

Revisiting the past, interpreting the present, and discerning the future

# The Laity's Historical role in the Italian Church

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This historical essay focuses on the functions and roles of Italian laity in response to the Church's mission during three different eras: the early Church, the 20th century, and the Italian Church today. In looking at these historical periods, it is evident that the interplay between theological elements and social and cultural factors greatly influenced the lives and actions of lay Christians, both men and women. The author is professor emeritus of history at La Sapienza, University of Rome.

## ▲ Ancient Times

The word 'lay', or 'laity', comes from the Greek adjective, *laikós*, derived from the noun *laos*, which means 'people,' 'multitude,' 'group', or in a more negative connotation, simply that of a big crowd. But its more positive meaning is that of a group united by their shared traditions, faith, customs, etc.

### *The early importance of shared Christian identity*

In the New Testament, the early Christian community was considered a 'people' acquired through the blood of Christ. This was because, as written in the Acts of the Apostles, God first visited the Gentiles, 'to take from among them a people for his name' (see 15:14). Already in the year 50 AD, in fact, the Apostle Paul describes the Church as constituted by Christ as head of a people who, all together, formed one body from whom various ministries and charisms developed, and each was tasked with bringing about reciprocal communion.

In studying the sparse, early first and second century Christian texts, the concept of 'lay persons' does not appear. Rather, emphasis is on Christian identity: God's grace bestowed upon every man and woman, with all called to share in this freely given gift.

### *Growing distinctions in the Third Century*

Without getting into an extended analysis of passages which have some bearing on the topic, it seems fair to suggest that things changed between the end of the second century and the beginning of the third. The texts speak explicitly of 'lay persons' as a distinct category within the life of the early Church.

The Syriac Didascalia (see II, 34,5ff. and 35, 1ff.) written around the year 230, insists on the laity's submission to the bishop and the duty to bring to him the fruit of their work. Towards the mid-third century, at the time of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, the ordained clerus in Roman Africa was distinguished from the plebs (see Epist. 45, 4, 2). Cyprian notes (see Epist. 1, 1) that ordained ministers are to be exclusively dedicated to divine worship, like the example of the Levites, without becoming distracted by profane matters. However, the entire body of the Church composed of all the faithful, participated in the most important decisions of Church life and lay persons were deeply involved in its evangelization.

Through their tireless journeying, the apostles and first disciples were models for the spreading of Christ's message. In later centuries, as the Church had established itself in various countries, bishops and priests began to remain in the one place. Thus, merchants, soldiers, and wanderers became the messengers of the Gospel. In other words, it was simple Christians who powerfully witnessed to their faith in the world.<sup>1</sup> Like in today's world, many martyrs of that time were lay people. As the Acts and Passions of the martyrs show, the Church gathered their testimonies and quickly disseminated them.

Because of this centralization with regard to the bishop and presbyterate, lay functions -- particularly those of women -- gradually reduced over decades and the functioning of the Church as a synodal institution became more limited. During that early, vibrant period of the Church, we see a contrast between institution and charism, and between hierarchy and prophecy.

#### *Distinction becomes separation*

In the fourth century, Constantine favoured defining clerics' status as privileged and allowing them a number of privileges.<sup>2</sup> Terminology meanings also changed: Klêros/clerus, which originally referred to those belonging to Christ's inheritance from the moment they were sealed with the Spirit, evolved to mean those with the responsibility of governing. Celibacy, freely chosen from the earliest times, became obligatory for those in major orders during the fourth century as well. Likewise, St. Gregory of Nazianzus<sup>3</sup> returned to the idea that everyone belonging to the Church of God should be organized in a harmonious structure, stating that pastors are on one side and the flock on the other. Pope Leo I also prohibited those who were not ministers at the altar from preaching and teaching, which had previously been permitted in certain churches.<sup>4</sup> This would become the norm for all Christian communities. The roles of God's people in the Church become ever more distinct and separate from one another.

#### *Monasticism's birth and development*

Already by the end of the third century, monasticism was born. It had two founders in Egypt: Anthony of the Desert and Pachomius. Anthony chose the life of a hermit and Pachomius began monastic life in community. They aimed at dedicating their lives completely to adoration of God either as individuals or in communion with their brothers, and both monastic forms desired to live the Gospel in the most radical way. From even before the Constantinian period, as the Church began to live interdependently within the society of its time<sup>5</sup>, monasticism was born in response to the prevailing ecclesiastical 'secularization.' It brought the return of a strong eschatological sense and a demanding asceticism based on celibacy, poverty and prayer, which in a sense reflected a continuity with the Jewish prophetic tradition. On the other hand, in some of its expressions it was not averse to welcoming an influence from Platonism in regard to elements of anthropological

dualism.<sup>6</sup>

Monks quickly came to be seen as the fullest expression of the charisms as they are bestowed upon the People of God, whether clergy or laity, to the point that, in time, monastic spirituality grew in its impact and provided the standard for everyone in the Christian community. As a consequence of this, however, among other things marriage lost some of its significance and was regarded with a kind of benign acceptance. Likewise, there was devaluing of the importance of involvement in 'worldly' activities. And, at the end of the patristic period (590 to 604 AD), Pope Gregory I affirmed three orders of the faithful: *pastores* (responsible for the community) *continentes* (monks) and *coniugati* (laity).<sup>7</sup>

