The Role of the Laity: Light of Nations today? by Sebastiaan Benders

Of course the constitution *Lumen Gentium* does not refer to the laity as light of nations, but to Christ Himself. Franz Cardinal König (2002) recalls: “The ministry of the laity is one of the large impulses given by the sixteen official council documents. It is the first time that a worldwide council gives special attention to the role of the laity. [trans.]”

The goal of this article is to examine what the role of the laity was before Vatican II, to discuss the impulses the Council gave with regards to the role of the laity and, finally, to reflect on these results. Consequently, the first chapter is dedicated to the time period between Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council, followed by a summary of the latter Council’s dogma in chapter 2. In chapter 3 some contemporary opinions on the matter will be presented, followed by a conclusion.

1 | The role of the laity before Vatican II

In this chapter we will first examine what the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) have to say about the role of the laity, followed by an assessment of the general effect of the Council on this role.

In the decree concerning the most holy sacrament of the Eucharist, the council fathers stipulate that priests communicate themselves but laymen can only receive Holy Communion through the hands of the priest. In the decree on communion under both species (as well as several other decrees), it is mentioned that laymen are not required to communicate under both species.
In the decree concerning the reformation, it is written that priests (and particularly bishops) need to practise what they preach to better instruct the laity. Furthermore clerics need to wear clerical garb in order to distinguish them from laymen.

The decree on the sacrament of Holy Orders connects this sacrament with the one of baptism and confirmation, which also imprint a character. It states that priests can be returned to the state of laity. Finally, there are several decrees which use the words ‘be they clerical or laymen’. It is very clear from these documents that there is no specific theology regarding the laity. The only way they are defined is negatively: they are not clerics.

As we have seen, not much can be found about the role of the laity in the documents of the Council of Trent, so let us turn our attention to the effect of the Council. According to Jedin (1899) the council’s attendance was relatively low and Italian and Spanish prelates were overrepresented. It was however instrumental in widespread liturgical and religious renewal with substantial results in later centuries. Trent corrected exaggerations and misinterpretations, it called for the founding of seminaries (and thus provided a more standardized formation for clergy) and the Roman Missal sought to standardize liturgy. It also reinforced several dogmas in the face of the protestant reformation, such as the teaching on the Eucharist and the sacramental priesthood.

It stands to reason that the Council of Trent resulted in a more pronounced Catholic identity, which – mostly indirectly – influenced the role of the laity. Bernier (1992) in his book about ministry in the Church, writes: “As crass as the popular understanding of priestly powers may have been, the Council of Trent etched it even deeper into Catholic theology, because of the
Protestants, who were denying[...] any right of the ordained to be considered priests” (p. 223).

The role of the priest became ever more pronounced through the establishment of seminaries as well as the liturgical renewal, which led to a definition of the laity mentioned earlier as non-clergy.

According to Bernier (1992) Trent’s insistence that ordained priesthood differs essentially from that of the laity meant that its main feature was the official public service. He writes: “Trent wanted to reject the idea that anyone without distinction (promiscue) could do anything in the church” (p. 227).

The role of the laity was also positively (although still indirectly) influenced by the dogmatic statements and the new priestly formation as it resulted in priests being more able to instruct the laity. Through the challenges of protestantism, Catholic faithful were evermore asked to articulate why they were Catholic.

Due to an absence of fast communication media we enjoy today, as well as due to the cultural circumstances of the time, the most substantial effects of Trent were not reached until the seventeenth century.

2 | The teaching of the Second Vatican Council

The document *Lumen Gentium* was the main catalyst for a new vision on the role of the laity in the Church and will be briefly summarized here. Afterwards, we will look more closely at chapter 4, titled ‘the Laity’.
*Lumen Gentium* was promulgated by Paul VI on November 21, 1964 and clearly is an ecclesiological document. The first chapter is titled ‘the mystery of the Church’ and discusses the founding of the Church by Christ, the role of the pope as successor of St. Peter and that this Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church. Furthermore, *Lumen Gentium* speaks of the collegiality among bishops, a matter that will be further explored in another council document *Christus Dominus*.

After having discussed the Church and its founding and role as well as its hierarchy, the council revives the image of the Church as people of God. This is the foundation for the later chapter on the role of the laity. In the Old Covenant, the people of Israel were the people of God, but now it is all the believers in Christ, “who are reborn not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed through the word of the living God, not from the flesh but from water and the Holy Spirit, are finally established as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people [...] who in times past were not a people, but are now the people of God” (LG 9). God means not to save individuals, but the people as a whole. Also the salvation of non-Christians is discussed. Already it is clear that the distinction laity-clergy, which was made so clearly in the decrees of the Council of Trent, is absent here. The next part of the document will only reinforce their correlation.

It namely speaks of the priesthood of the faithful. While not specifically referring to the decrees of Trent where the commonality of clergy and laity in baptism and confirmation was already underlined, this topic is more explicitly and thoroughly handled in paragraph 10 onward.

“Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common
priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ [...]. But the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist. They likewise exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity” (LG 10).

