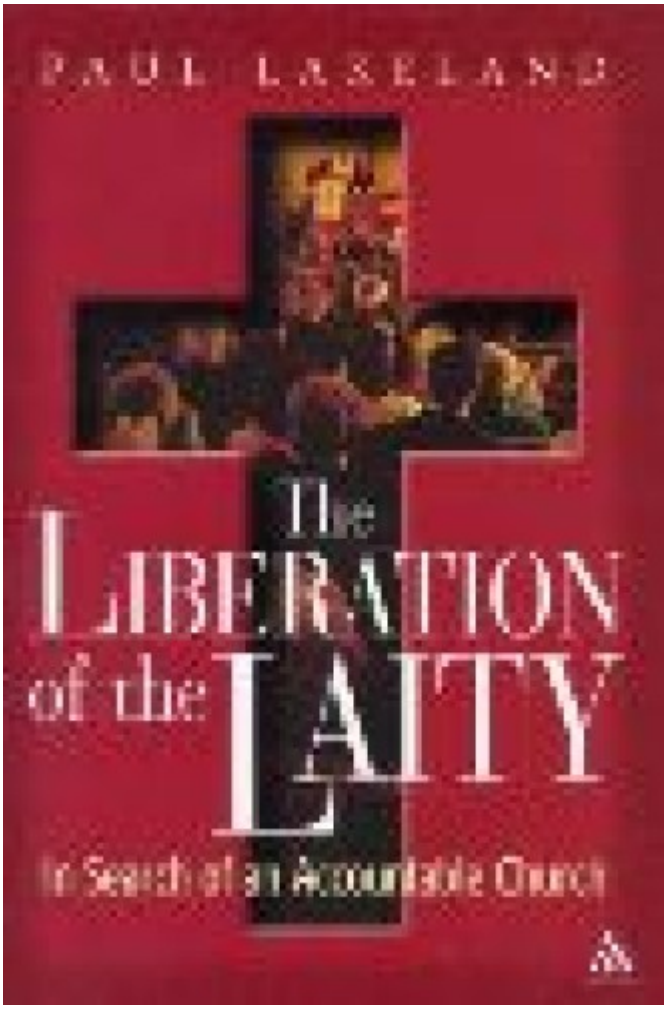
The Liberation of the Laity

reviewed by Kathleen A. Cahalan in the February 10, 2004 issue

In Review



The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church

Paul Lakeland
Continuum

Clergy sexual misconduct, the place of women in the church and issues of authority are all reasons for Roman Catholics to ask hard questions about their church. But according to Paul Lakeland, if Catholic laity really understood their status according

to official church teaching, they might feel an even deeper sense of unease. Like a partner caught in a co-dependent relationship, Lakeland argues, the laity can be liberated only by breaking the centuries-long parent-child relationship on which both parties depend.

Lakeland, professor and chair of the department of religious studies at Fairfield University, presents a comprehensive study of the development of the theology of the laity in 20th-century Catholic thought. The first part of his book carefully considers theologies of the laity from the early 20th century up to John Paul II's 1988 encyclical *Christifideles Laici* ("The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World"). Lengthy, and at times a bit sleep-inducing, this section will help those unfamiliar with Yves Congar's work on the laity, the Second Vatican Council statements on the laity, and subsequent Vatican corrections. In the second part Lakeland moves from history to constructive theology, redefining the laity's secular vocation and their responsibility for the mission of the church.

Vatican II gave significant attention to the laity, and, for the first time in history, the category made its way into several major church documents. *Lumen Gentium*, for instance, defines the church as the "people of God," recognizes baptism as the basis for the priesthood of all believers, and calls laypeople to work in cooperation with their pastors for the good of the church. The laity shares in the church's mission of bringing Christ to the world by mediating between God and the world: "a bringing of God to the world and . . . a bringing of the world to God."

The laity are to bring their competencies forward to help their pastors. They must also promise to pray for and accept obediently their pastors' decisions. Lakeland points out that for all the great achievements of Vatican II, particularly its expansion of the idea of the lay apostolate in the world, it nevertheless offers a merely phenomenological description without much theological substance.

The Vatican Council's failure to pursue a theology of the laity, and the church's reluctance to do so in the following 40 years, can almost certainly be traced to a general recognition that giving serious theological attention to the laity entails opening an ecclesial Pandora's box: the theology of ordained ministry.

