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CATHOLICISM at the CROSSROADS: How The Laity Can Change the Church

By Paul Lakeland

A Book Review by Regina Schulte, Ph.D. for CORPUS REPORTS, A Bi-monthly Newsletter of the CORPUS COMMUNITY , July / August 2007

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The Catholic Church is in crisis—certainly not “breaking news” to the clergy and laity, although it might be to some of the hierarchy. Scandalous sex crimes and their cover-ups are not the source of the crisis (nor what this book is about), although they have made us acutely aware of the shadow side of perpetuating an exclusivist clergy. Thus, even though it is a good thing to do, creating mechanisms to insure the safety of children from sexual exploitation will not address the root problem.

“The real scandal is clericalism,” says Paul Lakeland, author of this little gem of a book. The entrenchment of a “clerical culture” in the church has provided a fertile environment for clericalism to insidiously metastasize throughout the structures for governance, ministry, and leadership in the church. He warns that the church may crash if we don’t upgrade some of the elements involved.

Many of the laity are now motivated to take a more sweeping, in-depth look at the dynamics of the church’s interior operations. Lakeland intends to convert their criticism into energy for positive action, hoping thereby to prevent the crash that is waiting to happen. His book is written to serve as a guide for productive discussions among lay members of Catholic faith communities. If, as architects say, “form follows function,” this work, in its organization of subject matter, vocabulary, literary style, and pristine clarity is a textbook model of that principle.

The author offers extensive coverage of topics underlying the current situation and its needed reform. His principal foci are clericalism, the proper status and role of laity, responsibility and accountability in the church, characteristics of an adult church, the laity’s wholly-owned mission in both global and American cultures. It’s all there—and lucidly so.

Lakeland speaks principally to American Catholics, pointing out how we can draw on our cultural resources to make the needed reforms. “American history, American values, American traditions at their best have much to offer the worldwide Catholic Church, but most immediately they may suggest paths for our communities of faith here at home,” says Lakeland. He calls for a church of adults—one that can sustain adult faith, and he believes that this transformation should begin in the parishes.

Even though clericalism is the magnetic pole for its topics, this book is not an exercise in “clergy bashing.” I would describe it, rather, as one of “laity empowering.” The tone is a hopeful one—or, at least “cautiously optimistic.” After diagnosing the problem, the author prescribes 1) what should be done, 2) what can be done, 3) what must be done—to make right what is now wrong in the Catholic Church.

Lakeland’s “take” on current church reality is an either / or: “We are either a legitimately clericalist community, in which the will of God or the intentions of Jesus or the power of the Spirit works to maintain a situation in which only celibate men have the opportunities to lead, or we are a dysfunctional community marked by the infantilization of the laity.” Furthermore, “Any phenomenon such as clerical culture or its wicked stepsister, clericalism, which possesses a dynamism toward the creation of an exclusive group that defines itself over against the others, is inimical to the notion of a baptized fellowship of equals. And it should go.

The intransigence of papal and hierarchical leadership tells us that reform of church practices will need to be accomplished by the laity—no small challenge since the clergy holds a lock on all positions of leadership and governance. The door into the clerical fortress opens only for celibate males who, after ordination, may begin their careers to the top, where the pope as monarch rules the entire church and claims infallibility for himself in doing so. Such a medieval set-up provides no formal structures through which laypersons can participate. The result is an out-of-balance, out-of-date, and dysfunctional church.

The author poses this conundrum: “How can we remake the church as a more open community when it is not sufficiently open to be able to hear the voices calling for a more open community?” Despite the difficulties, Lakeland holds that “responsibility for an adult laity rests firmly on the shoulders of the laity, not the clergy.”

The remake must be “an open church in an open society”—a church in which responsibility and accountability are shared by all members, a church “in which the adulthood of its members is going to need to look like as other open society,” a church that is more democratic. The characteristics of such a church will be responsibility, openness, accountability, and freedom.

The author symbolically rolls up his sleeves and begins with the customary description of laity: not clergy. Laypersons have consistently been described in negative terms: not ordained, not able to say Mass, not having a vocation, etc. The laity must change this inert definition from what they can’t do, or can’t be, to who they are, and what they are called to do in their own proper missions—not just as “default” ministers in the current priest shortage.

