

THIRD PLENARY ASSEMBLY: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION GUIDE

**IS THE LAITY THE "MARGINALIZED MAJORITY"
IN THE CHURCH?****I. Introduction**

1. We have taken as the objective of our workshop to answer the question: "What can we do to help the laity feel and work like they belong to the Church?"

2. Because we are engaged in a workshop, our goals are simple to describe:

a) To work together through a sharing of experiences regarding the present situation of the laity in our individual countries, in order to discover the present reality both of theological theory and pastoral practice in the Church.

b) To displace long-held notions with what is the contemporary teaching and pastoral demands of the Church.

c) And, most importantly, to leave here with the conviction to put these new experiences and new insights into practice on returning home.

3. While we must humbly admit that present-day concern to evoke from the laity their participation in the Church's apostolate has been heightened by the difficulties facing the Church — with our theology coming later (the usual case, anyway) — our present convictions must not be received simply as something forced on the Church's authorities by events beyond their control but as a good in itself, to be realized as an essential expression of the Church's life and mission. Indeed, the dire need for apostolic workers, especially in the presence of an expanding apostolate and a decreasing number of full-time workers, may help many in authority to swallow their own theological, sociological, or clerical

This discussion guide has been prepared for the workshop sessions of the Third Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), held at Lux Mundi Seminary, in Sampran, Thailand, near Bangkok, 20th-27th October, 1982. The theme of the Plenary Assembly is: "The Church — a Community of Faith in Asia."

prejudices which have limited the role of the lay person in the Church or the way he/she may fulfill this role. We can help along this process of changing one's mind by calling it a reading of "the signs of the times," and such a reading brings us to a discernment of what is the will of God for His people.

As a good for the Church, then, it falls upon everyone in the Church to welcome God's action into one's life by working — devotedly and strenuously working — to bring the Church to the stature willed by God and His Christ. "Woe to me if I preach not the Gospel."

4. We need not spend time in discussion of the sacramental justifications for the presence of the lay person in the inner sanctum of the Church, of his/her leaving that outer court which traditional practice (not Tradition!) reserved for the laity and where he/she would wait for the ordained minister to come from behind the veil which separated — and often divided — clergy and laity, to receive quite passively the ministry of the clergy.

Such a doctrinal review seems unnecessary in our present workshop since all the participants would have signed up for this particular workshop precisely because of their interest and background in the apostolate. The task now is how to bring this commanding vision of the lay person in the Church into the every-day action of Church people so that it effectively engages the workings of the Church structures.

It is sufficient for our discussions to build on a very simple statement:

Each Christian is made a sharer in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ. He is called within the framework of his state of life, within his consciousness of being a living member of the Body of Christ, by faith, hope and love which the Holy Spirit pours out into his heart, to promote the glory of God through the coming of His Kingdom and to obtain eternal life for all. He is called to mediate the saving, healing Word of God to others in the context of his daily life's activities.

II. The Language of Church Belonging

The language we use — the words themselves — express our theological presuppositions, even if we are not conscious that these words carry such a theological weight that others may give them, or even if we ourselves have not made the reflective connection between the

words we are using and the theology we think is our own — in fact, our language and our theology may be quite different from each other.

For our workshop discussion, we propose to take several sets of words that appear in any ordinary conversation on lay ministry and to contrast some of these terms with others that are appearing in the journals of pastoral theology. In this way the set of words may illustrate different theologies at work — often contrasting because of different emphases only — and also as governing different pastoral attitudes and practices. Our sets of terms may sometimes overlap but perhaps the ideas bear being repeated.

1. Member of the Church or Belonger?

a) “To whom does the Church belong?” The Church, of course, belongs to Christ, and we are the members of his body.

At the base of every attempt at motivation of the laity to take their rightful place in the Church’s missionary activity is this attitude of belonging. If we can agree that the most effective motivating sentiment in any human activity is a “benevolent self-interest,” we can see how readily this can apply to a throwing of one’s self into the activity of the Church. If something belongs to me, or a family belongs to me, according to the depth of that belonging I belong to it, or to my job, or to my family, and the interests of the other become by interests, and I can throw myself into its fulfillment with ardor.

This same ardor for the Church’s mission is called apostolic zeal. It requires, however, a sense of belonging to the Church in the same way and to the same degree that the Church belongs to me.

