Putting the Clock Back: The New Testament Evidence for the Laity as the Prime Evangelisers

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Introduction

A remarkable change that has been progressively taking place in the Church since the Second Vatican Council is the increase of lay participation and their active involvement in the building up of the church in general and the local Christian communities in particular. History shows that for several centuries the laity had been kept at the periphery of the Church due to the impact of an institutional-based ecclesiology. Particularly during the Medieval period and the Counter-Reformation period, when the priesthood emerged as the one ideal ministry, it swallowed up all other ministries. In fact, the minority-clergy did not recognize the charisms present among the laity and so did not involve them in the services and ministries of the Church. As the result, the lay people remained a passive and powerless majority unable to exercise their charisms and ministries in the Church.

However, a paradigm shift has taken place with Vatican II, which has dismantled the myth of identifying the ministry with its sacerdotal form and considering the priests as the only ministers of the local Church. The documents of Vatican II, specifically, "The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," and the "Decree

on the Apostolate of the Laity" provide strong foundations for a new theology of the laity. Consequently Vatican II broadened 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 (*Lumen Gentium* 8; 12; *Apostolicum Actuostiatem* 3). As a result, the lay people are being brought into the mainstream of the life and activities of the Church. The world is witnessing an encouraging upsurge of lay ministries and services. Eucharistic ministers, lectors, catechists and those engaged in baptism and marriage preparation, etc., could be cited as a few examples. It is no wonder that the bishops at the Asian Synod (1998) rightly called the new millennium 'The Age of the Laity.'

When we look at the New Testament, especially the rich tradition of the early Christian communities, we will readily recognize that it was the lay people who were the first and prime evangelizers of the Good News. They played an active role in their churches and even more they were actively involved in their communities with a great sense of commitment and belongingness. This article attempts to have a closer look at the New Testament writings in order to identify and highlight lay participation in the evangelizing mission of the Church. This will also enable us to understand and appreciate the greater participation of the laity in the church of modern times.

From the Gospels

The gospels present the historical Jesus as a prophet par excellence. He is neither a priest, nor does he come from the Aaronic or Levitical line. Nowhere do we find Jesus serving in the Temple with the priests. He never bothers to reform or renew the old priesthood. On the contrary, he meets with rejection and opposition from the priestly class.[1] He is not called a priest

anywhere in the New Testament except in the Letter to the Hebrews. In terms of the established priesthood Jesus was a layperson; in terms of the Old and the New Testaments, Jesus is more correctly described as a prophet of the reign of God.[2]

Right from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus instructs his followers, namely the disciples and prepares them for their future ministry. Through his miracles, his creative and revolutionary teaching and his constant company with them, he shapes them to be the future heralds of the Good News. It may not be an unimportant information that the apostles whom Jesus chose and who formed a nucleus community did not hail from priestly families. Other than the term, 'apostles' (*apostolos*) which is meant to refer to the chosen Twelve, the word 'disciple/s' (*mathçtçs*) is found almost 250 times in the New Testament.[3] Luke particularly speaks of seventy(two) disciples and at times he makes mention of 'a great multitude' of disciples (Lk 14, 25). They were all lay people who responded positively to the call of Jesus and committed themselves to the cause of the Kingdom of God. According to the Acts (6, 1;21, 16) all the baptized are considered disciples.

One can say beyond doubt that the beneficiaries of the miracles of Jesus became in some way evangelizers of the new life, experienced in and through the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. They went out and proclaimed to everyone what they themselves had experienced, and thus brought others to Jesus. For example, the two blind men who received their sight from Jesus went away and spread the news about Jesus throughout that entire region (Mt 9, 27-31). When Jesus cleansed the leper, he charged him not to tell anyone; however, as soon as he went out, the man began spreading the news everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter any town (Mk 1, 40-45; Lk 5, 12-16).

