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1-1-2011

Laity

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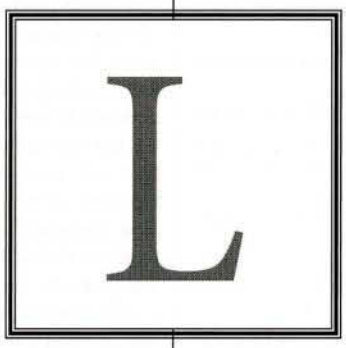
Published Version. "Laity," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Eds. Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby and Iain R. Torrance. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011: 269-270. Permalink. © 2011 Cambridge University Press.

LAITY The Greek word *laikos*, from which the word 'lay' derives, does not occur in the Bible, although the noun *laos*, meaning 'people', is frequent, specifically designating the people of God as distinct from the Gentiles. Thus, the word *laos* properly refers to a sacred or consecrated people, distinct from a people who are not so consecrated. Several scholarly studies have shown that, although *laikos* is philologically related to *laos*, the use of the former term suggests that it refers to a further distinction within the people of God, according to which the *laikos* is opposed to the priest and Levite as one who is not consecrated for leadership in worship. In short, *laikos* designated a segment of the Christian population that were not leaders of the community and who exercised no cultic function. It referred to those who were not priests, deacons, or clerics.



Y. Congar (1904–95) argued that in 1 Peter the priestly themes and levitical ethic of the OT are carried over to the people of God as a whole (see, e.g., 1 Pet. 2:9). By contrast, Clement of Rome (*fl.* 95) is the first to contrast *laikos* to 'priest' (*1Clem.* 40:5), and uses the former term to refer to that part of the people which is neither priestly nor levitical; nevertheless, for him *laikos* refers to the non-priestly, non-levitical element among the *holy* people.

Gratian (*fl.* twelfth century), in a canon which he attributes to JEROME, declared, 'There are two types of Christians' (*Decr.* 100.12.1.7), effectively dividing humankind into two classes: those of religion and those of the world. In Gratian's text, lay people are allowed to possess temporal goods needed for use, to marry, to till the earth, to pronounce judgement on disputes and to plead in court, to lay their offerings on the altar, and to pay their tithes. They can be saved if they do good and avoid evil. Gratian's description presents the lay condition as a concession to human weakness and denies to the laity, concerned in temporal affairs, any active part in the sphere of sacred things. Gratian's division was echoed by other medieval writers, most notably Hugh of St Victor (1096–1141). Their perspective was shaped by an ambivalent attitude towards the world as essentially good because of its divine source, but also as a source of evil and a distraction from spiritual things. The latter emphasis led to an attitude of contempt towards the world that undercut the very structures and values inherent to the lay state and placed a correspondingly high value on the ideal of flight from the world in MONASTICISM.

From the fifteenth century two competing ecclesiologies developed: a tendency by some writers to identify the Church with the clergy and a reaction (culminating in the Protestant REFORMATION) that identified the Church with a lay society, with no theological distinction between a priesthood of the baptized and a hierarchical priesthood.

A more positive view of the laity in CATHOLIC THEOLOGY developed in the nineteenth century, when growing secularization, a more positive attitude towards the world, and waning ecclesiastical temporal power required a new form of witness in an increasingly pluralistic and secular world. Pius XI (r. 1922–39) and Pius XII (r. 1939–58) officially accepted and promoted Catholic Action, a movement which enabled the laity to cooperate with or even participate in the hierarchy's own apostolate, but the apostolate was still essentially that of the hierarchy. In the ENCYCLICAL *Mystici corporis* (1943), Pius XII acknowledged the laity's share in responsibility for the Church's total mission.

This brief overview of the history of the laity shows that the very concept excluded the laity from any active part in the sphere of sacred things. It does not account for the truth that the laity, like clergy and monks, are ordered to a heavenly inheritance (Col. 1:12), even though they are also involved in the activities of the world and, indeed, accomplish God's work in and through their work in the world. The laity cannot be identified simply by reference to the world, secular work, or merely temporal occupations. These provide the conditions, not merely the matter, of their Christian activity, which can be quite spiritual.

VATICAN COUNCIL II and, later, the 1983 Code of CANON LAW identify the Church as the people of God, treating all Christians in common before differentiating the various states of life and offices. They stress the oneness of the chosen people of God. Members of the Church share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ, possess in common one salvation, one hope, and one undivided charity (*LG*, §32). All are called to holiness. The people of God as a whole is active, consecrated, and a witness and sacramental sign of God's GRACE active in the world. This people is constituted by BAPTISM and shares properly in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly offices, although these are carried out differently according to one's office and state in life. As part of the people of God, the laity is entrusted with a common sacred mission, which is also secular: the transformation of the present order into the KINGDOM OF GOD. The laity has an active responsibility for the evangelizing mission of the Church. The apostolate of the laity is inherently their own, received in baptism and CONFIRMATION (*LG*, §11).

