

## **EMERGENCE OF LAY LEADERSHIP IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES\***

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One of the changes that has been progressively taking place in the Church since Vatican II is that quite a number of lay people, having realized their vocation and mission emanating from the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, are determined to involve themselves in the building up of the local Christian communities by assuming various ministerial functions and leadership roles. Having been sidelined and kept at the periphery of the Church for several centuries due to the impact of the monolithic and institutional ecclesiology, they are now brought to the mainstream of the ecclesial life and activities and made to realize their indispensable role of actively participating with their own creativity in the work of the service of the Church in order that the Church become what it ought to be. Needless to say, the basic Christian communities, which have sprung up all over the world within a short span of time, have boosted the participation of the laity in the life and mission of the local Christian communities. The call of Vatican II to form participatory structures in the parishes has undoubtedly contributed towards the leadership of the laity. Such a development is indeed an emergent sign of hope for the Church in the post-Vatican period.

Nonetheless, if we look more attentively and carefully at the present situation prevailing in most of our parish communities, we

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cannot be overly optimistic. It is very unfortunate that even today, many years after the Council, the lay people are still silent spectators and remain at the margin of the Christian communities, subjecting themselves to the governance of the clergy. The organs of lay participation and co-responsibility have not been established in several parishes, in spite of the clear-cut directives of the code of canon law. Even in those parishes where the parish council is formed, what happens, more often than not, is that it is the clergy who dominate the entire proceedings of the council and control the decision-making process so that only what they aim at and plan out is ultimately realized. Often enough the gifts and charisms of the laity – both men and women – are not duly recognized, welcomed or activated in significant functions and tasks of ministry and apostolate. It is deplorable that women, who participate in the liturgical services in great numbers, are treated as third-class citizens and denied the opportunity to exercise their leadership. In a situation like this, we need to ask ourselves: Why is it that the vast majority of the lay people still remain passive without taking an active part in the life and mission of the Church? What are the concrete measures to be taken to build up authentic Christian communities in which the laity exercise their legitimate role of leadership? Let us explore these questions in this article.

## **1. CHURCH: A COMMUNITY OF FELLOWSHIP AND EQUALITY**

It is to be noted that an important reason for the domination of the clergy and the passivity of the laity is the pyramidal model of ecclesiology which is still dominant in most of our Christian communities. Even though it is an outmoded model which originated in the feudalistic society of the West in the mediaeval period, we find in practice that it wields tremendous influence even now over the clergy and the laity. The Church, accordingly, is viewed as a holy institution founded by Jesus Christ who transmitted the authority of governance to the apostles and the apostles in turn entrusted their authority and office to other office bearers in the Church, namely bishops, presbyters, deacons, etc.<sup>1</sup> The members of the hierarchy, the sole representatives of Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Avery Dulles, "Half Century of Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), 422.

Christ, enjoy power over the lay faithful, as they are fully responsible for the salvation of the flock entrusted to their care. Thus the Christian community, as Leonardo Boff observes, is "divided between rulers and governed, between celebrants and onlookers, between producers and consumers of sacraments."<sup>2</sup> The role of the laity, in this model, consists primarily in participating in the sacramental celebrations, obeying and respecting the clergy, making financial contribution to the parish and rendering assistance to the clergy in the work of building up the Church, whenever required. At the beginning of the twentieth century the passivity of the laity was approved and legitimized by Pope Pius X in his encyclical letter *Vehementer nos*: "It follows that the Church is by essence an *unequal society*, that is a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; *the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.*"<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that Vatican II took serious measures to put an end to this universalistic, hierarchy-centred and traditional concept of the Church, it is still very much alive and vibrant in most of our Christian communities. The authoritative behaviour of some of the clergy, their unquestionable domination in the administration of ecclesiastical bodies and institutions and their reluctance to entrust responsibilities to the laity bear witness to the fact that the Church is still under the powerful grip of pyramidal model. Because they are determined to enjoy all the rights, privileges and authority in the Church, they keep the laity always at the receiving end. This is the reason why the efforts that are being made, in accordance with the call of Vatican II, to involve the laity in the affairs of the Church have not significantly improved the situation. It can be said, therefore, that the emergence of lay leadership ultimately depends on renewing radically and totally

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<sup>2</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesio genesis*, London: Collins, 1982, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Pius X, *Vehementer nos*, 8 (emphasis added).

our parish communities and structures based on the communitarian model of the Church slowly budding forth since Vatican II.

