

VAIHARAI

(The Dawn)

A Theological Quarterly

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Issue Editor : Dr. S. Devaraj

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ed. by Arland J. Hultgren, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK, 2000.

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EMPOWERMENT OF THE LAITY

Editorial

More than a hundred years ago, Cardinal Newman, a great champion of the lay people, wrote an essay titled *On Consulting the Laity on the Matters of Doctrine*. This essay irked some bishops and priests in England, as it daringly voiced out the decisive role of the laity in the Church. Irritated by the progressive ideas of the Cardinal one of the bishops asked him tauntingly: "Nowadays you are speaking and writing so much about the laity. Who are the laity?" He **retorted** immediately: "Dear Bishop, the Church would look pretty **silly without** them. We too will be unemployed." It is absolutely true that **without** the laity there is no Church and without their active involvement the Church would remain lifeless and barren. For the Church **is** basically a community of believers united in love and fellowship **and** committed to the mission of the Kingdom of God for which Jesus of Nazareth laid down his life. It exists by the faith of a believing community. The laity are not simply a section within the Church, but they themselves are the Church together with others who have the charism of ordained ministry.

One of the crucial problems and challenges faced in the Church today is that the laity, in spite of the clarion call of Vatican II to renew the Church from its root and to build it up into a community of faith in which the laity play a decisive role, remain still a silent flock and a marginalized majority in many of our parish communities. They go to the Church and participate in the Sunday Eucharistic celebration, but are passive in the pastoral life of the Church. Since they have been trained for several years to be dependent on the clergy both for spiritual and material needs, even today many of them do not feel the need for taking an active and creative role in the various pastoral programmes and activities and leave to the clergy the decisions to be made for the administration of the parish. Because of this dependent attitude, deeply imprinted in their psyche, many are not confident of taking up

leadership in the civil society for the realization of the Kingdom of God.

At this juncture, it is indispensable that concrete measures must be taken to liberate the Church from the clutches of strong clericalism for the sake of the empowerment of the laity, which is an urgent need of the hour. The laity must be made to realize that they have a specific and definite contribution to make in the Church, in areas such as thinking, planning and decision-making, financial administration and liturgical celebration. They must also be encouraged to venture into areas outside the premises of the Church such as politics, trade unions, mass media, social work, inter-religious fellowship and professional life. Only such an involvement would enable the Church to become a catalytic and corrective force working towards a just society - the Kingdom of God on earth. Pope John Paul pertinently points out that "the laity have an essential role in this announcement and witness. No one can take their place. Through them Christ's Church is present in the world as a sign and source of hope and love" (*Christifideles Laici*, no.7). The present issue of *Vaiharai* brings out five articles with the view to creating awareness for the empowerment of the laity who have been pushed to the periphery of the Church for several centuries.

Emphasizing the importance of active involvement of the laity in the life and ministry of the Church, viewed as a community of fellowship and equality, Dr. S. Devaraj, Professor of Systematic Theology at St. Paul's Seminary, Tiruchirapalli, points out that the formation of BCCs, promotion of lay ministries, effective functioning of participative structures and the legitimate sharing in the administration of ecclesiastical institutions are some of the concrete steps to be taken to help them to emerge as leaders of Christian communities. He argues convincingly that the emergence of lay leadership largely depends on the *kenosis* of the hierarchy.

In the second article Dr. Aloysius Xavier, Professor of Biblical Theology at St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, Bangalore, brings to light the leadership of the laity in the Christian communities established by Paul. Highlighting the fact that the Church at the time of Paul was non-hierarchical and non-institutionalized organization, he explains how the lay men and women contributed to the growth and welfare of the community making use of the charisms they received in the sacrament of baptism.

Dr. A. Rayappan, Professor of Canon Law at St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, Bangalore, underscores in his article the new vision and understanding of the laity and their indispensable role in the parish communities, based on the code of canon law. Only their active role in the teaching, sanctifying and pastoral offices of the Church would build up the parishes into dynamic and vibrant communities of faith. The parish priests must come forward to bring them from passivity to activity and from oblivion to light by recognizing and promoting their mission in a spirit of co-responsibility.

The last article by Dr. A. Pushparajan, Professor and Head, Department of Interreligious Relations, Madurai Kamaraj University, reiterates that the lay faithful who are living in a religiously pluralistic context of India bear the responsibility of fostering dialogue and fellowship among people belonging to various religious traditions. He candidly and succinctly elucidates the secular character of the laity's vocation in the light of his own personal experience in a religiously plural society and the documents of the Church. Deeply rooted in the Christian faith, they are called to be open to other religious traditions and contribute to the realization of the Kingdom of God in collaboration with all people of good will.

I would like to express my sincere and heartfelt thanks to all the contributors for their efforts taken to study and research into the empowerment of the laity for the building up of authentic Christian communities which bear witness to the values of the Kingdom of God. This issue of *Vaiharai*, I am confident, would usher in a new way of being Church in our parishes.

Dr. S. Devaraj