between them and many of the more traditional clergy. In the old days the

<sup>1</sup>A paper read to a regional conference of the Newman Association on 'The Modern Layman', at Coventry in March 1963.

priest may have had to defer to the old Catholic landed gentry, but amongst the poor Irish immigrants he was monarch of all he surveyed. He was often the only educated man in the parish and the natural leader of the people in temporal as well as in spiritual matters. Nowadays it is too often true that the priest is revealed as a man well-trained, but not so well educated. He may have been taught a great deal during his training, but may not have been trained to think for himself. The laymen, on the other hand, often try to think about clerical problems, but they seldom have much worth while knowledge of Church affairs. Confucius summed up this situation: 'Learning, undigested by thought, is labour lost: thought, unassisted by learning, is dangerous'.

This brief sketch appears to be belied by the success of many schemes for lay apostolic work. We are all aware of the immensely good work done by so many Catholic societies. That cannot, however, obscure one vital and significant fact: that the laity have absolutely no say in the management of the temporalities of the Church. They have spiritual rights defined by canon law. Their confraternities all have carefully approved constitutions. But nowhere in canon law is there any mention of lay persons having any part as of right in the temporal affairs of the Church. From this point of view, the Church has become an exclusively clerical institution.

If the Church is to appear to be what it is in essence: an integrated organism, one undivided body, then the laity must at least share temporal responsibilities, for that is where their particular expertise lies. At this moment the sole temporal duty possessed by the laity is to support their pastors. They do this willingly, but often with reservations both mental and monetary, because they are given no information about the management of their money. No accounts are rendered. They may suspect, in some cases, that money is not well managed.

In case it is objected that I have been restricting the role of the laity exclusively to temporal affairs, and those to finance, an illustration of the work that laymen ought to do, that the law almost requires that they should do, can be taken to indicate the extent of this clerical exclusiveness. In the management of our aided schools there must be a number of foundation managers, or governors, appointed by the trustees, though in effect by the parish priest. This is an excellent field in which the laity can exercise responsibility. It is a great help to have serious and able lay persons to assist in the management of these schools. I do not think it unfair to say that, save in a comparatively few instances, the law is either ignored because the managers never meet, or its

intentions are circumvented because the managers are mere rubber stamps, expected to ratify all the decisions already taken by the parish priest. It is comparatively rare to find the management system envisaged by the education acts carried out in the letter and in the spirit. It is also a fact that parent-teacher associations are discouraged in Catholic aided schools. The whole responsibility for the schools is exclusively that of parish priest and head teacher. In order to make a realistic approach to this problem of lay participation it is vital to be practical. But we should not base our approach on what are called practicalities, but on what is more formidable and enduring in the Roman Church: canon law.

*The Parish Priest in Canon Law.* Canon law, as a matter of fact, is rather reticent about the temporal power of the parish priest. It lays down in considerable detail what are his spiritual responsibilities, but contents itself, in canon 1182, with saying that he must administer the goods and funds of his church in a responsible fashion and render accounts to the bishop. The situation is further simplified in this country, because it is generally admitted that, to all intents and purposes, there are no ecclesiastical benefices here. The reason for this lack of detailed regulation in the common law of the Church is that it is for the bishop in synod to make the particular laws regarding these matters. The bishop is, then, both temporal and spiritual ruler of his diocese and the pastoral clergy are, more or less, his delegates. His rules must only not conflict with the code of canon law.

The general tenor of diocesan regulations is pretty well the same throughout this country. The general trend is as follows:

1. All money coming in to the parish, save for stole fees, mass offerings, Christmas and Easter collections and money given specifically to an individual priest for his personal use, belongs to the parish.
2. From parish money the parish priest may take what is needed for the decent upkeep of the presbytery and the sustenance of the clergy, devote the money to parochial expenses, which are defined, and receive a small stipend, varying from £60 to £120, for personal use.
3. He must keep accurate accounts and render these annually to the bishop, or when required to do so.

There is, then, no real control by means of budgetting and within the limits of what is defined as parochial expenditure, the priest can spend the money pretty well as he fancies. Perhaps what is *not* said is more interesting. There is no provision for having accounts certified by

accountants. Nothing is said about money raising. Nothing is said about the role of the laity, save that no parochial, school or charitable moneys may be banked in the name of lay persons without the express permission of the bishop.