Obvious as it may be, the concept of communion is at the heart of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. The Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in 1985, marking the close of Vatican II, observed, "the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents."<sup>4</sup> The Church, accordingly, is not primarily an institution but a people of God united together in "a fellowship of life, charity and truth."<sup>5</sup> Envisaged as communion, the Church has a twofold dimension, namely vertical and horizontal. Communion is basically a participation or sharing in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit – a divine life that is fostered by the Spirit of God. All the members share in "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor 13:14) by virtue of baptism and through the celebration of Eucharist. The participation in the life of communion with the Triune God fosters among them a bond of solidarity and fellowship. It forms them into a Church of God gathered together in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and makes them all brothers and sisters to one another. Since all proclaim the same faith, share the same Word of God, celebrate the same sacraments and participate in the same life of grace gifted by the Holy Spirit, all are called upon to love one another, participate in the joys and sufferings of one another and bear the responsibility of carrying out the mission of Jesus Christ making use of the charisms of the Spirit. Therefore, the life of communion is the basis for the equality and dignity of all the faithful and for their responsibility for the mission. This is the reason why the Council explicitly stated: "...the chosen People of God is one: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:5). As members, they *share a common dignity* from their rebirth in Christ. They have the same *filial grace* and the *same vocation to perfection*. They possess in common *one salvation, one hope, and one undivided charity*."<sup>6</sup> " And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, dispensers of mysteries and shepherds on

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<sup>4</sup> *Message of the People of God and the Final Report*, Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986, 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 32 (emphasis added).

behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ."<sup>7</sup>

This understanding of Church as communion or fellowship has opened up a fresh and new image of the laity and offered a new structural possibility for the exercise of their Christian responsibility. It must be recognized, first of all, that the laity are no longer simply a silent marginalized community to be ruled by the hierarchy, but they themselves are the Church due to the fact that the Church exists and becomes a vibrant community of faith only by their life of communion and collective witness to the values of the Kingdom of God. We cannot say that the Church is truly present merely by the fact that the articles of faith are meticulously professed, sacraments are regularly administered and hierarchical structures are firmly established. Though these constitutive elements are indeed essential, the *ekklesia* is not fully formed as long as the laity remain passive without any opportunity for exercising their charisms in accordance with the call of the Holy Spirit. As the Council pertinently observes, "the Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is a perfect sign of Christ unless there is a genuine laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy."<sup>8</sup> It is very legitimate, therefore, that they are in the forefront and assume the role of leadership in the local communities. Moreover, collegiality and co-responsibility, flowing from the bond of communion, demands that the laity, true to their vocation, involve themselves in different kinds of ministries for the building up of the local community. Considering the fact that their active participation has a strong sacramental foundation, there is no need for them to receive any mandate from the hierarchy to engage in the task of mission.

## **2. MINISTRIES FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF LAY LEADERSHIP**

In the light of the communitarian model let us proceed further to analyze various structural means to enhance and

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<sup>7</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 32 (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 21.

promote the leadership of the laity in the Christian communities. In the first place, the new vision of the Church as a community of equals called to build up the Church into a community of love and fellowship committed to the Kingdom of God demands the restructuring of ministries. It is a matter of fact that in the past the minority-clergy monopolized all the charisms, services and ministries. This happened during the medieval period and Counter-Reformation period, when the priesthood emerged as the one ideal ministry, which swallowed up all other ministries. The laity, as a consequence, remained a passive and powerless majority devoid of charisms and functions in the Church. Dismantling the myth of identifying the ministry with the sacramental form of ministry and considering the priests as the only ministers of the local Church, Vatican II widened the horizon of ministry in accordance with the vision of the New Testament and declared that it should be the concern of the entire people of God.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. 1. Ministries in the Early Church: Collegial by Character

It is worth recalling that in the New Testament and during the early apostolic times, there was no mention of 'clergy' or 'laity' owing to the fact that the whole believing community was seen as a royal priesthood, holy nation and a people set apart, a *kleros* (1 Pet 2:9). All the members offered to God true worship in spirit and all contributed their mite to the growth of the community. The ministry was collegial in character. There were different kinds of ministries and all of them were exercised by the people, according to their charisms, for the common good and growth of the local community (Rom 12: 6-8; 1 Cor 12: 8-10; Eph 4: 11-14; 1 Cor 12: 28). More significantly, even some local Churches were founded by the lay people. For instance, some of the persecuted Christians of the Jerusalem Church, probably the Hellenistic Christians, founded the Church in Antioch even without prior approval or knowledge of the leaders of the Jerusalem Church. They made a great revolution by bringing together Jews as well as Gentiles into one community

<sup>9</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 8, 12; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 3.