The secular quality properly attributed to the laity is not to be interpreted in an exclusive sense. As the development of lay ecclesial ministry has shown, lay

people also legitimately engage in ministerial service within the Church. These new activities are raising new questions about the relationship between lay and ordained ministry. While some fear that laypeople are usurping what is properly ordained ministry, others fear a clericalization of the laity and a devaluation of the laity's traditional influence and mission in the secular sphere. At the same time, the older dualism between the spiritual and secular spheres is being questioned today.

Y. Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1965).

L. Doohan, *The Laity: A Bibliography* (Michael Glazier Books, 1987).

John Paul II, apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles laici* (1988).

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LAMBETH QUADRILATERAL: see ECUMENISM.

LAS CASAS, BARTOLOMÉ DE While his work as a historian seems to be one of his major contributions to the understanding of the conquest and colonization of the Americas, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (*ca* 1485–1566) is best known as the 'defender of the Indians' for his work in protection for the human rights of native population in the Americas. He challenged the myth of superiority that constructed the Amerindians as barbaric, deficient, irrational, naturally inferior, and created to serve. His hope was that this challenge would transform the treatment of Amerindians by the Spaniards *conquistadores*.

Las Casas arrived in the Americas in 1502 and observed the mistreatments of indigenous populations first hand, but it was not until 1511, after listening to a sermon in which the Dominican priest A. Montesino (1480–1540) denounced the behaviour of Spanish conquistadores towards indigenous people, that Las Casas began his quest for the elimination of the *encomienda* system. Las Casas saw the *encomienda* system as a mortal sin because it was a legal way of enslaving Amerindians in order to use them as forced labour. He was not against the missionary endeavour; indeed, he saw it as the only just motive for the colonization of the Americas. But he was against the violence that, in his eyes, had prevented the establishment of a real missionary enterprise.

Las Casas understood that while it was important to confront the actions of the Spaniards, it was more important to challenge the ideology behind those actions. This ideology, which defined Amerindians as less than human, was supported by a philosophy that talked about two different kinds of human beings: those born to be served, and those born to be servants or slaves. Against this perspective, Las Casas believed that all humans were created equal and that the idea of two different types of humans would imply that God somehow failed in the CREATION (see THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY).

After twice presenting his defence of the Amerindians before Spain's King Charles I (r. 1516–56) and having been named bishop of Chiapas, Las Casas officially presented his arguments in favour of the humanity of the Amerindians during his famous debate against J. Ginés de Sepúlveda (1494–1573) in 1550. Two years later, he published his best-known work, *The Destruction of the Indies*, where he not only narrates the atrocities committed by the *conquistadores* but also engages in a more general condemnation of Spanish actions, including the killing of Amerindians. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that Las Casas did not make the same defence of Africans: although he later regretted it, he suggested that Africans should be used as workforce in the sugar mills, as this would liberate the Amerindians from that hard labour.

The work of Bartolomé de Las Casas is still important in today's society in Latin America, as indigenous communities still struggle for HUMAN RIGHTS. The resurgence of Las Casas' message has become present in the theological discourse called *teología india*.

G. Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Orbis, 1993 [1992]).

HJAMIL A. MARTINEZ-VAZQUEZ

LATIN AMERICAN THEOLOGY Latin America was the crucible for the development of LIBERATION THEOLOGY, a theological–religious movement that was closely tied to its social and cultural context. The contextual character of liberation theology was emphasized and theorized by Latin American liberation theologians themselves, intent as they were on reading and confronting 'the signs of the times'. In retrospect, such a judgement can be not only readily confirmed but also amply extended. From the beginning liberationists argued that all theological systems or visions had a context, that such contexts represented particular needs and challenges, and that all theologies should scrutinize and address such challenges and needs, if they hoped to be of relevance and service to their respective societies and cultures. No theology was beyond history, or outside society and culture; all theology was, and should be, contextual.

What liberationists posited of all theological visions or systems, past or present, they readily applied to themselves. As a theological–religious movement, Latin American liberation theology sought to be keenly cognizant of and directly responsive to the context of Latin America, from which it was emerging and in which it sought to intervene. This was the Latin America of the late 1960s and early 1970s – that period of sharp global turmoil that followed the consolidation of the Cold War through the 1950s and into the 1960s.