

**Asian Convention  
Vatican II in the Context of Globalisation  
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## **Vatican II on the Lay Apostolate**

### **Introduction and Presentation:**

In spite of some interesting and lively experience, some 35 years ago, in Malaysia with the YCS and the YCW, I am very far from being an expert on lay apostolate! But on the other hand, I was truly blessed by the Lord right at the beginning of my priestly life. Immediately after my ordination, I was sent for further studies in Rome, just at the time when the Second Vatican Council started. And I have been there for 2 years, living in the atmosphere of what was going on at the Vatican. We surely were not allowed to have any participation in the Council debates. But as priests and students, we were very eager to follow the developments and exchanges of ideas, which were taking place, most of the time, outside St. Peter's Basilica. And I still remember some of the heated controversies on what we may consider the central points of the Council: The presentation of the Church as first of all the People of God, the religious freedom and dialogue with non Christian religions, and more especially the lengthy discussions about the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, which in the beginning, was called the "*Schema XIII*". It was really like being witnesses of something very new that was going to have a long impact on the life of the Church, something like a new birth!

I would not say that the Apostolate of the Laity was one of the most central points in the Council documents. But the new conception about the Church, seen first of all as the *People of God*, and the opening of the Church to the reality of the world as it is today could not fail to have a deep impact on the understanding of the role of the laity both in the Church and in society. Certainly also, the orientations and the experience of Cardinal Cardjin and of the various movements known as the *Catholic Action*, brought a new eye opener on the role and apostolate of the Laity.

Here I shall try briefly to summarize first what the Council said about the laity, the main orientations of the decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. Then I shall underline the continuity between what is said by the Council and the main orientations of the Catholic Action, according to the mind of Cardinal Cardjin. And I wish to end up with some suggestions or applications regarding the responsibilities of the Lay People today, in the context of Globalization.

### **1. The Laity in the context of Vatican II:**

We cannot say that the Vatican Council was first concerned by the laity. The main break through brought up by the Council were directly concerning the new understanding of the Church, the opening of the Church to the reality of the world and the dialogue with non Christian religions together with the question of religious freedom. But these new visions could not

fail to have an impact on the understanding of the laity and of their role and function within the Church and in society. When the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) defined the Church as the **People of God**, it immediately implied that the word "Church" did not only refer to the Pope and the Bishops, or to the Roman Congregations. While it had been common to think of the laity as those who simply had to obey the hierarchy, the new definition means now that the essential core of the Church is the community of all those who have received baptism. And the hierarchy becomes the group of ministers who are at the service of this community, of this People of God. The perspective is somehow reversed, and the centre is now the laity, precisely. And this will be an occasion to stress on the duties and place of the laity, both in the Church and in the world.

*Lumen Gentium*, the decree "Ad Gentes" on the missionary activity of the Church and mostly "Gaudium et Spes", the pastoral Constitution on the Church in the world today, expressed the wish of the Council to open the Church to the reality of the world as it is now. In a way, we may regret that the decree on the Apostolate of the laity was written before the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. If it had been written after, the Constitution on the Church in the World could have brought up some more specific lights in defining the duties and functions of the laity. But in any case, the general orientation is that the main role of the Church is to open itself to human society and to transform it so that it may be more in line with the spirit of the Gospel (LG. 31, AG. 5-6). It is obvious that those who are more directly present within that world are the laity themselves. Therefore the role of transforming society is the main duty of the lay people, even though they have to carry out this function in relation to and under the guidance of the bishops and priests.

This general context of Vatican II tells us already that the lay people do not have only to come to Mass on Sundays or to receive the sacraments and save their souls. They are the ones who have to bring the Gospel into society, into the world and re-create this world in a new way so that it may truly become the Kingdom of God. This is already clearly expressed in the Constitution on the Church (n.31-36) and it will again be developed in the decree on the Apostolate of the laity.

