

# **The Role of Presbyter and the Mission of Laity in India Today\***

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## **Introduction**

The emergence of the laity is one of the most noteworthy features of the post Vat. II ecclesial scene. For long considered as dormant and treated as docile the laity today have become quite awakened and assertive. They have started claiming their due place in the Church in general and their own communities in particular as well as their Christ given rights and responsibilities as co-disciples and equal partners in the Church's mission.

The rise of the laity is evident not only in the Churches in the Western countries but also in the Afro-Asian and South American continents and especially in the subcontinent India. After the II Vat. council the Churches in the Western countries witnessed a significant decline in the number of priests due to the exodus of many from priestly ministry and the reduction in the number of young men who opted for priesthood. This crisis situation opened the way for a large number of lay men and women to come forward and take up ministries earlier performed exclusively by priests. Even in the Afro-Asian countries which have been blessed with

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an abundance of vocations to priesthood and religious life, responding to the urgent need for more and newer ministries, so many members of the laity have volunteered to take up on a full or part time basis many ministries such as that of catechists, evangelizers, directors of religious education, organizers of prayer or charismatic groups, coordinators or leaders of BCCs, secretaries of various commissions related to pastoral ministry at the parish and diocesan levels.

This emergence of the laity has been welcomed by many as the long overdue 'coming to age' of the laity and "a sign of hope for the Church in the third millennium".<sup>1</sup> It is a manifestation of the working of the Holy Spirit who never fails to provide the Church with ever newer graces and gifts to meet the challenges of the times. The Church leadership also, both at the universal and local levels, has in recent times, encouraged their greater participation in its life and mission by articulating a more solid theological basis for it as well as providing greater scope for it in the liturgy and participatory structures of Church governance. What is of even greater significance is the admission of laity to a couple of ministries hitherto reserved only to the clerics and leaving the door open for the establishment of more lay ministries.<sup>2</sup>

However, these developments have not evoked great enthusiasm in some quarters. On the one hand, there are quiet a few, especially among the committed laity, who consider these measures as only half hearted and inadequate. Some of them, while

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<sup>1</sup> Kuncheria Pathil, "Theology of the Role of the Laity in Vatican II," *Canonical Studies*, Sept. 1996, 34.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Ministeria Quaedam: Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio by which the Discipline of First Tonsure, Minor Orders, and Subdiaconate in the Latin Church Is Reformed*, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co. 1976), 727-8.

still remaining within and faithful to the Church, call for an enlarged, and even equal, role for the laity in all areas of Church's life and mission. But some others, failing to find in the Church adequate scope for their active ministerial roles and leadership, have voted with their feet and have joined the neo-Pentecostal Churches. Even within the Roman Catholic Church there are many full-time lay ministers who feel, not always without justification, that they are treated as second class ministers who are accorded less respect, privileges and financial support compared to the ordained ministers and resent their domineering attitude in many cases.

On the part of the ordained ministers also, despite the more prevalent attitude of welcoming lay participation, it is not uncommon that the assertive laity are bypassed, lay leadership is resented, and lay ministers are seen as intruders. Overall, the assumption by the laity of many roles previously carried out by the clergy, has also caused many ordained ministers to feel that their unique identity is called into question.<sup>3</sup> Such a feeling of threat has also given rise to the oft repeated caution against the 'clericalization of the laity and the laicization of the clergy'

In the context of such ambivalent reactions to the emergence of the laity we need to carefully examine it so that we can discern "what the Spirit is saying to the Churches" (Rev 3:22) in and through this sign of the times. In order to do so we need to study it as well as the Christian sources in a mutually critical manner. Such a study would mean that we critically examine this new development in the light of the Bible and tradition as well as reinterpret them in the background of it. To do so, I would like to present first in a very brief manner the pre-Vat. II monopolistic understanding of ministry

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Wood, "Introduction: The Collegeville Ministry Seminar," in *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood*, ed. Susan Wood (Collegeville, MN. Liturgical press, 2003), ix.

in the Church. For, though a lot of new theological insights have been brought to the fore today, some of which are even reflected in the Church's magisterial documents, the mindset of many of us as well as the structures of ministry can be described as reflecting to a large extent only the pre Vat. II theology. Secondly, I proceed to briefly expose the teaching of Vat. II with regard to mission of the laity in the Church. In both the sections the relevant canons of the 1917 and 1983 codes of the Canon Law will also be briefly pointed out. In the third section I seek to elaborate the main Christological, ecclesiological and sacramentological bases on which a sound theology of the laity has been built up by contemporary theologians. And finally I will be suggesting some concrete steps for the greater empowerment of the laity.

