

November 1963

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Recommended Citation

Cary-Elwes, Columbra (1963) "The Christian Layman in the World," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 30 : No. 4 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol30/iss4/5>

THE CHRISTIAN LAYMAN IN THE WORLD*

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The subject that I dared to offer to talk about was the laity and the Church.† I do not happen to be a layman and it is very typical of the Church of today that somebody who is not a layman should start talking about it; just as priests tend to talk about medical matters. The laity have not worked it out for themselves, and very few people have really ventured on this quite complicated subject of the position of the laity in the Church. So, I am going to venture to talk about it now.

As you know, it was quite normal not very long ago for a young man to say to his father or mother that he was "going to enter the Church," by which, apparently, he meant that he was going to become a priest; as though he were not already in the Church, as though the laity were not the Church. The laity are the Church, and the clergy are the servants of the laity. They are the *servi servorum Dei*.

We must examine the position of the laity in the Church, a point of extreme importance today, because it is precisely the laity that is being considered in

many aspects of the Vatican Council.

If the Church is the laity, and the hierarchy and the priests are their servants, then the laity in one way are the most important part of the Church. They are innumerable, they are everywhere, they are of all kinds and descriptions. They have immense capacities which vary from group to group, from individual person to individual person. Even within this group of medical men, the St. Louis Catholic Physicians' Guild, there are immense potentialities, great variety and innumerable contacts with the world around. It is this vast army of Christians that makes up the Church. And on the whole neither the laity nor the clergy have fully appreciated the wonder of what it is to be a member of the laity and the potential that lies hidden there. As Father Congar said, the medieval Church and the early Church were almost a monastic Church. It was considered that if you wanted to be 100% Christian you had to become a monk, or at any rate you had to treat the world — even if you were in it — rather as if you were a monk. With the coming of the Renaissance and the fuller appreciation of the wonder of the natural order and of the natural life of man, the laity could look at their own world, the world in which they lived and be fully Christian in it.

*Transcription of remarks at Annual Meeting of the St. Louis Physicians' Guild, February 13, 1963.

†The reader must make allowances for the style. This was spoken extempore and those who heard it want it kept that way. C.C.E.

We begin with stating what the laity is in the Church. To put it quite bluntly, you are other Christs. By the sacrament of Baptism we receive the life of Christ, everybody does, priests and laymen. That is to say, that we are living by the life of Christ. Here I am following Pere Congar, one of the great theologians of our day (see his *Guidelines on the Theology of the Laity in the Church*).

He begins with the point that the laity are not simply a political pressure group to be turned on if we want to have money for our schools. They may be that, but God forbid that they become merely a pressure group; that is the danger in America. They may have political power, they certainly are a kind of immense cow, from which the Church, I should say rather the clergy, milk vast quantities of money. And that has its advantages, as the Priory has found out. I am not denying any of these things, but I am not going to talk about them tonight.

The laity are something much more than a pressure group, much more than a bottomless bank. They are other Christs. What is Christ? What is His action, what does He do, what does He represent? Christ primarily was *the priest*. He was also *the king* and *the prophet*. Now that does not sound a very promising sort of line for the laity, because the clergy do not usually say that the lay folk are prophets, or priests, or kings. If they come across a lay prophet, they tend to sit on him and usually fairly rightly. A layman who sets out to be a prophet in the sense that

we usually understand it, is very often rather a dangerous type. And we don't usually say that the laity are the priests and they don't seem to be kings; and yet the laity are in a certain and a very, very real sense all of these things. Scripture says, "You are the royal priesthood" — royal priesthood — and that comes more than once in the New Testament, spoken not of the priests but of the laity.

In fact, the word "priest" in the Greek New Testament, the real word for priest, is never used of priests as we understand them. The word "presbyter" (elder) is used, from which the word "priest" comes. And of bishops, the word is "overseers" and never do the sacred writers call them priests; but occasionally Christ is called a priest and the people of God are called priests. Now that is extraordinary. So there is a great amount of work to be done on just that one point if, as it seems, you are really priests in the Biblical sense. I do not say only men are priests but *everybody*, every single Christian man and woman. In what sense is this true? We have to dig in the very depth of the nature of the priesthood and of sacrifice to understand. Pere Congar points out that really there are two elements in sacrifice and priesthood. There is the liturgical sacrifice, the ritual one, the sacramental one, but that being a sacrament is only a sign of the more general one which underlies it. There is also the inward one. He quotes St. Augustine and St. Thomas showing that the priest basically is someone who can offer a sacr-

fice. He shows from the Psalms¹ and also again St. Augustine² that a sacrifice is basically an *inward* thing. The outward element of the Mass and of Calvary is the ritual sacrifice performed by the ritual priesthood, the summing up, the making visible of the inward one, which is the giving of your life. Only the Church's priests can bring Christ on the altar, but all the Church's faithful can and must offer that Christ-made-present together with themselves in sacrifice.