But theological inattention has not stopped the laity from being the laity. Since the council, lay Catholics have assumed their baptismal call and are more actively engaged within the church than ever before. In the average North American parish,

laypeople are extraordinarily visible in liturgical work, parish councils, teaching children, visiting the sick and so on.

Another major development, never anticipated by the council, is the emergence of what is now referred to as lay ministry in which laypeople assume full-time paid ministerial employment in the church. (Members of the first group are commonly referred to as volunteers; John Paul II has instructed that members of the second group not be referred to as ministers.)

That the church's teaching authority has been caught off guard by these developments is indicated in *Chistifideles Laici*. In that encyclical John Paul II clarifies a misunderstanding that he believes has led to the "clericalization of the laity" and the "laicization of the clergy." The document argues that the laity are to participate in Christ's mission but not his ministry; the ministries of laypeople (not lay ministers) are warranted only in extraordinary situations, such as a shortage of priests. The laity are responsible for the church's mission in the world, but not the internal work of the church. Laity on one side, clergy on the other—the line of division is clear.

In constructing his theology of the laity Lakeland defines lay vocation in relationship to a specific understanding of the world as secular. He then addresses the laity's liberation through its full participation in the church's mission within the world—a liberation which renders the church fully accountable to lay participation. Lakeland understands the secular not as the dualistic counterpart of the sacred but as the world of God's creation, "dependent on" and "suffused with" God's presence. The world is God's free gift of love characterized by both "unconditionality" and autonomy. People are free to "live out their destiny" as humans in this God-suffused yet autonomous world. Lakeland's is a sacramental, incarnational view of the secular world: the secular is not devoid of the sacred, but is "always already" sacred.

Lakeland's claims about the world shape his ecclesiology. The church is not separate from the secular, but within the secular. It exists to point to the fullness of God's reality made known in Jesus Christ, but it cannot be, and is not, the sole locus of God's presence in the world. Lakeland believes that laypersons must assume a secular, lay spirituality marked by freedom, limitation and responsibility. Human freedom is a divine gift, and through it we are to bring about human flourishing in the world—to counter dehumanization without rendering the world completely anthropocentric. Lay ministry consists of laypeople who, apart from ecclesiastical authorities, make decisions in their daily lives, workplaces, neighborhoods, towns

and countries—decisions that strive to make the world a more humane place.

Inside the church, Lakeland recommends revolution. The laity must take on an adult role, claiming accountability and responsibility for their work and ministry. This means everything from democratically participating in decision-making to selecting bishops, collaborating with ordained ministers at the parish level, and working at diocesan and national levels to carry out the church's mission. If the church does not recognize the vocation of the laity *ad intra*, Lakeland claims, it will surely lose them. Not only will the laity leave the church, but the church will fail to live up to its own theological claims about the baptismal identity of the people.

Lakeland's constructive ecclesiology and anthropology push the conversation a step beyond Congar, the council and John Paul II. Yet for all his pushing he never questions the category of the "laity." In fact, Lakeland holds to the distinction between the laity and clergy by reinforcing the idea that the laity's primary locus is the world, while the clergy's primary locus is the church. He extends the 20th-century conversations to their logical conclusion.

By the time one finishes Lakeland's book, however, it's hard not to wonder why the church needs the designation "lay" at all. The qualifier has done little to serve "lay" people. It creates a duality and division within the church. What finally does Lakeland want "lay" to mean? There is nothing in the scriptures or the early writings of the church that claims a technical use of the term as central to the theology and practice of the Christian community. No Christian is baptized to be a "lay" person. Jesus does not call people saying, "Come be the laity." And there has never been anything liturgical about the term. Since the technical term "lay" that confines some members of the church to a limited status has no theological basis, we should drop it.

Who, then, are we as members of the church? Yes, certainly the "people," the *laos*, but people who are disciples and followers of Christ. Why not call ourselves such? Why be a "lay" person in the Catholic Church (or any other church) when our baptismal identity is one of discipleship? Claiming the language of baptism and discipleship would go much further in helping us construct a theology of ministry, and more particularly a theology of ordained ministry, than holding to the lay-clergy distinction and continuing to build theological rationales to support each.

Certainly a fundamental aspect of discipleship is participation in the ministerial life of the community—service through teaching, preaching, caring for souls, praying

and leading—a service that all Christians are responsible to participate in, and a service some are called to lead. Lakeland’s theology of the laity has gone a long way in helping us to think about the role of the people of God in the church and in the world. I only wish he had gone one step further.