## **2. The main Orientations of the Decree on the Apostolate of the laity:**

When the decree speaks of the work of the laity, it speaks of "*a renewal of the temporal order*" (n.5). This expression is interesting in many regards. First of all it stresses one aspect of the mission of the Church which has been overlooked for quite a time in the past. The same expression is used also in the decree concerning the missionary work of the Church (AG. n.5). It is a clear awareness that we do not have only to teach the Gospel and to save souls through the sacraments. The task of the Church is somehow a new Creation, or the building up of a New World and a New Earth (Cf. GS. n.39). And since the members of the Church who are in the midst of this world or society to be renewed and changed are precisely the laity, it follows that the primary apostolic task of the laity is this New Creation.

But this task of renewing the temporal order is not dissociated from the sacraments. The decree insists very much on the fact that Baptism as well as Confirmation makes us the witnesses of the Gospel in the midst of the world and of society. And there is also a very particular

link with the Eucharist, which may be considered as the source as well as the end of the apostolic work of the laity. When, at the end of the Eucharistic Celebration, the people are sent out in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, they are sent into this world in which they live and work, and which God gives them as the field of their apostolate. And on the other hand, when the lay people come together for the celebration of the Eucharist, they bring in the bread and the wine, "*fruit of the earth and work of human hands*" so that they may become the Body and Blood of Christ. This expresses very clearly the link between the work of laity in this world and the celebration of the Sacrifice of Christ. (Cf. AA. N. 3-4).

I remain surprised about one thing. This document – and other documents of the Council as well – does not speak here about the ***Kingdom of God***. It is mentioned only twice in this document on the Apostolate of the Laity. N.7 speaks of "*searching everywhere and in everything the justice of the Kingdom of God*" and n.20 speaks of "*the fruitfulness of the lay apostolate for the Reign of Christ*". I must confess that I have no explanation for that. But we can see that John Paul II mentions the reality of the Kingdom of God very often in his documents on the Mission of the Church. But actually the responsibility of the laity, as it is presented by this decree, is truly the building up of the Kingdom of God in this world. It speaks of inserting the spirit of the Gospel into the reality of society and social institutions. It seems to me that this is precisely building up God's Kingdom. God somehow puts up the world into our own hands and He entrusts us with the task of making this world worthy of the Kingdom values. This shows quite clearly that God needs us for building up His Kingdom in this world.

One of the essential aspects of the laity's work is to fight against the cause of the social evil and not only to cure the effects. There are, in society, some "*structures of evil*" that have to be changed. (Cf. n. 8; 13). Bringing more justice in the world and putting the spirit of the Gospel within the reality of society means that those who live and act in this society have the duty to renew the structures of society and not just to take care of those who are the victims of social evils.

Finally I would like to make a remark on what happens in our Church today. There are certainly a good number of people who are committed to this change of the social structures, especially all those who are engaged in the various forms of social development. But I notice also that in many countries, there is a tendency to stress the role of the lay people as a direct collaboration in the ministerial field. Lay people try to have a direct part in the liturgy and sacraments. This is certainly part of the duties of lay people. But while doing this, one should not forget the other aspect, which is to be a witness within society and to bring the justice of the Kingdom into the social reality. Lay people are not just the direct collaborators of the clergy. Being present in the world through their professional, familial, social and political commitments, they also have to be witnesses of their faith and of the Gospel in the place where they are. This is just a passing remark which shows that may be, in some cases, the contemporary Church is slowly taking a slightly different orientation as regards the role of lay people.

### **3. A Continuity between the Intuitions of Card. Cardjin and the Council:**

When I was a small child, member of the Joyful Vanguard, which followed the orientations of Card. Cardjin, we used to sing very often: "*We shall lead our brothers to become Christians again. In the name of Jesus, we shall bring to them the Light and the flame that makes us live*". It is amazing that these words are still ringing up in my ears, after nearly 60 years have passed! This represents one of the fundamental orientations of Cardinal Cardjin: Making the workers to be apostles of the workers, the students apostles of the students, and the children apostles of the children. When the Council stresses the apostolic duty of the laity within society itself, we find the same orientation. Let everyone be a witness and an apostle of Christ in the place where he lives.