“To whom does the Church belong?” becomes, then, a vital question. All the literature, present and of the past decades, states, with no fear of contradiction, that the Church is not seen by the laity to belong to the laity but rather to the ordained ministers, or rather, to the “religious establishment,” which would also include usually the religious sisters and brothers and most apostolic associations, for these are viewed mostly as “elongations” of and concerned with “the Church,” that body over and beyond the laity. How then to promote this sense of belonging?

b) Certainly a new—really an old—ecclesiology is now taking possession, in which the Church is seen to be at the service of the wider,

broader, deeper Kingdom of God, and the Church is the first-fruits of this Kingdom. In this way the Church's ministry turns from itself to the Kingdom, no matter where the Kingdom seeks to establish itself. The Church's ministry reaches out to all, not as seeking only to possess them but convinced that every person carries a task or duty for the Kingdom — a charism — and the Church is to help that person, to be an "enabler" of every charism. In this way the Church as servant of the Holy Spirit, the giver of the charism, belongs to the bearer of the charism, and all ecclesiastical office serves the charism and its bearer—an enabling ministry.

c) Certainly, in terms of the hugeness of the task facing the whole Church, there is a movement from seeing the Church as arranged in some kind of pyramid of power with everyone looking upwards to the higher angle or degree, to more of a pyramid on its side with the broader base of countless laity turned towards the world to realize God's purpose for it, and the smaller part of the pyramid turned towards the laity to provide Word and sacrament for the task of the laity.

2. Democratic or Egalitarian?

"The Church is not a democracy" is a remark often heard when current attempts at Church renewal are examined. In this way it is stressed that the power and authority in the Church comes from the Holy Spirit of God, and not the endowment of Church belongs upon duly-elected officials. In our discussions in our workshop there is no dispute on this point of Catholic doctrine. However, Catholic doctrine also teaches — rather, demands — the equality of all persons in the Church, so much so that the title of address would be "brother" and "sister." What Sacred Scripture teaches is a difference of charisms and consequent responsibilities. The significance of any charism in realizing the Kingdom of God cannot be measured by worldly, or visible, standards at all. Since all increase comes from Christ and not from Peter, Paul or Apollo, we cannot use un-Christian standards in measuring the importance or dignity or worth of a person within the Church, or relegate a Christian to some level of "the upper classes" or "the lower classes" in the Church. The lifestyle of the Church must seek to promote this Christian equality. Such a sense of equality serves to place the responsibility for the Church's service of the Kingdom of God equally upon the shoulders of every Christian.

This insight also seems enhanced today in a worldly absolutely committed to the equality of persons in the human community.

Episcopacy or Prelacy?

Translations of Sacred Scripture have attempted in several ways to translate the word episcopacy. Most settle for some idea of "overseeing," what our contemporary theology would call the charism of being an instrument of transcendent love and unity to the Church, whether this charism be in Pope, bishop, presbyterium, or priest. Again, episcopacy is a service within and to the community of believers. Prelacy is another word and another idea; it introduces an element of superiority, of standing over and above the community. Church history traces how easy it was for political prelacy — with all its local symbols and practices — to infiltrate itself into the role of episcopacy.

The ministry of episcopacy, exercised by bishop or presbyterium or priest, must turn the attention of the people of God to its common service of God. This "working together" rests on the common calling to mission. Episcopacy would preserve this sense of common mission; it is very difficult to see how prelacy does. It is now a question of "working for" someone. Episcopacy makes possible a common celebration bishop/priest and lay person of their communion of life and service to the Church and together to the world; prelacy emphasizes the sender and the sent.

Episcopacy would seem to look to the competence of the lay person, for the job to be done, and would choose, all things being equal, the more competent person; prelacy has inbuilt into it the primacy of status.

The Church of the 1980's in Asia must ask itself how faithful it has remained to the scriptural ideal of episcopacy. In accepting the Gospel from the West, Asia has also accepted the heavily-inculturated ideas of political prelacy, along with its signs and practices of a medieval Frankish prelacy. Each culture seeks to express in symbol its awe and reverence (e.g., the beautiful Filipino symbol of touching the bishop's hand to the forehead); an unhappy transfer of Western customs of royalty, subservience, submission, can make the Church appear to the unbeliever silly and demeaning, and set forth bishop/priest and lay person as ruler and servant, this latter with easy-to-see effects in the lives of the "servants."

Assistant or Associate?