(Acts 11: 19-21).<sup>10</sup> It is evident that the laity were the founders as well as the administrators of the house Churches. The best example would be the Jewish couple Aquila and Prisca who were at first leading a house Church in Rome and founded later on a house Church in Ephesus on their personal initiative.<sup>11</sup> The co-workers of Paul were all lay people, who laboured hard for the spread of the Gospel of Christ. He remembered with much appreciation and gratitude his collaborators such as Phoebe (Rom 16: 1-2), Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16: 3-5), Urbanus (Rom 16: 9), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), Philemon (Philem 1) etc.

## 2.2. Promoting Lay Ministries through BCCs

Taking serious note of the ecclesial model of the New Testament period and the vision of Vatican II, we observe that there is an urgent need to reshape the understanding and exercise of ministry in the parish communities in order to promote the active involvement of the laity. The parishes, as we have them today, evolved in the West during the medieval period marked by the feudal system, which legitimized inequality at all spheres. Needless to say, they function as administrative subdivisions of the diocese rather than genuine communities of love and fellowship. But it is heartening to note that the basic Christian communities, which originated in the Latin American countries, is gaining momentum and popularity in several parts of the world and has been accepted as the pastoral programme in many parishes in India. The parish, instead of being perceived as a huge, powerful and institutional structure controlled and administered by the clergy, is understood in terms of smaller Christian communities which help the laity to experience the Church in a concrete way and make communion and participation a lived reality. Gathering in small groups, around the Word of God, they are able to foster a true sense of community and mission. In the BCCs all are

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond Brown, *Antioch and Rome*, New York Paulist Press, 1982, 32-36; Joseph Pathrapankal, "The Church in the Acts of the Apostles," *Indian Theological Studies* 34 (1997), 216-217.

<sup>11</sup> P. Sampathkumar, "Aquila and Prisca: A Family at the Service of the Word," *Indian Theological Studies* 34 (1997), 185-201.

considered equal in dignity and responsibility; all are endowed with the charisms and gifts of the Holy Spirit and all are committed to the mission of Christ. The lay ministries should be envisaged and modelled from the spectrum of the BCCs. These local Churches emerging from below would certainly facilitate the discovery, development and recognition of the different charisms of the laity so that they blossom into ministries. The participation in the ministerial life would definitely offer them abundant scope for leadership. It is important that shared participative leadership is promoted as a style for the BCCs where there is consultation, dialogue and sharing.

In this connection, we have to bear in mind that the ministries in the proper sense apply to those services for which the members commit themselves in a stable manner. All such ministries must be approved by the community and authenticated by it in the person of its leader. The community recognition of the stable services rendered to the community is necessary. Foreseeing an impending danger arising out of such officially recognized ministries, Kurien Kunnumpuram points out that, "other members of the community may easily lapse into passivity, leaving all the work and responsibility to these ministers."<sup>12</sup> To avoid this danger, the laity must be conscientized about their vocation and mission in the Church and constantly motivated to collaborate with the officially recognized lay ministers. At the same time, these ministers should not form a ghetto and monopolize the various services in the Christian communities.

### 2.3. Role of Ordained Ministers

At this juncture, what is urgently important is the reimagining and reinterpretation of the role of the ordained ministers in the Christian communities in the light of the communitarian model of the Church. A priest is called from the community and ordained for serving the community. His ministry is neither above the community, nor is it independent of the community. His participation in the priesthood of Christ by virtue of the sacraments

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<sup>12</sup> Kurien Kunnumpuram, "Laity and Creative Ministries," *Indian Missiological Review* 8 (1985), 178.

such as baptism and priesthood becomes relevant and meaningful only to the extent he promotes the priesthood of the lay faithful and collaborates with them in the upbuilding of the Kingdom of God. Vatican II clearly states: "Pastors also know that they themselves were not meant by Christ to shoulder alone the entire saving mission of the Church."<sup>13</sup> Seen in this perspective, his ministry consists primarily in establishing vibrant communities of faith by fostering and coordinating the various charisms of the lay faithful. Instead of monopolizing all the services in the parish, he must come forward to allow, encourage and motivate the laity to exercise their prophetic, priestly and servant roles for the establishment of authentic Christian communities. He should exercise participative and collaborative leadership at all levels and promote such a style of leadership in the BCCs. As the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences pertinently notes, "The role of the presbyter is to inspire, to encourage, to foster initiatives, and to help charisms to develop... His one concern is to form his community into a living sign of the presence in the world of the Risen Lord who assumes and heals all human situations and brings to fulfillment all hope and aspirations."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, only as the builder of community he is called to preside over the Eucharistic celebration and administer other sacraments. Edward Schillebeeckx notes that in the early Church, "the community called him as leader to build up the community, and for this reason he was also the obvious person to preside at the Eucharist."<sup>15</sup>

### **3. PARTICIPATORY STRUCTURES AND THE LEADERSHIP OF THE LAITY**

Another important point, which draws our pointed attention is that, the emergence of lay leadership in the Christian communities urgently calls for the establishment of participatory structures. The Second Vatican Council changed the whole perception of authority and the entire manner of exercising

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<sup>13</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 30.