In the Johannine gospel, we come across the Samaritan woman (Jn 4, 1-42) who, having experienced Jesus, left her water jar at the well and ran to the town and said to the people, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did. Could he not be the Christ?" So they left the town and went to meet him (4, 28-30). Many Samaritans in that town believed in Jesus because they heard the woman's testimony (4, 39) She is an example of one who became an evangelizer sharing the good news with others and inviting them to experience the same. In the same gospel we come across a man born blind cured by Jesus (Jn 9) who becomes another evangelizer. To his neighbours, he says that a "man called Jesus" healed him (v.11). In the preliminary interrogation by the Pharisees he acknowledges Jesus as a prophet (v. 17). In the final questioning he defends Jesus as the one coming from God (v. 33). Later he comes to see Jesus as the Son of Man (v. 38). This man, having received his sight from the Lord, grows steadily in spiritual perception of the mystery of Jesus' person and finally becomes a disciple (cf. v. 28 – the Pharisees tell him, "You are that fellow's disciple...").

The synoptic gospels narrate the mission of the Twelve (Mt 10, 1-15; Mk 6, 7-12; Lk 9, 1-6). But Luke in particular mentions the mission of the seventy(two) (10, 1-12) and their return (10, 17-20) which is a clear example of how ordinary people were evangelizers during the ministry of Jesus. Further the third evangelist speaks of the women disciples (Lk 8, 1-3) who were with Jesus (Being with Jesus is one of the characteristics of discipleship as stated by Mark). These women were healed of evil spirits, infirmities or demonic power. Here Luke underscores the fact that in their healing they had already experienced the Kingdom of God within them (Lk 11, 20). It is these women who provided for Jesus out of their own resources (*diakonia* – another

characteristic of discipleship). The Gospels clearly portray women as the first to proclaim the resurrection. Particularly, "there is a strong fourfold gospel tradition which presents at least one woman, Mary of Magdala, as having fulfilled all the criteria of apostleship and as having exercised her apostleship at the very least in her critically important mission to the other disciples."[4] Thus those men and women who had undergone a 'Jesus experience' and accepted him to be their master, became in turn evangelizers, sharing the Good News of the Kingdom of God with their fellow human beings.

From the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline Letters

The early church was a community of believers marked by the characteristic of unity. The Acts describes the community life of the believers in Jerusalem saying that they were of one heart and one soul (Acts 2, 42-47; 4, 32-35). This was evident from the following features: their life in common and common property (2, 44; 4, 32), sale of goods and distribution of the proceeds among those in need (2, 45; 4, 34-35), common prayer in the temple (2, 46), and breaking of bread in common (2, 46). They were a loving community, which by its own inner dynamism was transformed into a worshipping community (prayers in common, breaking of bread in common, attending temple together, etc) and eventually lived as an evangelizing community ("Day by day the Lord added to their number" - 2, 47). The community was literally following Jesus' dictum expressed in Jn 13, 35: "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Through their exemplary life, they became martyrs (in Greek, originally it meant 'witnesses') of the message of Christ. Because all of them proclaimed the Christian message through their exemplary life, it spread rather quickly. It is worth mentioning that it was the lay people who founded some of the churches. For example, the church of Antioch was founded by the Hellenist Christians who were

scattered in connection with the persecution following the killing of Stephen (Acts 11, 19-26).

Acts 6, 1-6 presents the appointment of seven men whose function was to serve/minister or to wait at the table (*diakonein*).[5] Stephen was the leader of the group and is presented as a person full of the Holy Spirit and other charismatic qualities. He performed many signs among the people. As the first witness (*martys*) of Christ, he underwent all the opposition which Jesus himself faced from his opponents. Another member of the seven "servants of the table," Philip, preached the gospel among the Samaritans, the bitterest enemies of the Jews. Thus a lay person (missionary) became responsible for the spread of the gospel outside the Jewish territory and made it available for the Samaritans. Moreover, Philip was inspired by the Holy Spirit to admit the Ethiopian official into the community of the believers (Acts 8, 26-39) through which the later mission of the church among the Greeks was inaugurated. He went on to preach the good news among the Greeks in Azotus and Caesarea (Acts 8, 40). So Philip stands as an inspiring example of a lay missionary who had taken the initiative to preach the gospel to the outsiders.