Lakeland draws from two sources for authentic identity of the laity: the story of the early church, and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. For him, the latter “is the contemporary expression of Catholic orthodoxy,” and therein he finds the positive definition of the laity, one standing in its own sunshine rather [than] in the shadow of the clergy. “A layperson is a Christian baptized into mission to the world beyond the church.” Because the laity’s mandate is from God, without intermediaries, laypersons are free from ecclesiastical oversight. (Note: this does not include the current hybrid phenomenon of ecclesial lay ministries mentioned above—the so-called “apostolate of the second string,” which Lakeland describes as an “abnormality” in a church formally separated into clergy and laity.)

Vatican II’s vision of the entire church was that of a “community of the baptized, a people of God... in an open and dynamic relationship to the world.” Today, probably most of all because the Eucharist is not consistently available in many parishes, laypersons have begun probing into the meaning of their baptismal priesthood.

Baptism is the defining event in the lives of clergy, pope, bishops, and lay persons all alike. Baptism makes us all Christians, “and no baptized person can be more Christian than another.” For many centuries so much honor was bestowed on the ordained priesthood that baptismal priesthood became invisible. But, it is in baptism that we receive our call to ministry—and, whole Orders may specify the direction an individual’s ministry will take, it is not more sacred, no more elevating, no more sanctifying, than other ministries in the church. In the early church, “the whole church, the whole people of God, was set apart for the service of the Lord,” says Lakeland.

He calls on the laity to assimilate the fact that “as baptized members of the community we have a right and responsibility to defend the good of the church, truly to ‘own’ the church, and to speak out forcefully if necessary when we feel that the church is in error or in danger.” (According to the thought of Vatican II, infallibility is not a prerogative of the pope alone; it belongs to the entire church community.)

Taking that mandate as his platform, Lakeland proceeds with the theme of this book: “an open church in an open society.” He explicates practical suggestions for laypersons to help bring about such a church and to pursue their God-given ministry to the secular world. (“The church is not there just for its members; in fact, it is more properly there for what its members can do for those who are not its members.”)

A useful template for ministry can be found among practices of the church in its first centuries. Originally all members were simply Christians, all were described as laity, there was no such thing as “clergy,” ministers were married, laypeople helped choose bishops, women hosted (and most likely presided at) house-church Eucharistic assemblies, teaching authority took lay theologians seriously. Since these were once common practices in the church, they could be restored today without undermining any essential doctrine.

Although this book is not about Catholic dogma but focuses, instead, on what is transitory and therefore reformable, the author points out areas in which some of our most basic doctrines should come into play. E.g.,

we affirm the dogma of the Trinity as the sine qua non of our faith: a relationship of “persons” defining one another, in total communio with one another, equal in every way; yet, the Catholic Church “has resolutely adopted a hierarchical structure.” Also: as Christians engage the wider culture, the doctrines of creation and incarnation will take priority over those of salvation, sin, and grace.

Lakeland is obviously no theological lightweight. Even though he presents his thought with a simplicity intended to facilitate the work of discussion groups, serious theology and ecclesiology are implicit in all that he writes. Readers will find here myriad informative and intriguing facts, one after another, each engaging them at whatever level they bring to their reading, each invited reflection. Many of his refreshingly original insights and pith sentences will make excellent sound bites for capturing a discussion group’s attention.

There seems a gentle tone, a reverence in Lakeland’s writing. The way he connects his thought to dogmas and traditional pieties of Catholic faith reflects—at least to me—a deep spiritual life and a sensitive love for the church. He writes kindly and respectfully for his readership without diluting his convictions. This meticulously constructed and dedicated piece of work can’t be other than a useful gift to the church.

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I add a simple “Amen” to Regina’s review and ‘mega dittos’ to Paul Lakeland.

During my pastorate at St. Joseph in Mendham, I used to assign mandatory summer reading for parishioners. This little gem is ‘mandatory’ reading for all website visitors!

Fr. Lasch