#### *The Medieval period and its legacy*

To a clericalizing of the ministry which marginalized the laity there corresponded, from the viewpoint of spirituality, an essentially monastic framework. Both in practice reduced the laity to minority status, rather than creating the conditions needed for the laity's development of the capacities which belonged to it, in terms of the plan outlined in the New Testament. This is a situation which has continued for centuries, which we will not deal with here. It is enough to note – insofar as these generic observations being made here have a value – that in that long medieval period, many different voices make themselves heard. The traditional tripartite division remains. However, there are opinions (but only a few ) which do not emphasize the state of perfection but the perfection of state, or the response to their vocation which is proper to each of the faithful.

Lay confraternities present from the 11th to early 18th centuries are a notable and fruitful - though relatively little known<sup>8</sup> -- example of lay groups bringing ahead social and charitable initiatives in this period of history. Beginning with the mid-19th century, we see a renewed consciousness and commitment of lay men and women in both the Church and society, with its resulting consequences for both.

#### ▲ **The twentieth century Italian church**

Within the limitations of this reflection, let's consider more recent times. As noted above, lay Catholics gradually became conscious of their own role in relation to the world, including significant events of that time. If, for example, consider only two such events -- industrialization, and a secularization -- that were accompanied by a decline in the sense of the sacred. These events served to 'provoke' Christians through both their positive (improved living standards and civil autonomy) and negative (loss of the mystical and transcendent human dimension accompanied by limitless human power) aspects. In developing to their full potential, Catholic laity could place themselves both at the service of the Church and civil society.

#### *Reawakening of Italian laity*

In examining the history of Catholic associations, we note their strong impact on the fabric of civil society in the 19th century. The Catholic association for the freedom of the Church emerged in 1865 (recognized by Pius IX the following year and then closed down by the Italian government). In 1868 the Society of Catholic Youth was founded. In 1876 there was set up the Work of Congresses and of Catholic Committees which, under the direction of the Church, promoted a series of social initiatives (agricultural banks, workers societies, banking institutions) and organized conferences from time to time. In 1896, the Italian Catholic Federation of University Students was founded, social action came to the forefront

through the *Unione Popolare* under the guidance of Giuseppe Toniolo, with organization of rural cooperatives and Catholic people's banks occurring as well.

A little later, in 1913, the Gentiloni pact ended the Catholic organizations' abstentionism which had been in effect in the new Italy since 1870 when, on the orders of Victor Emmanuel II, the Piedmontese army occupied Rome and Pope Pius IX declared himself a 'prisoner' in the Vatican. This made possible the emergence of political parties of inspired by Christian thinking, for example, the non-confessional *Partito Popolare*, founded in 1919. The leading spirit in this political experience was Luigi Sturzo, and though interrupted by the Fascist dictatorship, he began to promote political activity by lay people who acted autonomously under their own responsibility.<sup>9</sup>

Pius XI (1922-1939) strongly supported Catholic Action, which he saw as an integral part of the Church. He wanted to distinguish it from other movements involved in socio-political action, considering it the 'participation of laity in hierarchical apostolate.' Up through the late 1950s historical studies show that it continued to enjoy the favour of Pius XII (1939-1958) and illustrated the importance of Catholic Action as a school for religious and civil formation.

In 1928 in Spain, Escrivà de Balaguer founded the Society of the Holy Cross (*Opus Dei*) that would lend further importance to the role of laity. Pius XII, through the 1947 Constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesiae*, and the *Motu Proprio Primo Feliciter Consente*, a year later, recognized secular institutes as a form of the life of perfection which was compatible with the lay state. Those belonging to these secular institutes were to commit themselves to keeping the evangelical counsels and aiming to carry out the apostolate in the most widespread work situations, sharing the daily existence of everyone, without the obligation of living in common. This served to counter the centuries-old notions that the attainment of Christian perfection belonged exclusively to those of the religious and priestly states.

Thus, the role of the laity became valued in relation to the social and cultural context in which they worked and were immersed.<sup>10</sup>

*Vatican II: Council discussions on the laity for the first time*

This was the horizon that prepared for an unexpected event, willed by the intuition, courage and faith of John XXIII – the Second Vatican Council. For the first time, a Council treated of lay people in light of the Church, which is the ontological communion of all its members in the divine life of Christ, in whom they participate.

*Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (IV, 31), having given a general description of the lay state, focuses on its richness of grace and function in relation to Christ, along with a positive understanding of its mission. After its introduction on 'The Mystery of the Church,' by placing the chapter on 'The People of God' before the 'Hierarchical Constitution of the Church,' it emphasized the priority of the ontology of grace and the unity that comes from the Father through Christ in the Spirit, before going on to discuss the various charisms and ministries.

