

Clergy-Laity divide in the Church

The crisis of the Roman Catholic priesthood is worsening: shortage of priests, many parishes deprived of the Eucharist, priests continue to leave the priesthood; there are fewer new entrants and many question the very foundation of their existence. The Church has not recovered from the after-effects of the pedophile exposures. The Laity have become more vociferous demanding their rightful place in the Church, claiming that they too are the Church, as was emphasized in Vatican II which spoke of the Church as “the People of God”, which includes the Pope, Cardinals, Bishops, priests, deacons the religious and what we call the ‘laity’ (LG, chapter two). While tradition is important, it needs be evaluated in the light of the NT and the practice of the first century Church.

The words ‘lay’ and ‘laity’ come from the Greek laos, people; in normal ecclesiastical language the laity are the people distinguished from the clergy. The ‘lay person’ is ‘non-clergy’. The focus of this short paper is that this division does not stem from Jesus and is not called for from the practice of the early Church, for Jesus did not seem to want a two-tier Church made up of a superior class called “Clerics” and an inferior class of the “laity”. For Jesus all his followers were equal as brothers/sisters/friends (Matt 23.8ff; Jn 13), though they have distinct functions. Paul was clear about the distinction of functions but without the notion of a hierarchy of persons (1Cor 12. 12ff; Rom 12.4ff; Eph 4.11ff) and was totally unaware of what today we call ‘priests’; nowhere does he refer to “priests”.

Jesus did not leave behind him a “hierarchy”, a class of people called “priests”. Whenever he used the word ‘priest’, it was about the Jewish priests for whom he had little regard (Lk 10.31). Jesus never spoke of himself or any of his disciples as priests; the gospels and the genuine Pauline epistles do not present Jesus as a priest. Jesus, like the prophets before him (e.g., Amos 5.21-22, 25) was opposed to sacrifices (Matt 12.7), the main function of the priest at Jesus’ time; his cleansing of the temple, the prediction of its destruction and his words to the Samaritan woman (Jn 4. 21-24) show that he wanted a completely new form of worship and a new type of community which would give primacy to interpersonal relations rather than to cultic acts (Matt 5.23; 25. 31ff). Jesus had no interest in cultic practices. His visits to the Temple were primarily to teach. Through his attacks on them the Temple priests became the arch-enemies of Jesus and, ultimately it is they who turned him over to the Romans. Had Jesus wanted the priesthood to be the backbone of his community, he would definitely have spoken about it. Many believe that Jesus ordained priests on Maundy Thursday. However, without any disregard for them, from what I have mentioned above it seems clear that Jesus could not have thought of ordaining ‘priests’ before his death, as ‘priests’ were not in his horizon. Professor Herbert Haag of the Catholic Universities of Tuebingen and Lucerne says: “The New Testament does not recognize any priesthood, whether sacramental or universal” (Clergy & Laity. Did Jesus want a Two-Tier Church? 1997, 72). Quoting Häring, Haag says: “The Church of the first three centuries did not know...either the concept or the reality of a ‘clergy’” (p. 45).

On the other hand, Jesus spoke often about the leaders he wanted to leave behind and gave them very precise and clear instructions (Matt 20.20-28; 23.8-12; Mk 10.35-45; Lk 22.24-27; Jn 13.1-18). While affirming the good done by many present day Church leaders, can anyone recognize in them the kind of leaders Jesus envisaged? The function of the leaders Jesus wanted to leave behind was to “feed my lambs”, “take care of my sheep” and “feed my sheep” (Jn 21.15-17); in other words, to care for and build up the community, and not the service of God by offering sacrifices. The early disciples of Jesus followed his teaching and practiced the “brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Pet 5.9) as is evident in the



writings of Paul. While, he was conscious of his authority (Gal 1.1.), Paul speaks of himself as a servant (1 Cor 3.5), others as his brothers/sisters (Rom 1.13; 1 Cor 1.10; 2 Cor 1.8). Paul commissioned Timothy and others to leadership in the community by laying hands on them, but this cannot be seen as an “ordination to the priesthood” as we see it today. The idea of a ‘priest’ does not arise in the first two centuries.