Paul perceived his own mission as the "priestly service of the gospel" (Rom 15, 16) and exhorted the Christian community to offer itself as a "living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Rom 12, 1). The New Testament books list many gifts conferred on individuals for the benefit of all: teaching, healing, apostleship, etc. The gift of priesthood is never mentioned, however; instead every Christian has a vocation, as the first letter of Peter convincingly highlights: "You are a chosen race, a community of royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people God has made his own to proclaim his wonders..." (1 Pet 2, 9). However, "ordination as a rite and

ceremony that confers power or office does not exist in the New Testament.... Priesthood, as a specific type of ministry, does not exist in the New Testament."[6]

A glance at the Pauline letters will reveal that Paul greatly admired the men and women who were helpful in his missionary endeavours. Most of them were ordinary people, whom we today call the laity. E. B. Redlich[7] presents a list of some one hundred names, often with some kind of titles, who associated themselves with Paul. E. E. Ellis[8] narrows down this list, after eliminating the names with general or without any designation, to thirty-six persons who were closely associated with Paul. These collaborators of Paul considered themselves to be at the service of the Word of God and contributed extensively to the spread of the Gospel of Christ. Their contribution was significant particularly as house church leaders and patrons of ministers (Rom 16, 1-5), as those who struggle with persevering efforts, even risking their lives (1 Cor 16, 16; Rom 16, 3-6; Phil 4, 2-3) or as official delegates of the churches (2 Cor 8, 18-23; Rom 16, 7; Phil 2, 25). They were involved in the work of administration and instruction (1 Thess 5, 12-13; Acts 18, 26), nurturing and building up the church (1 Cor 3, 6-8.10-11).

These co-workers included Jewish and Gentile Christians, men and women, and married couple as well. Paul remembered them with much gratitude and appreciation. These were lay men and women who had a sense of belonging to their churches and people of great missionary zeal who helped Paul in his ministry. Paul calls them by different designations: apostle, partner, brother, servant, fellow-servant, fellow-soldier, fellow-prisoner, worker and co-worker. These designations are pointers to their significant contribution to the ministry of the gospel. They were involved in a

variety of activities such as the founding and building up of communities, and their instruction. Some of them functioned as emissaries and others helped in the writing of letters. Particularly by calling them his co-workers, Paul acknowledges that his service and that of his collaborators are of equal importance. According to him, they are God's helpers and fellow workers (1 Cor 3, 9). The space allotted does not permit the discussion of all these people, but the example of a few (leaders of house-churches, deacons, and builders of church communities[9]) will elucidate our argument.

Leaders of House-churches

Prisca (or Priscilla as she is known in Acts 18, 2.18.26) and Aquila (Rom 16, 3-5a; 2 Tim 4, 19) played a prominent role in the ministry of the gospel. Paul recommends that all the churches of the Gentiles be grateful for their service as he himself is. They were the co-workers of Paul and they 'had risked their necks' for Paul (Rom 16, 4). This may signify the sacrifices they had made. They stand as an example to show how the lay people were the founders and administrators of the house-churches. This couple were at first leading a house-church in Rome. But after the degree of expulsion by Claudius they might have moved to Corinth where Paul met them and stayed with them. He seemed to have stayed long enough there to take a job in the workshop of Aquila (Acts 18, 1-3). Then they moved to Ephesus where they founded a church on their personal initiative and became actively involved in spreading the message of Christ. From the admiration Paul had for them, one might infer their involvement with Paul's mission of serving the Word – teaching, preaching, being leaders of the house-churches, planting and building up new church communities, and more importantly showing hospitality etc (1 Cor 16, 19; Acts 18, 1-3. 26-28).