Gone are the days when lay activity in the Church, e.g., Catholic Action, was defined as "the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy," as if the lay person did not possess in his/her own

Christian person a full role in the mission of the Church. The lay person was the "assistant," and so, more after the manner of a "helper," helpful but ultimately lacking any spiritual capacity or personal responsibility for the task entrusted by ordination—the only way recognized—the task of the apostolate. Perhaps this may be somewhat exaggerated, but indeed the concomitant attitudes of not being included in the mainstream of this apostolate by way of sharing in responsibility for the outcome, of being only among those "who serve who only stand and wait," — all those signs and sufferings of belonging as a full member — were dispensed with. The time has come to jettison the word "assistant" from our theological baggage—whether it be assistant bishop, assistant parish priest, or, in our case here, pastoral assistant, or the more embracing view of the lay person as only assistant in the apostolate—to take on the word and notion of "associate," a term which more clearly expresses the full insertion as a first-class citizen of the Church of the lay person into the mission of the Church. A mind-set of "associate" could set into motion also a reorganization of the process of decision-making, collaboration and reporting. This change of process should result in a sense of belonging.

Pastoral Assistants and Lay Apostles?

It seems strange that whenever a program of training for the laity is set up, it tends to imitate the programs of the seminary and the religious house of formation. As one reads down the list of courses in the curriculum, it suddenly becomes clear that the program is meant for one kind of lay worker, the one who will be taking over part of the work *within* the Church, work once indiscriminately placed on the shoulders of priests, and *to* the people of the Church to strengthen the believing community.

If it is accepted that there is a new ecclesiology at work in which the Church's primary direction is *outside* itself, then it would follow that the stature of the lay apostle to the broader Kingdom of God would assume its true magnitude in the concern and appreciation of the Church itself. These apostles are not only the ones ministered to by the Church but also the principal—respected, formed and situated within its working organisms—agents of the Church's evangelical activity.

The Higher Collegiality or Personnel Management?

Much as there is a need for increased collegiality among bishops, among bishops and priests, and among priests themselves, there is a need for a "higher collegiality," the collegiality of those who exercise office in

the Church by way of ordination or assignment with those who are in fact the principal agents of the Church's mission. It is in the operation of such a collegiality of charism-bearers and office-bearers that a "space for belonging" is developed, where the laity can point to the place in the Church where their full personal identity as Christians is symbolized, expressed and developed. When the ground rules are followed which are contained in any true expression of collegiality, it is then that the signs of a belonging *in* the Church are evident: dialogue, coresponsibility, consultation and participation. In passing, it does not seem possible to realize the goals of collegiality if the laity is put in a position of rendering in decision-making only a consultative (non-binding) vote, and of not knowing that their votes are sometimes taken seriously, in a deliberative sense.

Temporary Substitution or Personal Mission?

"Who does the work of the priest?" "Why, the priest does!" "Who does the work of the lay person?" "Why, the lay person does!" But is this true? The bishop, the priest, the pastoral worker, whether this be a religious or lay person, has a proper role in the Church. Sharing in one way or another in episcopate, by ordination or delegation, they are given as instruments of the unity of life in the Church. They bring unity to the many works of the Church's mission, and promote this unity in charity. They are nourishers of the Christian life through preaching the Word of God, administering the sacraments and shepherding the community in righteousness.

But history has burdened these offices of episcopacy with all kinds of activity; by reason of education, leisure or enthusiasm priests have had to undertake a variety of works. Now, however, as the laity becomes more educated, more competent and more willing, many find that those who have held jobs only remotely related to the ordained status, or those who have been delegated by priests for these works, are so set in these jobs that they will not allow themselves to be displaced or replaced by laity. Some say that the Church in Asia has not reached the desired point of development of the laity, but there are many places where the Church can now turn to our lay persons and say to them: "Come and take the job we have been holding only until you came along." This is what we call the theory of "temporary substitution": the priest, or his delegate, has only been substituting for the competent lay person, and now that he has arrived on the scene, the priest can return to what he was trained to do, ordained to do, and should do best: to be the preacher of the Word, the priest at the altar, the enabler of the laity, to venture out into new frontiers because he is free to do so.

Someone has written that "The priesthood gobbled up all ministries." By returning as many tasks as possible in the Church to the lay man and lay women, surely this is the highest vote of confidence in the "lay person come of age" in the Church, as he/she has come of age outside the Church.