There is, then, nothing to stop a bishop radically changing the system obtaining in his diocese if he so chooses, because he is the sole legislator in synod, only constrained, in theory at least, by the common law of the Church. So far as I know there is nothing to prevent a bishop from associating the laity at all levels with the administration of the temporalities of his diocese, provided that a cleric presides over any commissions he may set up. (Can. 1183). Therefore, though there may be many other obstacles, mostly human ones, there are no obstacles in law to radical change.

*The Church of England.* It is, then, fruitful to take a look at the manner in which the Church of England tackles this problem and for two reasons: first, because it is generally acknowledged that the temporal administration of that Church is quite brilliant; second, and more important, because much of what is done in the Church of England, much of its way of doing things, is specifically English, dating in atmosphere if not in detail from its pre-Reformation Catholic roots. There is no doubt that the Church of England, in its administrative atmosphere, suits the English approach and temperament. We should be no less Roman Catholic for imitating it. It is not a necessary ingredient of Roman Catholicism to use Italian or Irish methods, systems and organisation in these matters; canon law does not require it.

The basis of Anglican administration is that the laity are associated with it at all levels. Churchwardens and Vestry go far back into our history, succeeded in modern times by the electoral roll, Parochial Church Council and churchwardens, now that much of the ancient civil jurisdiction of the Vestry of the parish has been taken over by local government. In fact a considerable part of this system, dating from mediaeval times, had fallen into desuetude. The old democratic, or rather communal, system had been replaced by the so-called tyranny of parson and churchwarden, usually the squire himself.

It is only since the Parochial Church Council Measure of the House of Assembly was passed in 1921 that a modern version of the mediaeval system has been in force. This has had singularly beneficial results at all levels in securing genuine co-operation and informed interest. This is a useful counter to the argument that a similar system would not work

with us. They have changed radically, so can we. They have benefited greatly, so would we. I do not propose to summarise in detail the Church of England system. I shall only highlight certain features of it that appear to me to be wholly admirable and worthy of imitation.

The first and indispensable condition for any transfer of financial and temporal responsibility in the parish is to take the priest's personal upkeep, housekeeping and private income right out of parish politics. This is accomplished in the Church of England by deriving the main portion of his income from the Church Commissioners, supplemented by the diocesan authorities, who finance these operations together with their contributions to central bodies, like the Central Board of Finance, by means of a quota levied on each parish. The parson having been provided for, the Parochial Church Council has the responsibility both for raising money and for the maintenance of the church and its works, subject to the obtaining of licences for alterations, etc. A parochial budget can be, and is often now, framed.

The parson is, therefore, not the benevolent despot. The emphasis is on the fact that it is the parish's church and responsibility, not only the parson's. He is the chairman and leader of the Parish Church Council. It is laid down that as a principle 'it shall be the primary duty of the Parochial Church Council to co-operate with the incumbent in the initiation, conduct and development of Church work, both within the parish and outside.' It is true that the system has had its teething troubles, that many parsons dread the P.C.C. Meetings, but there is no doubt that the system has come to stay and that gradually a spirit of co-operation and lay responsibility is being built, to the great good of that Church. Our clergy often ask for co-operation, but will not cede the authority they can and should cede, in order to obtain responsible co-operation.

The layman's role in the wider aspects of church government is particularly significant. He is associated with it right up to national level via the Parochial Church Council. He can be elected or appointed to the Diocesan Conference and thence to the House of Laity of the national assembly. It is understandable that the high calibre of the men who are appointed officers of the Central Councils under the Church Assembly is a result of this association with the temporal government. There is always a proper division of labour and responsibility between laymen and clerics, each in his own sphere, and with clerical control discreetly exercised in the proper places.

The Church of England Board of Education is then more soundly

based and has deeper roots than the Catholic Education Council, though not necessarily at any given stage more efficient. The Central Finance Board is also far better placed, with the Church Commissioners, to have a planned financial policy better than our hand to mouth methods of finance allow. We haven't yet got out of the tin-on-the-mantlepiece method of finance. Perhaps the most important difference between the Church of England and ourselves is that in the Church of England the lay apostolate evolves from the grass roots upwards and with us is imposed from the top downwards—and withers at the roots. There is often an imposing superstructure and nothing downstairs. This is not true leadership, because leadership requires a vital movement which needs giving to it a sense of direction. Ours is often all direction and no substance directed.

So much for the Church of England. In the sense that Newman gave to the word, the laity are 'consulted', so we may conclude that to do so has respectable historical precedents in the Catholic Church even in matters of doctrine.

