

The relationship of laity and clergy in a synodal Church

Necessary reciprocity

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One might expect that today, 50 years after Vatican II, clericalism would have disappeared. Yet, despite both denouncing clericalism and the lack of even the slightest doctrinal support, it is still difficult to eradicate it from ecclesial life. This may be because it is easier to highlight negative traits than search for alternatives. To overcome the risk of clericalism, the author opens rich, new horizons and sheds light on the history, thought and life of the laity.

Outdated and lacking doctrinal foundation

A clerical emphasis, especially after the 16th century Reformation, led to an inflation of the ecclesial role of ordained ministry and a further separation between members of the people of God even if there is no doubt about the indispensable mission entrusted to ordained ministry nor the necessary diversity of missions in the one people. Yet, something must be missing if our understanding of this diversity among vocations ends up denying that basic equality given to us through baptism (all the children of God, all members of God's people). Clericalism divides people into two unequal categories - superior and inferior - by reason of the power or authority received.

Vatican II affirms: "Therefore, the chosen People of God is one . . . sharing a common dignity as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection [...] no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex" (*Lumen Gentium*, 32). And it continues: "And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ. For the distinction which the Lord made between sacred ministers and the rest of the People of God bears within it a certain union, since pastors and the other faithful are bound to each other by a mutual need. Pastors of the Church, following the example of the Lord, should minister to one another and to the other faithful. These in their turn should enthusiastically lend their joint assistance to their pastors and teachers." (*ibid.*).

Research beyond negative effects

It is possible to make a list of all the negative impacts that a clerical 'style' has caused both to relations within the Church and in its pastoral and mission outreach. The list would not be a short one. Our interest here, though, goes in another direction. Both clericalism -- and its opposing tendency -- start from the same misunderstanding.

What does it mean to be "equal"?

It is usually said that two things are equal to one other if they appear identical: matter, shape, color, components, weight, etc. And it's true, with only miniscule distinctions remaining. But can this criterion of equality that is useful for 'things', also be applied to people? It doesn't seem so. In their essence, every person is unique because they have their root in a personal relationship with God who calls each into existence, each one an unrepeatable and different being.

By ignoring this fact, it is sometimes thought that unity between lay faithful and ministers requires them to be perfectly identical. It might seem that laity must and could be "copies" of priests. Their distinction is not valued as an opportunity. Instead, equality among people requires, in the process of unity, that the unique identities of each one remain safeguarded. Only Trinitarian communion reveals to us a way of equality that also welcomes diversity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit have the same unique, divine nature. But it is not simply this unity of nature that makes them equal but rather the dynamic of personal, reciprocal self-giving out of love that exists between the three, making them equal and distinct.

Among persons -- also human persons -- equality is achieved by way of communion. If there is a free exchange of gifts among us, I can continue being myself, but with you within me. It is a richness because you have given yourself to me. And vice versa. Through communion, this freely giving of oneself, it is possible to be one and several. Not only does this safeguard our own identity but we are enriched by that of the other who has given him or herself to me out of love.

The value of reciprocity

Thus, what is missing is *reciprocity*, the fundamental Christian law seemingly capable of uniting two opposing attitudes. You do not feel the need of others, as they are distinct. But without reciprocity there is no Christian life because the Holy Spirit, who is loving reciprocity made Person, simply disappears if this reciprocity is lacking.

Even more so, if we do not implement Jesus' new commandment, we effectively block the living presence of the Risen One among us, a presence that we should instead be offering to others. Our credibility as disciples is then lost.

Historical Context

Thus, what is needed is communion, reciprocity lived well. This is not simply sharing reflections around the table. Rather, we find it confirmed throughout history. In many

moments of the Church's history clerics were able to move forward precisely thanks to the laity.

We see this already in the earliest moments of the Church in the great constellation of collaborators who, around the Apostles, supported the ecclesial mission. It is enough to think of the married couple, Priscilla and Aquila, who formed and instructed Apollos. In the decades and centuries that followed, many of those who spread the faith were merchants, soldiers, slaves. At the time of the Arian crisis, it was God's people who saved the true faith, while many bishops and even some synods drifted towards embracing Arianism. Then, for example, in the eleventh century, with the reform by Gregory VII, he found in the laity that commitment to overcome the schism of the West. We see this in the actions and figure of Saint Catherine of Siena, flanked in this effort also by her followers.

But the moment when support by laity was perhaps most decisive was after the French Revolution. The Church emerged markedly weakened, with enormous decreases in the number of priests and religious. It was the laity, then, who took the cause of the Church into their own hands. And there came many converts to Catholicism, such as prominent intellectuals like, F.R. de Chateaubriand in France, F.L. von Stolberg in Germany, K.W. von Schlegel in Austria, A. Manzoni in Italy, and John Henry Newman in England. Great defenders of the Church also came forth, such as Félicite of Lamennais, founder of the *L'Avenir* newspaper (1830) and Charles de Montalembert, who is recognized for his defense of religious education in schools.

Then, too, there are those who have opened the way for works of charity, such as the Frenchman, Blessed F. Ozanam, founder of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul. And, in Germany, circles of Catholic intellectuals promoted an opening of the faith to new currents of thought, to a Catholicism that was more open and public in its thought and culture, and in defense of the faith and of the Church. This would later pave the way for the Tübingen School of Theology.

These and others were the true protagonists of the church's recovery, often despite opposition from clerics themselves who were concerned with defending their prerogatives. Priests were fearful of overly active, bold lay persons and continued to believe that God could only speak through them. Instead, men and women bear witness that the Church cannot properly carry out her mission if she does not count on the laity.

Today, things seem to be falling apart worldwide. Without lay people, most ecclesial activities are not sustainable. Furthermore, a number of major movements have come to life through lay people, movements encompassing people of all vocations in ways that rejuvenate and bring new life to the entire fabric of the Church. Clerics themselves are understanding the necessity of relying on laity not only in ministry or in sustaining their own vocations (which are often no longer respected today), but also simply as a matter of survival.

The indispensable response lies in communion, in the reciprocity of vocations and states of life.