Cardinal Cardjin was also very sensitively aware of the situation of injustice created by the industrial development, especially in the period between the two World Wars. He unceasingly repeated that "***a worker is worth much more than all the gold of the world***". His very deeply heartfelt conviction about the overwhelming dignity of the Human Person and especially of the labourers is at the root of the foundation of the YCW. Even if this is not explicitly stated in the document on the Apostolate of the Laity, it is clearly mentioned and even repeated in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

The method put forward by the YCW and used by other similar movements, "***see-judge-act***", is certainly a very fruitful method for the Reign of Christ. And the document on the Laity dedicates all the n. 20 to this method of the Catholic Action. This method is certainly one of the best ways to establish a direct relation between life and the Gospel. I still remember how lively and fruitful were our YCS or YCW sessions. After a thorough examination of the situations and the problems encountered, all members, Christians and non Christians alike, were eagerly searching in the Gospel to see what the Word of God had to say about such situations. It had nothing to do with theoretical studies of the Bible, but it brought directly the Word of God into the life situations. With such a method, the Gospel is not just a teaching, but it becomes truly a light for daily life and decisions. It is certainly one of the best methods to insert the spirit of the Gospel into the communities and organizations of the world. The Lay People then "search together in the Gospel a way to judge their daily lives" (AA. n.30).

#### **4. What is the role of the Laity in the context of Globalization?**

Here may not be the proper place to make a complete description and analysis of Globalization. We know that it has both positive and negative consequences. It is at the same time a fantastic increase of the means of communication, bringing men closer to one another. But it may also result into a terrible isolation or individualism, when people are only concerned with their own profit or advantages. We know also that the main basis of globalization is not humanitarian but economic.

I would like to quote an outstanding contemporary philosopher, Paul Ricoeur. In his book entitled "*History and Truth*" (1955), there is a chapter called "***The Socius and the Neighbour***". This is what he writes: "It would be absurd to condemn machines, technocracy, administrative apparatus, social security, etc. Technical procedures in general, and all 'technicity' have the innocence of the instrument. The concept of the neighbour invites us to situate evil within the

specific passions that are connected to the human employment of instruments.... The vice of social existence of modern man does not lie in being against nature; what is lacking is not naturalness, but charity. Consequently criticism goes completely astray when it attacks the gigantism of industrial, social or political machinery... If a particular organization has overextended itself, this is an error, not a fault in the ethical realm... The theme of the neighbour condemns rather a vertical extravagance, that is, the tendency of social organisms to absorb and exhaust at their particular level the whole problematic of human relationships. The extravagance of the social realm as such lies in what we earlier called the 'objectification' of man within the abstract and anonymous relationships of economic, social and political life. The social realm tends to block access to the personal and to hide the mystery of the human relationships, to dissimulate the movement of charity behind which stands the Son of Man."

It is a rather long quotation; but I feel it expresses and summarizes very well both the problems raised by globalization and the task that lies before us, Christians. In a society where the human relationship is totally overlooked for the sake of economic and technical development, we have to bring back the reality of this human relationship. Jesus taught us to look at others as neighbours, to give to others the dignity and respect they all deserve. We surely have, as Christian lay people, to work on the structures and to change them, not by opposing the technical development, which is natural, but by bringing back a true human relationship within this technical development and within the new structures, so that the dignity of all, and especially of the poor, is respected everywhere. Then we are in the line of the orientations given by Cardinal Cardjin and by the Council. As Christians and witnesses of the Gospel, we have to help all people so that they are no longer slaves of the material reality. The way to carry out this duty is left to every group. It is up to us to come back to the Gospel and see what it calls for in the situations in which we are involved.

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