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Review: 'The Liberation of the Laity: in Search of An Accountable Church'

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REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church. By Paul Lakeland. New York: Continuum, 2003. viii + 311 pages. \$28.95.

FOUR PERSPECTIVES

I

Speaking within a U.S. context, Paul Lakeland claims that the Catholic laity constitute an oppressed group in need of liberation. The laity, for the most part, are unaware of their oppressed status. Although materially their situation differs from that addressed by the liberation theologians of Latin America, structurally their problems are identical. The laity need to undergo a process of conscientization and self-definition. They need “to achieve voice in the church, that is, to be taken seriously on a par with clerical voices, priestly or episcopal, according to the degree of expertise one can claim or according to the measure of good in what we [the laity] have to say” (201).

Lakeland began this study several years ago, prior to the current sex abuse scandal. He sees the crisis as symptomatic of problems that have long been in place. He identifies the main structural culprit as the lay-clergy distinction and the various ways in which it has been construed throughout the history of the church. He declares his purpose as “the end of the laity as we have known it” (2).

In part one, Lakeland narrates and analyzes how the current situation came about. He emphasizes that for the first two centuries of the church there was no lay-clergy distinction either semantically or conceptually. He highlights, for example, how the commissioning of the Twelve takes place after the general call of disciples, such that the latter gives context to the former.

Lakeland acknowledges that the language of lay-clergy that emerges in the third century has a history, and that the terms did not come out of nowhere. Overall, however, his strategy is to paint a picture of an early church with no lay-clergy distinction in support of the position that such a distinction is not essential to the church, that it consists in historically-contingent structures, and that the church of today is free to revise it or to do away with it as it sees fit and as the contemporary situation and the Holy Spirit may demand.

As Lakeland tells the story, the lay-clergy distinction gradually hardened into a sharp differentiation that came to include both state of life and function. From the twelfth century until Vatican II, the laity's

main characteristics were passivity, subordination, and lack of expertise. The laity was defined negatively as those who are not clergy. The theology and culture that stood behind Vatican I represent the culmination of the long historical process by which the laity were reduced to their subservient state. The road to Vatican II involved a battle between those who worked for needed change and those who defended the status quo. The road to the present has involved an ongoing struggle between those who want to implement the needed changes and those who want to restore the past. At stake in the balance are the legitimate rights and liberties of lay people.

Lakeland investigates movements and figures that made possible a new view of the laity for Vatican II. Catholic Action focused rightly, in Lakeland's opinion, on the need for the laity to live out its faith in the world, but remained stuck on the conceptualization of the laity participating in the hierarchical apostolate rather than directly living out their baptismal call. The accompanying theology that focused on the church as the Mystical Body of Christ was itself a two-edged sword that promoted a fuller sense of participation while continuing to highlight differentiation among the members.

Lakeland discusses little known theologians such as Henri Godin, Yvan Daniel, Etienne Fouilloux, François Varillon, Yves de Montcheuil, and Gérard Philips, as well as leading lights such as M.-D. Chenu, Jean Daniélou, and Henri de Lubac. These figures offered studies that in varying degrees challenged the static views of the neoscholastics through a return to the sources of scripture and the tradition read with an historical consciousness. De Lubac in particular, by critiquing the neoscholastic dichotomy between a natural order and a supernatural order, laid the groundwork for a reconfiguring of the church-world relationship at Vatican II.

It is to the work of Yves Congar that Lakeland pays the most attention, and in fact he expresses his desire to write the theology of the laity that Congar was unable to write.¹ Congar's inability stemmed both from his need for caution under the suspicious eyes of the Vatican but also after the Council from his being "trapped in the earlier understanding of the priesthood." On the positive side, Congar recognized the lay priesthood in the world, the fundamental parity of clergy and lay, the horrors of clericalism, the universal call to holiness, and the relative autonomy of the secular realm.

¹Lakeland values Yves Congar's, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïc* (Paris: Cerf, 1953) [Eng. Trans., *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1955; rev. ed. 1965)] as well as the 1964 revisions to that text, but finds it inadequate for addressing the current situation.

