

Lay charisms in a synodal, missionary Church

The Warp and the Weft

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The Churches are living an era characterized by renewed missionary fervor, an era intimately linked to the synodal arrangement of the Church. Mission and synodality, in fact, are two sides of the same coin by which evangelization plays out. And the coin's thickness can be considered "Trinitarian communion." Jesús Morán, a philosopher and theologian, was elected co-president of the Focolare Movement in 2014. He reflects here on the role of the laity, and in particular the new movements and communities born from lay charisms.

Renewed missionary outreach

There is urgent need for a new missionary spirit in the Catholic Church. In the post-conciliar period, Pope Paul VI addressed the apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, to the people of God. Pope John Paul II also dedicated the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* to this topic, writing that *the Church is not Church if she is not missionary*. And Pope Francis in his programmatic apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, entitled the first chapter, "The Church's Missionary Transformation."

Attentive contemporary theologians are also dealing with this subject. Some face challenges when speaking of "mission" in today's cultural context which is so resistant to forms of imposition or presentation of the truth in any absolute way¹. And yet, if we defer to the New Testament, mission is inherent to the Church and a mandate that she must fulfill: *the Church exists to communicate the Gospel*.

But there is need to deepen the context in which this perennial mission occurs today. Summarizing studies of today's cultural context, three dimensions emerge as relevant: a) *a secularized world*, b) *a globalization to be discerned*, and c) *structural religious pluralism*². These intricacies make the mission complex and challenging, but at the same time, exciting.

Mission today relates to the gift and humanity of Christ, and is perhaps the only fruitful way to conceive it. In fact, the Church is born from the reciprocal love of the Son with the Father in the Spirit. To put it in the language of the phenomenology of gift: in the Trinitarian perichoresis, the three divine Persons, in giving themselves to one other, find a dwelling in one other. In the Father's plan of love, the risen humanity of the Son found hospitality in the Father. Now the Church, out of love for the Son, in his death and resurrection, finds hospitality in his humanity, and thus comes to share in the Father's mission.

The mission of the Church, then, is none other than to bring all humanity to find its home in the humanity of the Risen Ones, as 'gift'. Theologian and archbishop, Roberto Repole, affirms: "The Church must make available to all... the same gift by which it lives: having found hospitality in the risen humanity of Christ and, therefore, in God himself"³. In Christ, a personal space is open to all and no one is excluded. But by its nature, this missionary understanding requires apostles who are hospitable in interpersonal relationships and welcoming, inclusive, dialoguing communities.

Who are the laity?

A decade before the Council, in 1954, Dominican theologian, Yves M.-J. Congar ventured the giant undertaking of elaborating an urgently needed theology of the laity. It would later prove influential for the Council and is still of interest today. In his introduction, Congar cites an anecdote recounted by Cardinal Gasquet: "A catechumen asked a Catholic priest what was the position of laity in his Church. The position of the laity, the priest replied, is twofold: He kneels before the altar; that is one. And he sits below the pulpit; that is the other.' The cardinal adds that there is a third that the priest had forgotten: The layman also puts his hand in his purse"⁴.

Further on, Congar wrote: "In the end, only a *total ecclesiology* could constitute a valid theology of the laity"⁵. A revaluation of the laity requires a new vision of the Church, one more in accord with the New Testament and the experience of the early Church. Congar also included a number of valuable indications. For example, nowhere in the New Testament is there an affirmation of a distinction between laity and clerics (cf. p. 19). It was not until the mid-third century that we find a tripartite distribution of ecclesial states: clerics, monks and laity (p. 23).

Congar associated the Church's hierarchical dimension with the (institutional) structure, in the deepest sense of the word, connecting the life of the Church to the life and gestures of Christ. This architecture serves the whole and sustains it. Later, Congar spoke of the need to keep these two dimensions together, like the warp and weft of a fabric: institutional structure and what he refers to as the *community life* of the Church. He expressly says that the Church is made up of God's people, and that one can be a person of God in two ways: by competence of office or by personal qualification through one's life: *ex officio* (juridical order) or *ex spiritu* (order of life) (cf. p. 324). He then goes so far as to say: "Jesus instituted an apostleship and invested *the Twelve* with its powers. [...] When the Spirit had come, the Church no longer existed simply as an institutional framework but as a body or community quickened by the Spirit of Christ; all the members – and not the Twelve alone – receive the Gift of God [...]. Now the Church sets to work to weave: on the apostolical warp, which ensures her continuity with Christ, the weft ever continues to make a pattern of life aroused in souls by the gifts of the Spirit." (p. 326).