<sup>14</sup> "Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church," in *For All Peoples of Asia* Vol. I, ed. Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arevalo, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1987, 86.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Minister? Pastor? Prophet?*, London: SCM Press, 1980, 89.

ministry by introducing a new principle called collegiality and co-responsibility. Notwithstanding the Council spoke of collegiality among the bishops, it has to be realized by all means at all levels of ecclesiastical administration. To build up the local Church into a participative community in view of promoting lay leadership, it is indispensable that the structures and organs of participation are established in all the parishes so that all the faithful could have a say in the making of decisions in the community. Collegiality implies collective responsibility in planning, making decisions and executing them for the common good of the community.

### 3.1. Collegiality in the Early Church

It is to be noted that collegiality has a strong biblical foundation. In the Apostolic times, when some serious problems cropped up affecting the life of the Church, the assembly of the faithful was convoked to thrash them out.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Mathias was elected as one of the twelve to replace Judas at a meeting of the community in which about one hundred and twenty believers including women took part (Acts 1: 14-15). The participation of the whole community was more clearly revealed in the appointment of seven deacons to take care of the widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1-6). The Council of Jerusalem, convoked to resolve an insurmountable difference of opinion about whether circumcision was necessary for salvation, was a clear expression of the collegial character of the early Church (Acts 15). Not only in the Church of Jerusalem, but also in the Pauline communities the same participatory system of governance was followed. The importance that Paul gave to self-determination or, at least shared responsibility in the community of Corinth was candidly manifested in cases of conflicts.<sup>17</sup> He asked the Corinthians to assemble to take disciplinary action against a person who was involved in sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:4-5). When there was some confusion caused by the charismatics, he exhorted the

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<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, "Community Cooperation in the New Testament," *Concilium* 7 (1972), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Bans Van Iersel, "Who According to the New Testament has the Say in the Church," *Concilium* 148 (1981), 14.

community to regulate the use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 14:26-32). The practice of participative decision-making continued even after the New Testament times. For instance, the Apostolic Tradition written by Hippolytus in Rome around 215 A.D. expressly emphasized the election of bishops by the whole people: "Let the bishop be ordained after he has been chosen by all the people."<sup>18</sup> In the third century, St. Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, declared: "I have made it a rule, ever since the beginning of my episcopate, to make no decision merely on the strength of my personal opinion without consulting you (presbyters and deacons), and without the approbation of the people."<sup>19</sup> Pope Leo the Great underlined the need of people's involvement in the election of ministers, as they had to serve the community and bear the responsibility of its growth: "Let him who will stand before all be elected by all."<sup>20</sup>

### 3.2. Building Participatory Structures

Drawing inspiration from the tradition of the early Church and the communal vision of Vatican II, concentered efforts must be taken in our parish communities to make collegiality and collective responsibility a concrete reality by establishing parish pastoral council and parish finance committee. Now there is a growing tendency to consider these bodies designed primarily to help the clergy to coordinate and carry out the various activities of the parish. Even some of the clergy make use of these organs to exercise their office more effectively and stabilize their authority more firmly. It is sad that still there are priests who are under the impression that they would lose their power and authority over the laity by establishing the participatory structures in the parishes.

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<sup>18</sup> *The Apostolic Tradition*, no. 2; cf. William Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* Vol. I, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1984, 166.

<sup>19</sup> G. W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage* Vol. II, New York: New Man Press, 1984, 43-44.

<sup>20</sup> *Epist. X, 4, P.L.* Vol. 54, 634; For more details on the election of ministers in the early Church cf. H.M. Legrand, "Theology and the Election of Bishops in the Early Church," *Concilium* 7 (8/1972), 31-42; Peter Stockmeier, "The Election of Bishops by the Clergy and People in the Early Church," *Concilium* 137 (7/1980), 3-9; Edward Kilmartin, "Episcopal Election," *Concilium* 137 (7/1980), 39-43.

Though many reasons could be adduced for this state of affairs, the most obvious one is clericalism which has been strongly rooted in our local Churches from the time of missionary expansion. But the concentration of power and ministry only in the hands of the ordained ministers would undoubtedly destroy the conciliar vision of the Church. It is important that following the model of Jesus who emptied himself for the sake of building up the Kingdom of God, the clergy are called upon to empty themselves for the empowerment of the laity.