In what way can we say then that the layman is a priest? He is so in that inward and general sense by which he gives back, offers to God first of all himself, who is now Christ-like and Christ himself. He gives himself and Christ, in his heart, which is the inward sacrifice of which all outward ones are only representations. And he gives the whole world. Now to take the doctor, think of the marvelous giving that the doctor does. In the whole of his life, it is perfectly evident, particularly the pain and the suffering and the death that come. You are so near life and death, so near the outward symbols of sacrifice, it should be easy to make your life share in the sacrifice of these people who are giving their life in their death. Or you may stave off death for a time. Even then, you are giving that; for every action that a man does, if he does it with Christ, is making a profane thing *sacred*, i.e. making it belong to God which is what sacrifice means. The difference between the profane and the sa-

cred is that the profane starts by being as it were outside God's domain whereas the sacred belongs to God. But you by touching the profane things with your Christ-like hands, sanctify, sacrifice, make sacred (*sacer-facere*) everything you touch. You do not turn things into gold, but you turn things into gifts to give to God. Put *that* thought into your lives and there you become part of the priesthood of Christ.

Take the second point, we are all kings by sharing the kingship of Christ. Kings! A king rules. That means that a Christian through his Baptism has authority, he rules. Again — Pere Congar makes a distinction, he says that over the material things, man can rule by *power*, by control, by physical control, by intellectual control, but over people by *holiness*. Take the doctors again; consider the control that the doctor has over the body and the mind, the emotions, of all those patients and people who come in contact with him. That is, of course, purely in the natural order. But by being united with Christ, the whole activity is raised up, because you are sharing in a way in God's creative activity and you are sharing his governing of the world. You are in a way interfering with the order of things, interfering in a way that God would want, that is to say using this wonderful mind that man has, to control life to control disease, to control man's mind. Even only in the material order that is a marvelous thing.

We do not have this power simply of ourselves, it comes to us from God and it is sanctified for us by our union with Christ

¹Ps. 50, 18-19

²City of God, Bk.X, cc. 5, 6

who is the Word, that is to say, the wisdom of God. "Verbum" (Logos) does not mean just "Word," it means "Wisdom." We should start the gospel of Saint John, "In the beginning was Wisdom and Wisdom was with God and Wisdom was God and by Wisdom all things were made." If only we translated it that way, we would make more sense of it. And as Wisdom made everything, so you, as you open up the human body or examine it, you see there the wisdom of God. You, as it were, tinker with that tremendous mystery and I am sure that every doctor would say that it is really only tinkering. How little we know about life. Yet I would like to take this opportunity to thank the profession of medicine for the wonders of surgery performed on me.

We have then a kind of authority over things, and that in the natural order. But over people we have not the same kind of power, we should not dominate them. It is a mistake that has been made within the Church to think that we can dominate people's liberty; and, please God, the Council will come out with a good, clear statement of the true meaning of tolerance. Over other people the Christian has kingship by humility; not by dominance, but by example. Is it not true that the saint, as we read in the life of every saint, draws people? He does not drive them, but attracts them, and not to himself but to God. That can be done just as much by a layman as by a religious or by a priest. Here then we have that second element; of kingship — the overlordship of

Christ over natural things by the power of the intellect, and overlordship by holiness among people.

The third point is this curious idea that we are all prophets. Now, of course, we may easily have a wrong idea about prophets. We have been brought up to think that the prophet is one who foresees the future. But the prophet really means a seer, somebody who understands who penetrates the truth, and Pere Congar says that this term is used in the Bible in a broader sense than what we call in theology the *Magisterium*, the teaching authority of the Church. Every Christian in a way is a prophet, like Noah of old. He has received an amazing revelation of truth. He received it from the *Magisterium*, the teaching Church.

If you take one of the old testament prophecies about what was to happen at the coming of Christ, you will find Ezekiel says: "At that time no man will have to teach another, but each will know the truth in his heart." We will not have to write the commandments of the new law on stone, they are written on the tablets of the heart. Every man will know the truth.

Of course, that text can be very seriously misused. It was in fact misused by the reformers, who said: "We have no need for bishops and councils and popes and what not; everybody knows we all know. We ourselves have this revelation." Now remember this, that the positive statements of the Protestant Reformation were usually true, but the counter statement was left out. The tendency on the Catholic side

was to emphasize the counter statement and forget the other. At the Reformation and long before, the Church was on the defensive about the idea of the hierarchy, the authoritative teaching Church. The popes and bishops had a right to teach. This was a perfectly true doctrine; but that emphasis rather damped down this other idea that every Christian knew the truth too. Because lots of people were popping up here, there, and everywhere and saying: "I don't see why I should follow this bishop; I know it just as well. I've only to pick up the Bible and there I've got it," the Church had to emphasize the teaching authority. But there was some truth in what they said, and I think it is an important truth that you should ponder, like the other two: that every Christian because of his Baptism and his Confirmation is in a sense a prophet, that is to say, somebody who knows.