*The Church in America.* Clerical domination of the Church in the United States is complete and bears comparison only with *Eire*. Even the reporters of the Catholic Newspapers' News Service tend to be clerics. This is not only due to the Irish origin of most clerical traditions there, but also to past history going back long before the great Irish immigrations.

At one time it was not possible for the Church, as a corporate body, to own property and, consequently, lay trustees were appointed to each parish. This had most unfortunate results, because, in some cases, the trustees disagreed so violently with appointments made by the bishops that they refused to hand over the use of the property and temporalities. Interdicts became common. Hence, perhaps, canon 1183.

However, there was an interesting transitional stage when the trustee system was in course of being abolished. In 1845 Archbishop Hughes published rules for the administration of churches without trustees. These rules included the appointment of laymen as parish treasurer and secretary. Two other points of interest emerge: (1) the pastor was provided with a proper salary for his maintenance and for that of the parochial house, thus removing the main obstacle to reform of our system; and (2) accounts were to be rendered half-yearly to the *parish*.

I am bound to say that I saw little evidence of lay partnership in any of the material concerns of the Church in America, at least in those

parts I visited. Of course, there were trusted advisers, but there was no attempt to integrate the laity in any form of responsible partnership.

*The Formation of a Parish Viewpoint.* We must now look to the future, to consider the necessary steps that must be taken in order to produce a climate of co-operation, of partnership, of genuine division of responsibility and labour. The formation of such a spirit must be gradual. It is quite useless to start off, as has been done in this country, with an ideal blue-print for a co-operative parish. It must start with the parish and then laymen can progress from minor posts to work of great responsibility at diocesan or national level.

The first requisite is for the parish priest to take the people into his confidence. This cannot, and should not, be done from the pulpit. A weekly news-sheet giving information about what is being done and the reasons for doing it is essential. War-time commanders found that the troops fought better when they were fully informed. The second requisite is to give a complete and truthful financial statement every year to the parish. By these means the parish will share the problems of the parish priest. They will get used to seeing how intelligently he thinks aloud about his problems. The better ones will begin to think too and take an intelligent interest. They will be ripe for responsibility.

I do not favour having a Parish Church Council at this stage, because, in the absence of a strong and responsible body of laymen, who are sharing the executive burdens of the parish priest, they become a paradise for the sea-lawyer type of parishioner. This is rather the stage at which the more interested laymen, who have exhibited a constructive desire to think and co-operate, might be given genuine responsibility as school managers, treasurer, fund raisers, etc. The bingo experts are liable to see everything in terms of money. Men need to be given a wider vision.

Soon the parish priest will have men who really know what the problems are. They will know the difficulties he has to face. It would be a natural step for laymen to take over the entire business of money raising and the handling of money when once a parish budget has been worked out and approved. Men might be given great insight into the wider problems of their fellow parishioners, and so of the parish, when they go out fund raising. This is the time when the St Vincent de Paul Society will fit into the general scheme.

So a responsible executive body evolves. This is the time to form them into a Church Council, at first appointed and then by gradual

stages embodying an elected element. This process is extraordinarily similar to the process at which this country has become so expert, of handing over former colonies to indigenous governments . . . However, I dare not labour that analogy.

This is the time, too, to have the laity as a body to enter into the wider fields of parish development, church and school building. I think, however, that the major responsibility for seeing through building schemes must be in the hands of a diocesan body, drawn from the most experienced of those who give their services to parishes. But that does not mean to say that the parish should abdicate all interest and responsibility.

The major obstacle, as we have seen, to handing over major responsibility to parishioners in financial affairs is that the upkeep of the priest and presbytery is mixed in with everything else. This should never be a matter of parish politics and discussion, it should be settled by authority and severed from the upkeep of the parish. The best way in which this can be done is by means of a quota paid by the parishes to a Diocesan Equalisation Fund.

To sum up: Pope John said recently that 'Priestly activity is destined principally for the celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass, for preaching, for the Sacraments, for assistance to the sick, for catechetics and for religious instruction. Everything that is not related to these duties should be set aside, or at best should only be tolerated'. If we desire to have priests who follow this ideal and yet keep a reasonable degree of material efficiency, some devolution of responsibility is necessary. At the moment, a parish priest has to be more of a business man than a priest. He has little time to read, ponder and study, so no wonder sermons are uninspiring. His main thoughts have to centre on bingo and money. We may admire priests who are good at these things, who promote dances and all sorts of social activities, but these are not the priest's job, and he was not trained for them. Priests would not lose one jot of their real spiritual authority if they educated the laity to be responsible and to care for the material welfare of the parish and diocese. Canon law provides an excellent framework. The Trust deed provides an excellent framework in civil law.

