

Preamble

In February 2020, our Leadership made the decision to request Rome to establish a Ministerial Public Juridic Person for the future canonical governance of the Institute's incorporated ministries. Over the months of preparing for the petition and envisioning the PJP, which we have named *Mercy Ministry Companions*, we frequently discussed the question of the composition of its first Council of Trustee Directors. What mix of experience and skills would be needed for this new governance structure? Would it include Sisters of Mercy or would it be all lay people?

We were clear that if there were to be sisters, they would be appointed not for any tokenistic or symbolic reason, but for their own competence in ministry and governance. And it is true that there are a number of such sisters - competent, committed and willing.

We were also very appreciative of the fact that for many years now our ministries have been directed by boards whose members, for the most part, have been lay women and men; likewise the ministries' leadership and staff have been predominately lay people.

We have often spoken among ourselves about the pressing need for lay leadership to be strengthened, not just in the Church but for the very sake of the Church's mission. So, after careful thought and prayer and encouraged by God's Spirit of Hope, we recognized that this is the graced time to pass trusteeship of the ministries to a fully lay Council of Trustee Directors. 'It's time', we said.

And we find that we are in harmony with Pope Francis.

IT'S TIME

[An address to the first gathering of the Council of Trustee Directors of Mercy Ministry Companions with the Leader and Council of the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea and Executive Staff of the Institute]

In his preface to a recent book by Italian bishop, Fabio Fabene, entitled 'Symphony of Ministries - A Renewed Presence of Laity in the Church' Pope Francis urges lay women and men 'to take a step forward' in the Church's work of evangelization. 'The time is now' he writes.

While there is an urgency about Francis' words, he is not referring to something unprecedented or unknown in the church because the critical and redemptive role of the laity is as old as the church itself.

We know that 'the lay mission' as Francis names it, is as integral to the life and vigour of the church, as the sacramental ministry of the ordained. Francis says 'If the heart of

the priest's identity lies in consecrating the Eucharistic bread, the centre of the lay mission consists in consecrating the world according to God's plan'.

The story of the church's mission is a grand narrative. It begins with the earliest post-resurrection believers, fired by gifts and graces of the amazing Pentecost event, which some had experienced personally, gathering often in small groups to remember Jesus and to contemplate the enduring meaning of his words and works.

We recall that these first disciples became so enlivened by insights from their shared memories of Jesus, that they created for themselves new, vibrant expressions of communion. At the heart of their communion was God's Spirit who moved among them, animating their unity, inspiring their prayer, encouraging their good works in Jesus' name. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles they gave over their personal resources to the community and *were of one heart and mind* in their breaking of bread and acts of service (Acts 4:32). And although, because they had been witnesses of Jesus, the apostles had authority to preach about him and to oversee the distribution of goods to those in need, there was no real hierarchy among them. Essentially, theirs was a communion of equals with each member entrusted to share the Good News of Jesus' resurrection and its implications for uplifting the ones who suffered from death-dealing, dehumanizing causes.

Within a couple of decades after the resurrection, Saint Paul began to give a new theology to these faith communities through his preaching and particularly his letters. Paul's instructions enlightened the communities and encouraged their new sense of self as believers in Christ.

Think of what it meant for the 'saints', as Paul addressed those who had been baptized, to understand their new communion as 'the body of Christ' (1Cor 12:27). What did it mean for their way of living to believe and to experience that the integrity of this body was manifest through the loving mutuality of all its members and the full-hearted investment of each one's abilities? What did it mean to be enriched by a collective bounty of different gifts - not given for anyone's individual profit but for the upbuilding of all? How did membership of the body of Christ impel them to continue the redemptive ministry of Jesus by serving others, without distinction, through prayer and works of mercy, as he did?

And given that the lives of these saints had been rigidly prescribed by their societies - Roman, Jewish, Greek - each one highly stratified by religion, class, ethnicity and gender, and dominated by elites - usually religious and political and military - think of the radical ethic of life with its promise of hope, freedom of spirit and graced identity that Paul offered when he taught '*There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus* (Gal 3:28).

Of course, other scriptural references and early church writings teach us about the role and responsibilities of those baptized into Christ. [If we were interested in

probing how these teachings shaped and strengthened the new church's unfolding mission the expertise of theologians and church historians would be helpful.]