The Laity and Vatican II

Reflections on the laity by theologians and popes pervaded the Church in this last century, but it was the Second Vatican Council that provided a framework for the reflections. In addition to *Lumen Gentium*, the Council dedicates an entire decree to the subject, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, where we find truly important clarifications regarding the role of the laity in the Church's mission.

The document reaffirms the involvement of everyone in the Church's apostolate, with the goal to "spread of the kingdom of Christ throughout the earth" and aim to "effectively order the whole world to Christ". It speaks of the image of the body: "No part of the structure of a living body is merely passive but has a share in the functions as well as life of the body: so, too, in the body of Christ, which is the Church, "the whole body . . . in keeping with the proper activity of each part, derives its increase from its own internal development" (Eph. 4:16). The text then specifies: "In the Church there is a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission. Christ conferred on the Apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying and ruling in His name and power. But the laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world. They exercise the apostolate in fact by their activity directed to the evangelization and sanctification of men and to the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel, [...] like leaven." (n. 2).

Against this backdrop, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* then states: "There is a great variety of associations in the apostolate. Some set before themselves *the broad apostolic purpose* of the Church; others aim to evangelize and sanctify in a special way. The purpose of some is to infuse a Christian spirit into the temporal order; others bear witness to Christ in a special way through works of mercy and charity." (n.19 - emphasis added).

The co-essential hierarchical and charismatic gifts

Thus, a more organic and less dualistic model has emerged, one that is also less top-down and elitist. It brings us back to that idea of the *Laos* of the first centuries and to the New Testament, in which there is no distinction between clerics and laity. Clerics and laity, therefore, walk together in the Church and build the Kingdom with particular gifts. And it has been along this path that the role of charisms and ecclesial movements arose in the Church during the last century.

The Vatican Council took an important step in this direction when it stated in *Lumen Gentium*: "The Church, which the Spirit guides in way of all truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13) and which He unified in communion and in works of ministry, He both equips and directs with hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with His fruits. (cf. *Eph* 4:11-12; *1 Cor* 12:4; *Gal* 5:22)" (no. 4)

Noteworthy commentary on this is also found in the Apostolic Letter, *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, on the relationship between hierarchical and charismatic gifts in Church life and mission. Addressed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to Catholic bishops (15 May 2016), the letter references *Lumen gentium* and emphasizes the closely, articulated relationships between these gifts.⁶

No. 11 exhorts "the necessity of overcoming every sterile contraposition or extrinsic juxtaposition between the hierarchical and charismatic gifts" and indicates the theological foundation of their co-essentiality: "The action of God in history always implies the relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit, who, in Irenaeus of Lyon's evocative words, are called "the two hands of the Father". In this sense, every gift of the Spirit can only be in relation to the Word made flesh. It is therefore necessary to repeat "that the two divine missions mutually imply each other *in every gift* bestowed freely upon the Church."⁷

A broader concept of apostolic succession

At the May 1998 World Congress of Ecclesial Movements, in preparation for the meeting of Ecclesial Movements and new Communities in St. Peter's Square which would follow, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger gave an important talk in which he proposed an innovative interpretation of twentieth century apostolic movements and their place in the Church.⁸

After examining how theology had dealt with their delicate articulation, Ratzinger offered a new historical reading that relied on the concept of apostolic succession. Here, he explained, the apostolic movements of the twentieth century -- predominantly lay in nature -- are only the latest flowering of a journey that began with first-century monasticism and passes through all the orders, congregations and religious institutes arising throughout history. These movements, Ratzinger observed, are intimately linked to the Church's universal mission, of which the papacy is the central figure that must be articulated with the local one. While the latter, over time, acquires a more marked and precise structural and institutional aspect (with the institution of local bishops), the former emphasizes more what Congar called *communitarian life*, witness, holiness, and ultimately the commitment to evangelization.