Lakeland also addresses what he considers to be Congar's underdeveloped side. Though there were some evident shifts in his thinking, overall Congar did not adequately give priority to the community of disciples as it precedes a structured hierarchy, tended to limit the prophetic mission of the church to its teaching office, and, unhappily, contrasted activities that are fully ecclesial with those that are secular. Above all, Congar continued to link ordained ministry with a male, celibate, priestly culture that Lakeland argues is not essential to it.

Vatican II, explains Lakeland, did draw somewhat upon Congar's work on the lay apostolate, but did not incorporate his work on the theological meaning of the laity. The theme of the lay person as priest and truly as mediator between the divine and the world is underdeveloped in the documents. Lakeland finds the conciliar teaching that a lay person can be delegated ecclesial responsibilities that fundamentally belong to the priest to be a contradiction that reflects this theological underdevelopment. That is, if certain responsibilities can be delegated, then they are not essentially connected with ordination. Lakeland thinks that the laity's lack of real participation in internal churchly matters results from misguided efforts to buttress the weak and unnecessary link between ordained ministry and a priestly, celibate culture.

The People of God functions for Lakeland as the "overriding image" of the Council. The decision that the Council would be "pastoral" rather than "doctrinal" really represented a choice for historically-minded theology over static theology. Still there was much opposition and compromise. The ambiguities within the conciliar documents themselves lead Lakeland to acknowledge two possible directions for understanding the lay role. One direction is the current path taken by the Vatican by emphasizing a distinction of roles. Laity serve outside the church's sacramental life; hierarchy minister inside it, except in case of emergency.

The other direction, associated with the conciliar vision of Léon Joseph Suenens, is that of coresponsibility of laity and clergy for the mission and ministry of the church. Suenens (and Lakeland) acknowledge that the church is not a democracy, but neither is it simply a monarchy or an oligarchy. In the church can be found legitimately a monarchical principle, an oligarchic principle, and a democratic principle. In its teachings on collegiality, the Council emphasized the oligarchic principal against a monarchical principle that had been overstepping its bounds. It did not, however, address adequately the topic of coresponsibility of the laity, which could have put welcomed emphasis on the democratic principle.

Lakeland judges that the direction chosen by Pope John Paul II has been unfriendly to the Council and bad for the church. He recognizes positive and even heroic dimensions of this papacy, but thinks that the pope's background in Marxist Poland has given him not only extraordinary strength but also a certain narrowness of vision in his view of the world. Unfortunately, part of the legacy of this pope will be a recentralization of authority, a reassertion of a strong church-world distinction, and a restorationist turning back of the clock to a style of Catholicism already outmoded before the Council took place. The U.S. Catholic bishops have done commendable work on the topic of the laity, but, in Lakeland's opinion, have lacked the leadership to make their views effective. Instead, the centralizing stance of Rome prevails.

Turning to the work of theologians, Lakeland finds the approaches of Urs von Balthasar and Ramiro Pellitero to lack sufficient respect for the inherently religious dimensions of the secular world and thus to be overly concerned about explicit ecclesial packaging and labeling. He finds the radical recommendations of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Hans Küng worthy of serious consideration, but also in need of clarification concerning how significant structural change can be effected without doing damage to elements of the Catholic tradition that truly are essential.

Lakeland devotes part two of this work to constructing a theology of the laity and to exploring its ecclesiological implications. He begins with a study of secularity, and engages Dietrich Bonhoeffer, William Lynch, Jürgen Habermas, and Harvey Cox as dialogue partners for this endeavor. Lakeland declares the secular world the only world there is. The laity live in it and so does the church and so does everybody else. It is the world created and redeemed by God.

Christian spirituality, in Lakeland's vision, is a worldly project. Christians are called to live in freedom as we grow toward becoming what we truly are. Social ethics is key to the human project, but Christians bring no privileged information to the table for developing one. A natural law ethic has more to offer than an ethic filtered through the biblical narrative. Jesus is the exemplar of "responsible commitment to the process," (184) a phrase which is interchangeable with Jesus' "faithfulness to his Father's calling" (184). The laity are in the vanguard of the church's mission. The role of the clergy, vital but not central, is to preserve the community of faith which is instrumental to the role of the laity.