But at this point, at the risk of being a bit piecemeal, I want to consider that the rich vocational potential of the saints began to be forgotten towards the end of the second century. This seems to coincide with common use of the term 'laity' to describe those who were not charged with leadership of the communities, particular ministries or liturgical offices. That is to say, as the young church found the need to organize itself a hierarchy developed; authority became vested in bishops and presbyters, works of mercy were assumed by deacons and, as the liturgy evolved, only certain men were elected or ordained for sacramental roles. Around this time too came the notion of 'apostolic succession' sanctifying the role of bishop and, by association, that of priest and deacon, and elevating their status. And so, the special class of clergy emerged.

Eventually, notwithstanding the large and increasing numbers of Lay Faithful whose focus was family and the world of work, as well as the church which they supported according to their capacity (and sometimes with their 'widow's mite'), it was the clerical class which grew increasingly powerful and assumed responsibility for ordering the religious, moral and social lives of the people. The laity, ever submissive to the clergy whose authority was understood as God-given, were relegated to a state universally regarded as inferior. Before long they were largely without influence in church affairs and, in fact, for the most part, they had become merely passive observers in the church, recipients of its clerical services, rather than its very heart.

This sad situation was exacerbated by a number of factors. One factor was poor education and illiteracy of many lay people causing their dependence on the learned clergy. Another factor was the pervasive but false notion that the world, in and of itself, was bad. Thus, the lay people who inhabited the world were thought unworthy, and thought themselves less than worthy, as they struggled with its ungodly temptations and engaged with its venal affairs. In that regard it was a widespread but largely unexamined belief that lay persons who rejected the sinful secular realm for an ascetical life as hermits in the desert, and a few centuries later, for monasteries and convents in the cities and towns, had the best chance of saving their souls, along with the clergy.

The dualism of secular and sacred (world and church) which belittled the profound truths inherent in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, was harmful for generations – maybe until the Second Vatican Council, although over the centuries there were various efforts to correct it. Likewise, there were countless lay women and men whose lives gave powerful witness as 'leaven in the midst', 'salt of the earth' and light to the world' and whose wisdom about secular realities was sought and valued by the clergy.

Moving ahead in this grand narrative to the nineteenth century, one outstanding advocate for lay people and their essential role in the mission of the church was Cardinal John Henry Newman (canonized in 2019).

As an English scholar, theologian and educator, Newman was acutely aware of the pivotal contribution lay people could and should make to reviving the Catholic church in Britain which was still finding its place in society after centuries of oppression. Although full Catholic emancipation had been granted by 1829, in Newman's experience the church and its people continued to suffer injustice and prejudice from the ruling class of Anglicans and protestants prevailing in industry, political thought and government. In a real sense, English Catholics in Newman's time were among the underclasses.

In an address he gave in 1851 to brothers and friends of The Oratory in Birmingham Newman said:

*I want a laity,
not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious,
but men [and women] who know their religion,
who enter into it,
who know just where they stand,
who know what they hold,
and what they do not,
who know their creed so well
that they can give an account of it,
who know so much of history
that they can defend it.*

I want an intelligent, well-instructed laity... ;

*I wish you
to enlarge your knowledge,
to cultivate your reason,
to get an insight into the relation of truth to truth,
to learn to view things as they are,
to understand how faith and reason stand to each other,
what are the bases and principles of Catholicism*

*You ought to be able
to bring out what you feel and what you mean,
as well as to feel and mean it;*

*And one immediate effect of your being able to do all this
will be your gaining that proper confidence in self
which is so necessary for you ...
You will fall back upon yourselves;
you will be calm,
you will be patient.*

It was in context of this address that Newman also said of the entrenched bigotry and enmities between Catholics and Protestants, 'ignorance is the root of all littleness'. Maybe we can apply this dictum to our own time and its various areas of heavy-hearted thinking which demean both church and society – 'ignorance is the root of all littleness'.

In more modern times of course, there have been significant moves to retrieve and promote the role of the laity. For example, addressing new cardinals in 1946, Pope Pius XII said

The faithful, and precisely the Lay, are in the front line of the Church; for them, the Church is the vital principle of human society. That is why they, especially they, must be constantly more and more clearly aware not only of being part of the Church but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful. They are the Church.

Pius' successor, John XXIII was also committed to restoring the dignity of the laity and their call from God to be 'salt of the earth and light to the world'. In his 1961 Encyclical 'Mother and Teacher' (Mater et Magistra) he wrote

The Church today is faced with an immense task: to humanize and Christianise this modern civilization of ours. The continued development of this civilization, indeed its very survival, demand and insist that the Church do her part in the world. That is why .. she claims the cooperation of her laity. In conducting their human affairs to the best of their ability, they must recognize that they are doing a service to humanity, in intimate union with God through Christ, and to God's greater glory.