Hospitality for missionaries as well as those of Christian communities who gather at their houses is an important aspect of evangelization, for it was considered as service to the Word. Moreover their house became the locus where Christians gathered to pray, learn their faith, take their fraternal meal and celebrate the Lord's Supper (Rom 16, 3-5; cf. also 1 Cor 11, 20-34). The leaders of the house-churches were also actively engaged in providing catechesis to those who came to their house for gatherings. This is evident when Prisca and Aquila instructed Apollos when he arrived at Ephesus (Acts 18, 24-28).[10] Without doubt, one could say that they had made a great impact on the Christian community through their witness of life. "As [a] married couple, Aquila and Priscilla have demonstrated how much they can share in the mission of Paul and give their heart and soul for the service of the Word."[11] It is also important to notice that the name 'Prisca' appears first in the mention of this couple (Acts 18, 18.26; Rom 16, 3; 2 Tim 4, 19) which may indicate that she was more committed to evangelization than her husband.

There is also a mention of the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 16, 15ff). Paul loftily praises Stephanas, saying "... you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; that you also be in subjection to such people and to everyone who helps in the work and labours" (1 Cor 16, 15-16). He may have had a big house to accommodate the Christians coming from his surroundings to celebrate Eucharistic meal, and he may have been rich and generous enough to provide them with supper. Besides, there were also other house-churches where Christians gathered together: at Corinth in the house of Gaius (Rom 16, 23), at Jerusalem in the house of Mary, (Acts 12, 12), at Laodicea in the house of Nympha (Col 4, 15), at Lystra in the house of Lydia

(Acts 16, 40) and at Colossae in the house of Philemon (Phlm 2-5). The importance of these house-churches is highlighted by A. Jaubert: "Such families or houses who received the Christians for worship already provided centres of mutual relation and became centres of evangelization."[12]

Deacons/Deaconesses:

Some companions of Paul were called deacon/s (*diakonos*). In the New Testament, the verb '*diakonein*' signifies 'to wait at table' (in the original sense) and 'to be serviceable' (in the wider sense).[13] In Pauline literature, this term may refer to different kinds of services rendered to the community. Deacons, according to the letters of Paul, were those who preached the gospel and laboured for the spreading of the gospel. The term is used of preachers or with reference to preaching. A deacon is a teacher who has been entrusted with and is sent to communicate the mysteries of God. In a Pauline community, deacons appeared to be a special class of co-workers active in preaching and teaching.[14] Epaphras (Col 1, 7), Apollos (1 Cor 3, 5), and Phoebe (Rom 16, 1) were designated as deacons.

Phoebe needs a special mention here, not only because she is a woman-deacon, but also because she is the first recorded "deacon" in the history of Christianity.[15] She was a deacon of the church in Cenchreae and a benefactor of Paul (Rom 16, 1-2). She may have been a figure of significance, whose wealth or influence had been put at the disposal of the church in Cenchreae. The effectiveness of her ministry and the significant contribution made by her in the church at Cenchreae is highlighted by Paul, when he describes Phoebe with the expression (*diakonos*). Because Paul describes himself with the same expression, i.e. as a deacon (*diakonos*) of the church (2 Cor 11, 23.29) and claims that he

became a minister of the church by God's commission in order to make the word of God known (Col 1, 24-25).

Co-workers and Builders of Church Communities

Timothy (Rom 16, 21; 2 Cor 1, 1) who appears as a co-author of Pauline letters was sent to Thessalonica to see how strong was the faith of the Christians in the church at Thessalonica and how loyal they were to Paul (1 Thess 3, 2). He was a 'servant of God' because with his preaching of the gospel he confirmed and admonished the faith of the Thessalonians (1 Thess 3, 1-3). He and Erastus were assistants (*diakonountes*) of Paul in the preaching of the Gospel (Acts 19, 22). Silvanus (1 Thess 1, 1) is also a co-author of Pauline letter and he is the one who played a significant role in establishing a Christian community at Corinth (2 Cor 1, 19). There were also other co-workers like Urbanus (Rom 16, 9), Achaicus (1 Cor 16, 15), Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (Phlm 24), Apollos (1 Cor 3, 9), Titus (2 Cor 8, 23), Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16, 7) and Philemon and Apphia (Phlm 1-2).