Communion ecclesiology, in Lakeland's view, is a necessary but not sufficient approach for bringing about needed changes. Yes, the institutional should be in the service of communion, but communion itself needs always to be oriented toward mission. It needs to take

seriously the development of structures that support the mission and to challenge structures that obstruct it. In our pluralistic world, "preaching the gospel means concentrating on justice, against what is anti-human" (229). Among other things, the church must confront the dark side of global capitalism. Engagement with the postmodern world requires a sophisticated blend of confrontation and cooperation with the modern world, not a narrow anti-modernism or a rejection of other religions.

So what structures are needed to support a church focused on its social mission, aware of itself as one global player among others, and fostering the ministries of all of its members? Lakeland offers a dream-vision of one set of possibilities. Its specifics follow.

Parishes are central. They are to be led by a team of ordained ministers who are accountable to the bishop and to the parish council. Gender or marital status are unlikely to be barriers to ordination. There is also a second group of members who focus their volunteer ministries within the church. The third and largest group is constituted by those whose ministry is carried out in their lives in the world. Members of the parish council, a truly deliberative body, are elected and are drawn from all three groups. The bishop cannot simply impose a leader on a community, but selections are worked out between the bishop and the parish council.

A diocese of the future may be led by a married bishop. Bishops will have more ties to their local communities and there will be less moving around. A larger group of people than in the past will be involved in the selection process. Careerism in the episcopacy will be curtailed.

Bishops' conferences will have a truly synodal structure. More than just bishops will be involved in synods. There will be more room than in the past for local variations of church practices.

The church universal will benefit from the elimination of the College of Cardinals. A more representative body will elect the pope, who should be a centrist. The curial offices that constitute the Vatican bureaucracy should be filled by competent lay people, emphasizing the disconnect between such offices and the qualifications needed for ordained ministry. The church universal will be led not simply by the pope or by the "Vatican," but by the pope and bishops taken together.

Lakeland sees religious congregations and orders, theologians, and institutions of Catholic education continuing to carry out their tasks. He emphasizes that though these proposed changes might seem radical, the bulk of Catholic tradition and practice will remain unchanged.

My task as the first reviewer in this symposium is not to write a critical review but to summarize the book and then raise a question or

two. I sympathize with the author's request for intellectual arguments rather than labels, and I hope that our colleagues in this symposium will give him satisfaction. Although the terms liberal, centrist, and conservative are somewhat problematic, the author uses them and so will I.

Surely Lakeland has his finger on some real problems facing the church, and some of his proposed solutions are worthy of exploration. I find his overall approach, however, to be one-sided and polarizing. Those places in the text where Lakeland acknowledges the need for balance stand in tension with his self-labeled liberal assumptions and positions. Concerning Vatican II, for example, he acknowledges that the real story is probably somewhere in the middle, yet he proceeds to narrate his highly selective version of that event and its continuing unfolding. Lakeland tends in general to dismiss the arguments of those whom he labels conservatives rather than engage them seriously.

I do not hold that all good books are centrist books, or that highly liberal or highly conservative views should not be present in current discussions. I find in this text, however, an unclearly differentiated mixture of scholarly claims that are reasonably argued and opinionated judgments that are barely argued at all. Much of the book is devoted to academic study, but the overall genre turns out to be that of a manifesto calling the laity to allow their consciousness to be raised and to throw off their oppression.

One-sided stories inevitably contain distortions. The current crisis in the church tempts both those on the left and those on the right to rush in and say, "I told you so." Lakeland fends off that potential charge by explaining how he conceived and began the study long before the crisis began. Still, the book easily lends itself to serving as support for those on one side who self-servingly interpret the crisis as a confirmation of what they have thought all along. I read any such text with a hermeneutic of deep suspicion. Does not the current crisis in the Catholic Church call for solutions that move us beyond left-right dichotomies rather than exacerbate them?

Lakeland claims that the pope should be a centrist. There seems to be in that claim an implicit acknowledgement that Lakeland knows that his own narratives are one-sided and that he is offering them to the broader community to counter the selectivity of the other side. But if the pope should be centrist, should not the leadership of Voice of the Faithful also be centrist? Should not movements of reform and renewal in the Catholic Church struggle mightily to avoid falling into the trap of framing every issue in terms of left-right polarization?