As we know well, a few years later, Pope John commissioned the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the teachings of which included robust confirmation of the laity. In fact, 'the special vocation' of the laity was a key subject in the Council's first and foundational document 'The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church' (Lumen Gentium).

These passages are probably familiar to you:

All the faithful who by baptism are incorporated into Christ, are constituted the People of God, who have been made sharers in their own way into the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ and play their part in carrying out the mission of the whole Christian people in the church and in the world. (LG 31)

The laity are given this special vocation: to make the church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that it can become the salt of the earth ... Every opportunity should ... be given them to share zealously in the salvific work of the church according to their ability and the needs of the times (LG 33)

In the years since Vatican 2 many theologians and pastoral ministers – lay, religious and clerical, along with the successive popes - have faithfully interpreted these and similar texts to inspire and educate the whole church and to call every baptized person to the maturity of a contemporary, Christ-centred spirituality.

Paul VI taught earnestly about the need for lay women and men to integrate their faith and its deep values with the realities of their lives, that is, the world of their baptismal vocation – family and other significant relationships, work, cultural pursuits, political activity, and so on. He urged them to develop the sort of intellectual and social competencies that would enable them to participate confidently, whenever relevant, in public discourse about matters related to human rights and the innate dignity of every person. He spoke of the ‘special obligation’ of laity to critique and respond to the signs of the times in light of ‘the justice of God’s kingdom’. As he wrote in his 1967 Encyclical ‘On the Development of Peoples’ (Populorum Progressio):

It belongs to the laity, without waiting passively for orders and directives, to take the initiatives freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live... (PP 33)

In his long pontificate, John Paul II frequently fostered right understanding of the lay vocation. Perhaps his most dynamic work on the subject is his 1988 Apostolic Exhortation ‘Christ’s Faithful Laity’ (Christifideles Laici) which confirms and expands the key teachings of Lumen Gentium.

Again, you probably know these texts:

Because of the one dignity flowing from Baptism, each member of the lay faithful, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility for the Church’s mission. (CL 15)

In order to achieve their task directed to the Christian animation of the temporal order, in the sense of serving persons and society, the lay faithful are never to relinquish their participation in "public life", that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good. (CL 42)

John Paul II implores all persons committed to the church to be ever aware of their responsibility and privilege to drive its mission. He speaks of cultivating ‘an ecclesial consciousness’:

I make a strong appeal to one and all, pastors and faithful, never to become tired of maintaining - indeed always taking an active part to fix deeply in one’s mind, heart and life - an ecclesial consciousness, which is ever mindful of what it means to be members of the Church of Jesus Christ, participants in her mystery of communion and in her dynamism in mission and the apostolate. (CL 64)

Pope Benedict elaborated teachings of predecessors as reflected, for example, in his emphasis on ‘co-responsibility’. He uses ‘co-responsibility’ advisedly to mean that the roles of the laity and the ordained are distinctive and complementary; that both derive from a common baptism and the one vocation as the People of God; that between them there is a mutuality of commitment in serving the church’s one mission. In 2012 he said:

Co-responsibility demands a change in mindset especially concerning the role of lay people in the Church. They should not be regarded as 'collaborators' of the clergy, but rather as people who are really 'co-responsible' for the Church's being and acting'.

To return here to Pope Francis, when he writes 'the time is now', I think he is not suggesting that after all these centuries the church finds it needs the laity because of their professionalism in dealing with complex 'worldly' issues beyond the capacity of the clergy or because the numbers of clergy are drastically declining, or because the impetus of Vatican 11 and subsequent papal teachings has become sluggish. But rather, that this is the time to re-claim, re-store, re-affirm, re-invigorate the laity's original place and purpose so that the church's mission can flourish and the work of evangelization can be fruitful in all places. Insofar as the urgent work of renewal is ever in progress, with its high points and low points of universal understanding, commitment and practice, Francis' 'now' is, in truth, 'always'.

I conclude with his words to the Pontifical Council of the Laity in 2016:

*We need lay people
who are formed well,
animated by a clear and sincere faith,
whose lives have been touched
by a personal and merciful encounter with the love of Jesus Christ.
We need lay people
who take risks,
who soil their hands,
who are not afraid of making mistakes,
who move forward.
We need lay people
with a vision of the future,
who are not enclosed in the petty things of life.*

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