Euodia and Syntyche are two women who laboured together with Paul for the spreading of the Gospel (Phil 4, 2-3). Lydia was one of the first disciples of Paul (Acts 16, 13-15). She and her household believed in the gospel proclaimed by Paul and were baptized (Acts 16, 15). She is another example of a wealthy patron who supported the missionaries. Mary (Rom 16, 6), Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis (Rom 16, 12) are qualified as workers in the Lord. Junia (along with Andronicus) is described not only as Paul's kinsman and fellow-prisoner, but also as outstanding among the apostles (Rom 16, 7).

Paul was a travelling apostle who proclaimed Jesus in one town and then moved on to another. His missionary journeys and those of his companions were an integral part of evangelization.

The travels of Paul and his associates (1 Thess 2, 17-20; 1 Cor 16, 5-12; 2 Cor 1, 15-2, 4; Phil 2, 19-30) were part of his mission strategy and constitute an important mode of collaborative ministry.... Regular personal contact with the communities to encourage, to support and to strengthen them, to prevent them from falling away from [the] faith, and to help resolve problems when they arose, were of high priority in his pastoral plan. When it was not possible for him to make the journey, he sent his trusted envoys (1 Thess 3, 1-5; 1 Cor 4, 16-20; Phil 2, 19-30; 2 Cor 8, 6.23).[16]

All these co-workers extended their helping hands to Paul for the growth and welfare of Christian communities. They contributed in their own way for the flourishing of the gospel and maintaining the newly found churches. It goes without saying that sacrifice was an integral part of their sincere and serious commitment to the gospel. Besides these special collaborators, all the members of the community, according to Paul, are gifted with charisms which they made use of for the welfare of their fellow-brothers and sisters.

Clerical Monopoly and Unimportance of the Laity

The contribution of the laity in the spreading of the gospel was remarkable in the New Testament era. But the history of the Church shows that the importance of the laity slowly disappeared, as clerical monopoly emerged. Yet there are different stages in the development of the 'laity-clergy' structure in the Church.[17] The first stage corresponds to the first two centuries of the Church,

when there was no distinction between 'laity' and 'clergy,' or even the mention of two such categories. It is because the entire believing community was considered to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pet 2, 9). The early Church was a "peoples' Church," wherein all the members had a great sense of belonging to their respective communities and contributed in their own way to the growth of those communities. With their different and varied charisms, they enhanced the welfare of the community (1 Cor 12, 8-10. 28; Eph 4, 11-14; Rom 12, 6-8). The Pauline letters reveal to us that the early Christian community was a non-institutionalized movement, run by charismatic lay people, both men and women.[18]

The gradual emergence of the idea of 'laity-clergy' forms the second stage which can be discerned in the third century reaching its full realization in the twelfth century. Though from some indeterminable point in the second century there slowly developed distinctions between clergy and laity, the situation became complicated in the third century by the emergence of a third group, the monks. Although one could distinguish clerics (indicating a function) from monks (a state of life), the differences began to slowly vanish. Congar[19] points out that in the Western church monks came to have clear liturgical roles, though this is not of the essence of the monastic life. As late as the twelfth century, one can see monks insisting on the clerical titles. As a result, the Church moved from a 'triple division' of laypeople, clerics, and monks to 'a double division into men of religion and men of the world.' The following period witnesses the intrusion of the elements of hierarchicalism into the Church, as a result of which the clerical hierarchy claimed superiority and the laity were pushed to the periphery. Since the mission and missionary endeavours turned out to be the privilege of the hierarchy, the lay people then did not

have officially any mission in the Church. Praying, paying and obeying became the role of the laity and consequently they became the passive members of the Church vis-à-vis mission.[20]

We have to thank Vatican II for the new life and impetus that have been brought into the church of our times. R. Brown suggests, "... we Roman Catholics need to recover for our people 1 Peter's sense of priestly dignity and spiritual sacrifices, precisely as a way of underlining the status conferred on all Christians.... Most catholic laity is completely ignorant that the term priesthood is applicable to them."[21] Moreover, the laity is to realize that "by the grace and call of baptism, and confirmation, all lay people are missionaries and the arena of their missionary work is the vast and complex world of politics, economics, industry, education, media, science, technology and the arts and sport" (EA 45). Such an awareness and conscientization will bring about an upsurge of lay ministries and services and a greater involvement of the laity in the mission of the church. The future of the church depends heavily upon the greater active involvement of the laity in the church and their sense of belongingness to the church (they belong to the church and the church belongs to them).