*Catholic Action.* I should like, for a few moments, to range a little outside the parish, even outside the Church, and speak about Catholic Action. I am not sure what is meant by Catholic Action in this country, if anything. If it means joining some Catholic society such as the St



Vincent de Paul Society or the Legion of Mary, then it is outside our scope. If, however, it means making an impact on the social, political and commercial life of this country by bringing Christian standards to bear on them, then it is most apposite to our deliberations.

Catholics are remarkably absent from the voluntary services of this country. We have, in many cases, tried to organise our own in a sort of apartheid. We have often organised well and pioneered new forms of service. We have often been inefficient. But that is not the point. The real point is that, having opted out of the main stream of voluntary works in the country, we have little influence outside our own body and so fail to spread our Christian standards and message. We are, too, poorly represented in the highest flights of voluntary work, for instance, in parliament and in local government. We allege prejudice, but that is not so in the majority of cases. It is really because we are not known, because we are not represented in those more lowly forms of service from whose ranks men and women are chosen for responsible civic and national work.

Two things need to be done. One is already begun. The first is to interest boys and girls at school in the practical study and investigation of social work, thus giving them an informed taste for it. At this moment they know nothing about it. This has been pioneered by Fr Leatham with his St Thomas More Society at Ratcliffe. This work is going to spread, because a group of laymen is determined to make it spread in the schools and to have its natural effect in boys and girls taking up voluntary work when they leave school.

The second measure is more difficult, but very much in the spirit of the times in the Church. It would consist of taking a very hard look at all Catholic voluntary bodies to see whether they merely duplicate the work of non-Catholic bodies without safeguarding some vital Catholic interest which makes it necessary to have our own separate organisation, as is the case, for instance, with the Catholic Marriage Guidance Council. This is in accord with Pope John's views on co-operation. Where we merely duplicate, we should amalgamate. We should direct our workers to work for the common good of the country and carry our gospel outside our own body. It would be unwise to be specific at this moment, but a cursory glance at any diocesan directory would give examples. It is worth saying, however, that there is a considerable amount of co-operation, and it is growing, between our own organisations and the others and also with the Welfare State.

For the laity, then, an immense field of activity and responsibility is

being opened up.<sup>2</sup> There may be blocks on the way, but the tide of history is running in this direction and nothing can stop it. Priests object that it is difficult to get laymen to do anything now, that they won't help and so all this is pie in the sky. It is true that the laity will not any longer suffer being treated like irresponsible children, merely doing what they are told and asking no questions. Even children are nowadays treated differently. If we continue to do as we have done, we shall continue to attract the irresponsible and incompetent and immature and shall continue to be let down. We need to obtain men of the highest calibre, ready to devote a major portion of their lives to the service of the Church. To succeed in this we need to give them real responsibility, real power and really consult them.<sup>3</sup>

If this is done we shall see a great flowering of the spiritual life amongst the educated laity, resulting, most likely, in many men and women dedicating their lives to the Church in Secular Institutes. Finally, the Holy See, with greater wisdom than those with only a local viewpoint, has formed in Rome a Permanent Committee for the Lay Apostolate, consisting of laymen whose views carry weight in matters of relations with civil government and sociology and which will, in the future, carry weight in other fields, particularly liturgical, intellectual and spiritual. Even the Roman Curia, it would seem, might not continue to be an exclusively clerical body and Newman's idea of 'consulting the laity' for which he got into such trouble a hundred years ago might flower anew.

<sup>2</sup>cf. Pius XII at the second World Congress Lay Apostolate, 1957. He said that it would show a failure to appreciate the real nature of the Church and her social character to distinguish in her a purely active element, the ecclesiastical authorities, and . . . a purely passive element, the laity. Relations between the Church and the world require the intervention of lay apostles.

<sup>3</sup>cf. Pius XII again: 'The layman should be entrusted with tasks that he can fulfil as well as, or even better than, the priest and within the limits of his functions or those indicated by the common welfare of the Church, he should be allowed to act freely and to exercise his responsibility.'