This was just like the change of title and approach of the Scheme XIII, 'On the Church and the Contemporary World' which took its final form in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. There the Church's need to be present in secular realities as a leaven and ferment, was

clearly expressed, along with the recognition of the autonomy and value of these secular realities, which are the specific field of the lay mission. A lot more could be added regarding the Decree on the Lay Apostolate, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* and other passages in the conciliar documents.

It is not by chance that the birth of ecclesial movements, some of which began before 1962, but were later approved, have cast light on the new vitality of the Church particularly through the laity. For example, the Focolare movement, today present in 182 countries in the various continents, with its own internal organization and works, like the Economy of Communion, which are predominantly lay activities. Among these ecclesial movements can be included the Sant'Egidio Community, Communion and Liberation, the Charismatic Renewal, and New Horizons.

### ▲ Today's world

At only fifty-plus years from the closure of Vatican II in 1965, it may be still too early in the Church to assess the full impact of its message at a global, pastoral level. But is it possible to already draw a few conclusions specifically regarding laity? In Europe, it seems to me that we can begin to discern using current data in the context of what we have just spoken about, in four specific areas where lay people are giving specific witness. First, we've seen ever-increasing numbers of the faithful give rise to a number of movements as mentioned above. These show the versatility of the Spirit in nourishing the religious and human fabric of society. A second area is that of the birth of many non-profit organizations -- both religious and secular -- that generously and effectively intervene where public authorities are unable, bringing help in situations of extreme poverty and other needed assistance.

A third aspect is the role of laity with regard to ecumenism. A good example here is 'Together for Europe,' a gathering of Christian communities and movements -- at present more than 300 -- from across the continent and belonging to different Churches, for which Chiara Lubich was one of its early protagonists. As a network, each brings the gifts of their own specific charism in order to concretely work together in facing Europe's greatest challenges and fulfill the continent's mission and calling to unity, built on the foundation of a 'culture of reciprocity.'

A fourth and final aspect speaks to the Church's roots and very existence: its martyrs. Today's dramatic situation gives witness to the faithfulness of believers and the Church's vitality. Huge numbers of Christians -- priests and laity alike -- bear witness despite conditions of discrimination, persecution, and even death for their beliefs. The late Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran, past president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, stated that the number of Christians persecuted worldwide ranges from 100 - 150 million.<sup>11</sup> But, we know those numbers are increasing, for as long as the Gospel is proclaimed in this world, the Church will always have martyrs as well.<sup>12</sup> ▲

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<sup>1</sup> The liberal Protestant historian, Adolf von Harnack, of the University of Berlin, already

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emphasized this a century ago. See *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* [1902-1905] (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997) [*Missione e propagazione del cristianesimo nei primi tre secoli* (Cosenza, 1986), 276].

<sup>2</sup> Regarding legislative privileges conceded to clerics, see Jean Gaudemet, *L'Église dans l'Empire romaine* (Paris: Sirey, 1958), 172f.

<sup>3</sup> See *Sermo* 32, 1ff.

<sup>4</sup> See *Epistulae* 119, 6.

<sup>5</sup> See Y. Congar, *Dizionario Teologico* (Brescia 1967), 124f.

<sup>6</sup> See L.F. Pizzolato, *Laicità e laici nel cristianesimo primitivo*, in AA.VV., *Atti del XLVII corso di aggiornamento culturale dell'Università Cattolica*, Milano 1977, 57-83

<sup>7</sup> See Gregory I, *Moralia in Iob* 32, 20, 35; Hom. *In Ezechielem*, lib. II, hom.1, 7; hom.4, 5; hom.7, 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Anselm of Havelberg (mid-12th century) in his *Epistula apologetica pro ordine canonicorum regularium* (PL 188, 1121) or Gerhoch of Reichersberg in his *Liber de aedificio Dei* (PL 194, 1302), which focus on the personal response to one's vocation, or distinguish between the hierarchy of orders which determines the status and hierarchy of values. The three Biblical figures discussed are in fact on the same plane with respect to the ideal of holiness, even though each carried out different functions. See P. Siniscalco, *Laici e laicità* (Rome: AVE, 1986), 61-65.

<sup>9</sup> This opens a chapter on the idea of Christian laicity or secularity, but it would take us beyond our topic.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1950s, great theologians like Yves Congar, Edmund Schillebeeckx, Gérard Philips and others in a series of books and articles carried out a deeper exploration of the 'vocation' and 'mission' of the lay person, but this did not mean that the figure of the lay person in relation to the Church and the world had been well-established yet.

<sup>11</sup> See J.-M. De Falco, T. Radcliffe, and A. Riccardi (eds.), *Il libro nero della condizione dei cristiani nel mondo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> See E. Peterson, *I testimoni della verità*, trad. it., Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1954, p. 21.