Conclusion

Our brief survey of the history of the New Testament era and that of the first century early Christian community has shown that it is the lay people who contributed exceptionally to the spreading of the gospel and the establishment and maintenance of the churches, at least in the beginning stages. The lay persons whom we have identified in this article as deeply committed to the cause of the Gospel stand as examples for the lay people of our times to continue the same rich tradition of being active evangelizers in our modern society. Though the laity played an important role as

evangelizers, in the course of Church history the credit has been given to the clerics. It is high time that the institutionalized Church acknowledges this fact. The Church should also pick up the spirit of Jesus and Paul and create space for the laity to play its appropriate evangelizing role.

(Endnotes)

[1] W. J. Rademacher, Lay Ministry: *A Theological, Spiritual, and Pastoral Handbook* (Middlegreen, UK, 1991) 13.

[2] Ibid., 47.

[3] Ibid., 21.

[4] Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MI, 1976) 19.

[5] This passage is traditionally titled as "the Institution of the First Deacons." But the word 'deacon' does not appear in the text. If Luke had intended to describe the institution of deacons, he would certainly have used 'deacons,' the more technical term. In his Gospel, Luke is very precise in describing the institution of the Twelve, "whom he named apostles" (Lk 6, 13). But here we find the names and their function (marked by the verb *'diakonein'* - "to serve," or "to minister" or "to wait at table). See Rademacher, 35.

[6] Ibid., 47.

[7] See, E. B. Redlich, *St. Paul and his Companions* (London 1913) 200-286.

[8] See, E. E. Ellis, "Paul and his Co-workers," NTS 17 (1971): 437-452.

[9] See also Aloysius Xavier, "Lay leadership in Pauline Communities," *Vaiharai*, vol. 8, No. 3 (September 2003):18-26 and Thomas Manjaly, *Collaborative Ministry. An Exegetical and Theological Study of Synergos in Paul* (Bangalore, 2001).

[10] For a detailed discussion on the service of this couple, see P. A. Sampathkumar, "Aquila and Priscilla: A Family at the Service," *Indian Theological Studies*, vol. 34, No. 1,2,3 (March-September 1997): 185-201.

[11] Ibid., 199.

[12] A. Jaubert, "Les epitres de Paul: Le fait communautaire," in *Le minstere et les ministeres selon le Nouveau Testament*, J. Delorme (ed.) (Paris 1973), 24, as cited in P. Sampathkumar, 194.

[13] See, Beyer, "διακονέω, διακονία, διάκονος" in *TDNT* 2, 84-85.

[14] See, Ellis, 441-442.

[15] J. D. G. Dunn, Romans 9-16, WBC 38B (Dalls-Texas, 1988) 887. The term *diakonos* could be understood simply in terms of a regular pattern of service undertaken by Phoebe on behalf of her local church; but this would probably have been expressed by use of *diakoneô* or *diakonia*. But *diakonos* together with ousa points more to a recognized ministry or position of responsibility within the congregation. Ibid., 886-887.

[16] Thomas Manjaly, 339.

[17] See Paul Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Chruch* (New York-London, 2003) 7-13.

[18] One finds the mention of bishops, elders and others only in the Pastoral Epistles which are of later origin.

[19] See Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (Westminster, 1965) 9.

[20] See, K. T. Sebastian, "Lay leadership in the Church and in the World," *Word and Worship*, vol. 34, Nos. 5&6 (Jul-Aug & Sept-Oct 2001): 155-156.

[21] R. E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York 1984) 81.