The participatory structures are mandatory as they are one of the principal means which contribute to the ecclesial fellowship. If the Church is really the people of God united in love and fellowship, and if all believe in one Lord, one Spirit, one body, one faith, one grace and one baptism, it is just and legitimate that the lay people play a decisive role in the participatory structures. Through these structures the whole community, guided by the Spirit of God, involves in the process of the discernment of the will of God in a particular context. As Felix Wilfred points out, "Through these structures the Spirit of God can act and lead the believers to mutual acceptance, recognition of the role of one another, deepening the bonds of fellowship through dialogue, exchange of views, common decisions and selfless collaboration without letting anyone impose his or her will on others."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, instead of looking at the structures of participation merely from a juridical point of view and considering them merely as consultative bodies as per the canon law, we have to make them decision-making bodies in view of promoting collective responsibility in the community. For as long as the lay people can contribute advice and work, but are excluded from decision-making, they remain second-class members of the community. Even some of them strongly suspect whether such structures are intended earnestly. As Hans Kueng aptly remarks, "The person who can advise and collaborate, but not participate in decision-making in a manner befitting that person's status, is not really the

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<sup>21</sup> Felix Wilfred, "Three Nodal Points in the Theology of the Laity," *Vidyajyoti* 50 (1986), 513.

Church, but only *belongs to* the Church."<sup>22</sup> But the early Church, as indicated earlier, was so democratically structured that the entire people of God actively participated in the decision-making process, even though divisions and conflicts cropped up at times. The example of the early Church challenges us today and invites us to change our systems and structures for a fuller and greater participation of the laity. Moreover, in an age when the democratic values and principles are deeply rooted in the civil society and the awareness of the dignity of human person, rights and freedom is growing sharper in the secular world, the Church must come forward to incorporate into its structures the basic values of the democratic system, as they are truly gospel values.<sup>23</sup> A Church united in love and fellowship will not brush aside the legitimate aspirations of the laity for participation, dialogue and the evolving of consensus through participatory structures.

In continuation of the above reflection, it is important to note that the emergence of lay leadership in the Christian communities largely depends on their active participation in the administration of ecclesiastical institutions and organizations. It is a matter of fact that the priests and religious would like to keep control of the money, the buildings, the properties and other structures which form the outward organization of the Church. They monopolize all the administrative offices in the schools, colleges, hospitals and other charitable and pastoral institutions. Very often it happens that the lay people play second fiddle to priests and religious, as they have to be at their mercy for obtaining some favours from them. The argument that is usually postulated in this regard is that the priests and the religious are better administrators and selfless labourers and the lay people may not be able to commit themselves fully to the welfare of the institutions, as they are tied down to their family problems and worries. But this argument no longer holds good. In fact, a quite number of lay people occupy influential

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<sup>22</sup> Hans Kueng, *Reforming the Church Today*, New York: Crossroad, 1990, 75.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. John Jay Hughes, "Authority and Democracy in the Church," *The American Ecclesiastical Review* 163 (1970), 3628-370; Karl Lehmann, "On the Dogmatic Justification for a Process of Democratisation in the Church," *Concilium* 6 (1971), 60-86.

posts and are involved in the policy-making bodies of the state government, private companies, industries, media network, financial institutions etc. They work with outstanding expertise and single-minded commitment. It is very unfortunate that they remain marginalized in the Church, as their talents and charisms are not recognized and made use of for the administration of ecclesiastical institutions. The leadership of the laity would bloom only when the priests and religious come forward to give up their domination in the ecclesiastical institutions and welcome them as collaborators in a spirit of communion. Of course, sharing of power entails tremendous sacrifice and great renunciation on the part of the hierarchy, but it is worth making for the empowerment of the laity.

## CONCLUSION

The emergence of the leadership of the laity in the Christian communities is the clarion call of the Holy Spirit. It is a call to renew the face of the Church and build it up into a community of love, fellowship and equality so that all the members become participants in the mission of Jesus Christ. In response to this call, serious measures must be taken to remove the roots of the juridical and authoritative ecclesiology and renew our parishes based on the communal vision of the Church. The formation of basic Christian communities, promotion of lay ministries, the effective functioning of participative bodies and legitimate sharing in the administration of ecclesiastical institutions are the concrete steps to be taken for the empowerment of the laity and the enhancement of their leadership. The golden era of the laity dawned in the Church with Vatican II. It is unfortunate that many parishes are still in the Dark Age due to the clerical domination and institutional power. The emergence of the lay leadership depends very much on the *kenosis* of the hierarchy.