In the Church you have to have these two poles: the people who teach and the people who are taught. But once they have been taught, then that seed of knowledge remains. In fact, having Christ in them, they have the mind of Christ. Once they have been given Christ, and have been taught the truth, then it is active in them. And if only the laity would spread their knowledge, then truly the Church could be apostolic 100%. Apparently this was Pius XI's idea when he invented Catholic Action; he claimed that this idea came to him as a divine inspiration, that the laity should share in the apostolate of the episcopate. This does not mean they

share the office of the bishops. They could, however, be helpers of the bishops. They can be told by the bishops to go out and preach the gospel. If they are told, then they have in a sense the authority of the bishops behind them.

But long before Pius XI's inspiration, the laity had this apostolic desire. It was already in them. They have Christ in them. Christ himself wants to spread himself, for if there is Christ in every Christian soul then there must be the Christ-like love of every other soul in each of the laity, just as much as in the clergy. If only it could be liberated. Let us start then with this idea that the Christian has first of all the truth of Christ in him and then this urge, this desire, this need, you might say, and this power of Christ in him to spread it.

In the natural order alone, for example, the political order, consider its relationship with the revelation of Christ. Take this tremendous truth, that we know theoretically by reason but in fact by revelation: that the essential unit in the world is the individual person. He is the creature that has an eternal destiny. Think what an enlightening effect that should have on the whole political outlook — that persons are not for the state, but the state for the person. That the individual person is not for the sake of the medical profession, but the profession for the person. We cannot treat a human body, an individual one, just as a guinea pig. He has an individual right. This influence of Christ-truth goes through the whole of the natural order, and not only on that particular point

of the human person, but over and over again. If we know our faith, then that will illumine, that will shine into and will make clear many obscurities. Now you the laity in the world, are the only people who can really do that. The clergy have too much to do on the spiritual level already, to say nothing of the financial level. (Which, of course, the laity should take over.) But you in each department are linked with the material world intimately.

The early Church was so oppressed by the wickedness of the world that the general emphasis was: "We really ought to get away from it." This idea came to a startling climax with the escape, you might say, of thousands, tens of thousands of people into the desert, following St. Anthony the Hermit. This was symbolic of the idea that the Church and the world were utterly separate, that the Church should not be sullied, dirtied, or harmed by the world. When the Roman world was more or less converted at the time of Constantine, it was still considered as something very wretched, to be shunned. But curiously enough, Our Lord Himself never really said that. He said, "I am not going to take you out of the world, you are going to remain in the world, but you are not of it." It is possible to take that, I think, in a slightly wrong way. You could say: "Yes, the laity have got to be in the world but they have got to be separated from it."

For instance, for a long time the idea of marriage was looked down on as something really rather second rate. In the Vic-

torian period people practically never talked about marriage in public, as it was thought of as something not particularly respectable. It was just an inevitable and unfortunate accident. I don't say that the Church ever held that officially; but apparently when Montalembert was writing the life of St. Elizabeth, he had almost to hush up the fact that she had been married. That was a count against her in her holiness!

We have gone a long way from that now, but there still is this curious hangover that the only perfect life is the religious or the priestly life, and the world outside is really all rather regrettable. But that is changing and the Church is coming more and more fully now into the world, because the world has swung away from the Church and needs saving. Up till the Reformation and even after, the world was caught up in the Church, as though the world were part of the Church and we didn't quite understand just what to do with it. But the world is now definitely a thing in itself and recognized as such. The people who are in the world are the laity. They understand it. Each in his own department is professional in it. The doctor knows about doctoring, which is a lay thing. Here then is the bridge between Christ and the world, the layman in all his works, the doctor, the lawyer, the business man, the sailor, the airman, and so on. You are the bridge between the Church, Christ, and the people who are outside the Church. Therefore, the laity are the front rank of the apostolate sent out by the

bishops to cooperate in the work of an apostle, somebody sent by Christ. Recognizing the fact of your being prophets, (that is, people with knowledge) you have to state your message.

This can be done either as part of the Catholic Action, which is the official action of the laity under the episcopate on purely ecclesiastical matters; or if you prefer, you can do it as individuals or as a group right in the lay world. Here in this Physicians' Guild is an ideal organization for doing it. You would do it by encouraging one another to act as Christs, and that means as a priest offering your life as sacrifice, making it holy, and every-

thing that you do holy, and everything you touch holy. Then you would do it by controlling, by your knowledge, the things of this world, trying to put them all into line with the design of God and at the same time trying to lead people by holiness and so ruling the world by holiness. Then, you should be prepared when required, (and "required" means out of love) to state the Catholic religion, the religion of Christ, the "good news" to everybody insofar as he will take it, and so put the truth of God into lay life. That I think is as much time as I have here to say what is meant by being a Christian layman today.

Federation Executive Board Meeting Scheduled

The Executive Board of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds will meet November 8, 1963. Time: 7:30 p.m. Place: Pick-Fort Shelby Hotel, Detroit, Michigan. The officers of the National Federation and one delegate from each active constituent Guild comprising the Board will conduct business. Election of officers.