After careful biblical and historical examination, Ratzinger concluded: "... [T]he concept of apostolic succession must be broadened and deepened if we wish to do justice to everything it claims to be. What does that mean? First, it means that the sacramental structure of the Church must be retained as the core of this concept. It is in this structure that the Church receives, perpetually renewed, the legacy of the apostles, the legacy of Christ. [...] [while] simultaneously, the making present of this event in the power of the Holy Spirit, hence the christological-pneumatological component, which guarantees at once the newness and the continuity of the living Church." (pp. 45-45).

Thus ecclesial or apostolic movements represent a recovery of the universal apostolic dimension linked to apostolic succession. This dimension has taken a back seat to local Church development, with the further novelty being that these movements, with their charisms, emphasize the laity as protagonists.

Conclusion

It is now a matter of putting together these two emerging perspectives.

I believe the first can be happily summarized in a passage from the International Theological Commission document on *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018). It refers to the co-essentiality between hierarchical and charismatic gifts. The document calls communities of consecrated life, movements and new ecclesial communities to involvement in the synodal life of the Church: "All of these [...] can offer significant experiences of synodal approaches in the life of communion and of the dynamics of communal discernment at the center of their lives, as well as stimuli to discovering new methods of evangelization. In some cases, they also offer examples of integrating different ecclesial vocations in the perspective of the ecclesiology of communion." (n. 74).

The second is the awareness that the Church's mission is none other than "to make available to all... the very gift by which it lives: having found hospitality in the risen humanity of Christ and, therefore, in God himself."⁹ In short, if the Church's mission is to ensure humanity (also in a broader cultural perspective) finds its home in the risen humanity of Christ, how can the Church adequately carry out her mission without the specific contribution of lay charisms imbued and focused on both the human and divine? How can

the Church's mission go forward, if not in a context of true theological maturity that is representative of an ecclesiology of communion and synodality?

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- ¹ Cf. R. Repole, *La chiesa e il suo dono. La missione tra teologia ed ecclesiologia*, Queriniana, Brescia 2019; id., *Il dono dell'annuncio*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2021.
- ² Id., *Il dono dell'annuncio*, cit., pp. 39-50.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- ⁴ Y. M.-J. Congar, *Per una teologia del laicato*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1966, p. 7.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13. The editor's italics .
- ⁶ "They have the same origin and purpose. They are gifts of God, of the Holy Spirit, of Christ, given to contribute, in different ways, to the building up of the Church. He who has received the gift of leadership in the Church also has the task of overseeing the proper exercise of the other charisms, so that everything contributes to the good of the Church and to her evangelizing mission, knowing full well that it is the Holy Spirit who distributes the charismatic gifts to each one as he wills (cf. 1 Cor. 12:11)" (n. 8).
- ⁷ It was John Paul II who was the first to speak of "co-essentiality" in his Message of May 28, 1998 to the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements: "Several times I have had occasion to emphasize how in the Church there is no contrast or opposition between the institutional dimension and the charismatic dimension, of which the movements are a significant expression. Both are co-essential to the divine constitution of the Church founded by Jesus, because together they contribute to making present the mystery of Christ and his saving work in the world. Together, likewise, they aim at renewing, according to their proper ways, the self-awareness of the Church, which can be said to be, in a certain sense, itself a 'movement,' insofar as it is an event in time and space of the mission of the Son by the work of the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit" (no. 5).
- ⁸ J. Ratzinger, *I movimenti ecclesiali e la loro collocazione teologica*, in Pont. Consilium pro Laicis, *I movimenti ecclesiali. Atti del Congresso mondiale dei movimenti ecclesiali*, Rome, 27-29 May 1998, Città del Vaticano 1999, pp. 23-51.
- ⁹ R. Repole, *Il dono dell'annuncio*, cit., p. 132.