The later leaders either ignored or refused to follow the teaching of the Lord, and on their own authority made themselves ‘priests’ busy with ‘sacrifice’, and patterned themselves on the empire, taking titles and dress code from the empire system: Reverends, Lords, Eminences, Excellencies and Holiness – all of which have nothing to do with what Jesus wanted, and, in real fact, are explicitly opposed to what he had wanted. They also moulded God unto the image of the emperor. “This survey has shown that all ministries are the creation of the Church. None can be traced back to Jesus, not even that of the bishop, and least of all that of the priest.” (Haag, 108). The ministries arose as responses to the problems the community faced (e.g., Acts 6).

The NT had a multiplicity of ministries, but by the 3rd century these are channeled into the threefold ministry of Bishop, presbyters and deacons, formed into a hierarchy of an order of priests. With this, there emerged a class called the laity, the non-clerics. Clerics are the norm, just as when we used to speak of ‘non-Christians’ the understanding was the norm is ‘Christian’. “The brotherhood throughout the world” eventually became 2 classes, the “ordained” and the “non-ordained”, one superior to the other, and their distinction became characteristic of the Church. The majority of the members of the Body of Christ are devalued, as only the ordained can hold offices in the Church, preside over the worship and participate in the decision-making processes.

This gulf between the classes was caused by various developments, like the granting of privileged status to the Christian Church by the emperor, a privilege which pushed the non-ordained to the background. The rejection by the Reformation of the hierarchy and the ministerial priesthood caused a further emphasis on the division and “ecclesiology” came to be ‘hierarchology’. The ‘Church’ meant: Pope, Bishop and priests. The change in the understanding of the Eucharist also led to this division.

The Eucharist, the continuation of Jesus’ fellowship meals and a symbol of the new covenant community he founded, and of the Kingdom he proclaimed, was celebrated in the homes of the people presided over by the hosts of the house churches, or the head of the gathered community; and later, also by ‘prophets’, ‘teachers’ and elders. The concern Paul had about the Eucharist was fellowship, equality and concern for the poor (1 Cor 11.17-34). He does not refer to priests when he talks about the Eucharist. The Didache, a second century document, also does not refer to priests with regard to the Eucharist. For the first two hundred years it was not a rite of ordination, as we understand it today, but a commission that was the criterion for presiding over the Eucharist; a “priestly ordination” cannot be detected before the fifth century (Haag, 45). “For nearly four centuries priestly ordination was not necessary for the enactment of the Eucharist” (Haag, 108). Usually reference is made to Heb 5.1 (“Every high priest is selected from among the people...to offer sacrifices...for the sins of the people”) when the Eucharist is seen in relation to the priesthood. This is absolutely untenable, as Hebrews speaks of Jewish priests and “no New Testament writing comes down so decidedly against the idea of a Christian priesthood as the letter to the Hebrews” (Haag, 41). Various developments led to regard the simple, homely Eucharistic meals as sacrifice requiring priests. The Jews who had become disciples of Jesus had difficulty in accepting the rejection of the Temple and Temple worship; without priests and sacrifices they had no identity as belonging to a religion. In the Roman Empire, Christians were accused of being atheists as they did not offer sacrifice to the emperor or to gods. Hence, they were literally forced to see the Eucharist as a sacrifice offered to God by priests. However, “in the whole of Christian literature of the



first two centuries the term *hiericus, sacerdos*, “priest” is avoided. This was to change during the third century” (Haag, 90). By the 3rd century, thanks primarily to Cyprian of Carthage and Tertullian, OT terminology dominated Christian worship and the division priests/laity came to be firmly established. The laity was condemned to passivity, obedience to and supporting the clerics.

A reappraisal of this division began with Pius XI’s encouragement of ‘Catholic Action’. “The aim of this organization was to activate the laity, but it contributed more to the building up of a Papal absolutism than bringing about the independence of the laity” (Haag,14). Pius XII went beyond Pius XI and saw the laity as the Church; he gave the laity their rightful place in the Church. He said very boldly, “The faithful, and more precisely the laity, stand in the forefront line of the Church’s life.... Hence they..., should have an ever clearer awareness not just of belonging to the Church but of being the Church” (Acta Apostolicae Sedis 38(1946), p. 149). Vatican II went far beyond the expectations of many when in the 2nd chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, prior to the discussion of various groups, declared the Church as the people of God, and “any and every class division within it is fundamentally rejected” (Haag,19). But soon after saying this, the Council went on to affirm the hierarchical structure, being afraid that they have given away their privileges and rights by affirming the Church as the people of God. Vatican II did bring in some reforms, but the same Council, when it came to the matter of the clergy, went back to pre-Vatican positions and spoke about the essential difference of priests from the laity, implying, unintentionally, therefore, the hierarchical priesthood has no foundation in Jesus, since it is said in 1 Pet 2.4-10 that the whole community is a priestly, holy community, and an “essentially different” sharing in the same priesthood is difficult to understand. This “*pro domo sua*” approach has done great damage to the Council and to the Church. We cannot expect the men, who defend positions which are diametrically opposed to Jesus, to support positions which undermine their authority and status. Chapter four keeps the laity in their pre-Vatican place, forgetting chapter two and the words of Pius XII. Hence, even though, under duress from theologians like Congar, Rahner and others, the Fathers of the Council agreed to the idea of the “people of God”, that could not be sustained for long due to the fear of losing their self-imposed importance and claims to superiority.