Later on, the unity of clergy and laity as being one people of God is again underlined when the document speaks of a universal call to holiness for all faithful: “Thus it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity” (LG 40). The final chapter is entirely dedicated to a Mariology, which means the council fathers, in the face of criticisms from ecumenical or protestant factions, wished to show that Mary’s place was clearly in the Church.

Turning our attention to chapter 4, ‘the Laity’ (paragraphs 30-38) we have already seen it is embedded in the greater picture of the People of God, “intended for laity, religious and clergy alike” (LG 30). The laity take part in Christ’s priestly, prophetical and kingly functions through their baptism (LG 31) and the clear distinction the document makes is that the laity participate in secular culture to a greater extent than priests do. This is quite a change from the formulation of Trent as noted by Bernier (1992), who was quoted earlier. *Lumen Gentium* calls the laity a vocation (LG 31) in the world itself. They further God’s plan through the temporal means of the world.

Again the common filial dignity and common goal of all faithful is expressed, although their paths differ (LG 32). The document further mentions how laity “have the capacity to assume
from the Hierarchy certain ecclesial functions, which are to be performed for a spiritual purpose” (LG 33), such as in locations where there are no sacred ministers or in times of persecution (LG 35).

The image of the Body of Christ is also mentioned, with Christ as the head. This means that all gifts come from Him and in our offer, our praise and our work, we ought to be united with Him (LG 34). The laity are, once again, charged with the evangelical task to be a living testimony in the world. The specific context of the Christian family is mentioned as one of the places where this work is to be carried out (LG 35).

Laity should be trained for their task and support one another in it. Furthermore, the goods of this world should be used by them to complete it. They also should balance their tasks as members of the world and members of the Church (LG 36). It is the task of the ministerial priesthood to support the laity through the spiritual goods of the Church as well as through their leadership. In return, the laity obey in the same way that Christ has shown obedience “even unto death” (LG 37).

Although several other conciliar and post-conciliar documents unpack what this chapter in Lumen Gentium has to offer the Church, the teaching contained in it is definitely the foundation for everything else that happens. In short we see that a lot has changed since the Council of Trent: the laity are seen as having a positive vocation (rather than being seen as those not called to the priesthood) and they exercise it in the secular world, employing temporal means, while themselves being sustained by the spiritual goods of the Church. In the next chapter we will explore the result of this teaching in light of the recent history of the Church.
3 | Lumen Gentium today

The results of the impulse the Second Vatican Council gave to the role of the laity in the Church can certainly be called ambiguous. Wintz and Bookser Feister (2004) write: “The Holy Spirit is clearly leading us to a more inclusive model of Church in which we recognize the need for both lay and ordained ministers to make the work of the Church complete” (p. 2). As an example they list the role of women in Church ministry, as well as ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

To be sure, much has happened. Wintz and Bookser Feister’s observation is correct in the sense that lay people play a more active role. In fact, the rapid success of Opus Dei is due to its founder’s stress on this active participation of the lay faithful in their daily lives: to do the job that they were given with as much zeal and Christian testimony as possible. The document Christifideles Laici (1988) names various concrete examples such as promoting the dignity of the human person (CL 37), calling upon the name of the Lord (CL 39), duties in the family (CL 40), works of solidarity (CL 41), works in the socio-economic life (CL 43) and evangelization (CL 44). It can hardly be argued that the Christian lay faithful have not benefitted from their newfound sense of identity. In fact, they are now better prepared for their explicit tasks.

On the other hand, however, Oxford theologian Fr. Ian Ker (2002) notes an article in the Catholic Herald that the results of the Second Vatican Council were not unambiguous.

“No one would now say, as a famous English monsignore of the nineteenth century asserted, that the province of the laity was to hunt, shoot, and to fish [...]. However, inevitably there have been problems and distortions [...]. The Council’s teaching on the role of the laity has, paradoxically, led to a certain clericalisation of the laity, and bishops have often given the impression that the way to implement the
decree on the laity is to build up as large a bureaucracy as possible and set up innumerable committees and commissions” (p. 3).

This is certainly demonstrated by Dutch bishop and council father Jan Bluysen’s book (1995), in which he describes the enormous democratically elected lay bodies erected in his diocese and nationwide. The call for active participation of the laity in the liturgy set out in Sacrosanctum Concilium as well as the concept of the priesthood of all the faithful discussed above, have indeed led to a certain clericalisation of the laity. In many churches across North America we see vast numbers of lay people march to the altar during an opening procession, making as much a statement for the active participation of the laity as for a select number of vocal lay people assuming roles that used to be reserved for the clergy. It can be argued that this development has not only devalued the ministerial priesthood but has depreciated the reverence for the Holy Eucharist as well.

4 | Conclusion

The title of this article asks: are the laity the light of the Church today? The answer might well be: more so because of the teachings of the council fathers in Lumen Gentium. Many Catholic faithful have taken seriously the call to be the salt of the earth and feel empowered by the Church to exercise their tasks. However, the balance between universal and ministerial priesthood was lost for quite some time and it will take us more time to re-establish it.
Bibliography