The new code of Canon Law of 1983 was supposed to bear the stamp of the Council, but the Code affirms in advance the division of the clerics and laity as divinely instituted (Canon 207# 1), showing ignorance of the NT and the teachings of Jesus. Then the Synod of 1987 and the subsequent *Christifideles Laici* have only reaffirmed the inferior position of the laity, going against the desire of Jesus, the insight of Pius XII and Vatican II.

I do not deny that the ‘priesthood’, as it developed in the Church, has done a lot of good to the community and some such kind of leadership has to continue. However, I personally do not see how the exclusively male priesthood claiming to come from Jesus can be justified and sustained. The Biblical Commission itself had told John Paul II that it cannot be defended on the basis of Scripture, and, as I have shown earlier, it is not based on the Tradition of the first 2 Centuries closest to the Apostolic times. Hence, may we hope that the present form of leadership will be changed and a new form be worked out based on the Bible and the early tradition, always under the guidance of the Spirit.

Honesty is required of all, especially of the disciples of Jesus who is The Truth. In my view, this is not evident in the present Hierarchy. I am convinced that the Church will become what Jesus wanted and wants it to be, namely, a fellowship of mutual service as friends, brothers/sisters and a Sacrament of Salvation for the whole world, only when the Hierarchy recognize that their claims and position are not founded on Jesus, but on the Roman empire which had a clearly hierarchical structure, and on their legitimization of their self-importance, and are ready to repent, give up the claims which are against the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus, and want to become a community of brothers/sisters at the



service of one another, where all members are considered equal, with distinct functions, and where every member has the right and duty to serve the community. They should remember that Jesus by the gesture of the foot-washing has overthrown all structures of inequality and domination, and established mutual service as friends as the characteristic of His community. (Jn 13: 12-17) Then leadership in the community would be considered as one of the services open to all the members, irrespective of gender. The present priesthood would be rethought to follow the pattern of Jesus, not as a privilege and a matter of powers, but a commitment to serve and build up the community following the example of the foot-washing Master, the God who became a slave. If this radical rethinking is not done, I do not see much meaningful future for the Church. The present type and exercise of leadership ('the enemy within') will destroy it. However we hope that the Lord would not let this happen and the leaders will see themselves in the light of the NT and Jesus. Jesus had told Peter at the foot washing that "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand" (Jn 13.7). That 'later' has yet to happen in the Church. Are not twenty centuries enough for that 'later' to appear? The laity, especially women will have to take the lead to make this 'later' to happen and a rethinking of what Jesus wanted is done, so that we become truly the salt, leaven and light of the world, the fruit-bearing branches of the divine tree, where all branches have the same dignity and the function of "bearing fruit" and thus revealing God.

Is such a change possible? In many areas where the Church held a wrong view, for example, it had taken social structures like slavery as 'natural' and 'God willed' have been given up; similarly, in so many areas the Church has accepted changes; hence I do not think it is impossible that a change happens and we re-discover the kind of Church and leadership Jesus envisaged, as the Spirit of Jesus is still active in our Church.

Dr. Joseph Mattam sj
4/3/13

Fr. Joseph Mattam SJ, founder and dean for many years of Gujarat Jesuit Regional Theologate is a writer and author of many books. He is a regular invitee to address theological centres in Europe and America.

This article is published in July issue of New Leader from Chennai, India.

<http://www.rk-kerkplein.org/home/themas/Kerk-zijn/ambten/de-scheiding-tussen-geestelijkheid-en-leken-in-de-kerk>