## **1. Ministry as Clerical Monopoly**

The understanding and practice of ministry that prevailed in the Catholic Church during the pre-Vat. II period can be described as 'monopolistic'. Ministry at that time was too closely, or rather exclusively, identified with the sacrament of the Holy Orders. Though there were a variety of ministries such as sub-diaconate and the minor orders of portor, lector, exorcist and acolyte they were so little practiced and had shrunk in their significance. They had been, for all practical purposes, reduced to mostly mere rituals whose reception was nothing more than a pre-condition to entry into Holy Orders. Thus, in practice it is only the bishops, priests and deacons who were ministers in the Church. Because of the reception of the Holy Orders they alone were regarded in the Church as having the power to perform the threefold functions of Christ - teaching, sanctifying and governing. All the others in the Church, lacking such a sacred power, had no claim to ministry but had only a passive role as beneficiaries of the ministries of the

bishops, presbyters and deacons. Thus, the Church was understood as consisting of two parts – the teaching, sanctifying and the governing Church and the Church that was taught, sanctified and governed.

Such a dualistic understanding of Church membership and ministry had been built on the medieval theology of the Church and the sacrament of the Holy Orders. Medieval ecclesiology, especially as articulated by St. Robert Bellarmine, viewed the Church as the perfect society on earth which reflected the perfect society in heaven. Consisting of God, angels and saints the perfect society in heaven is naturally a pyramidally structured hierarchical society.<sup>4</sup> Modelled on it, the Church also is a hierarchical society in which the fullness of power resides with the Pope and is shared with the bishops, presbyters and deacons in decreasing degrees. As the heavenly hierarchy is constituted by God the creator at the top and angels and saints who are creatures at lower rungs, so the ecclesiastical pyramid is also composed of two essentially distinct groups – the clergy who had sacred power and the laity who did not have it. Giving unambiguous expression to this traditional view of the Church Pope Pius X speaks of it as an “unequal society” comprising of two ranks – the clergy and the laity.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the mission of the Church, entrusted exclusively to the clergy, was understood to a large extent as internal, i.e. as directed to the sanctification of the laity. Evangelization was reserved to mostly missionary religious congregations and the laity had no role in it.

The medieval theology of the Holy Orders also reinforced the essential difference between the clergy and the laity. Holy

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<sup>4</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church: A Critical Assessment of the Church in All its Aspects* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1974), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Pius X, *Vehementer Nos*, in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. Claudia Carlen (New York: McGrath, 1981), 3:47-48.

Orders was seen to bring about in the recipients a unique ontological configuration with Jesus the High Priest whereby the presbyters and deacons became sacred persons invested with sacred power.<sup>6</sup> Because of this configuration and the consequent endowment of sacred power they alone could act as '*alter Christi*' and are authorized to perform the three-fold ministry of preaching his word, performing his sacraments and administering his people.

The Code of Canon Law of 1917 also tellingly illustrates the second class status of the laity in the Church. In the book titled *laity*, it had two general canons: the first one speaks of the 'right' of the laity to receive spiritual goods from the Church and the second disallowed the laity from wearing clerical dress (CC. 682-3).<sup>7</sup> Overall, according to the Code of 1917 it is the clergy who dispensed the sacraments, guidance and other means of grace and the laity had just to receive them. What is strikingly missing in the Code is a theology of baptism that articulates the sharing of all the faithful in the priesthood of Christ and the Church's mission as a common call and a collaborative task.

The pre-Vat. II theology and Canon Law did confer a very strong identity to the priest. But as Susan Wood points out, "unfortunately, it also contributed to the impoverishment of the identity of all the baptized as full participants in the life of the Body of Christ. It prevented the baptized from living out their full responsibility to minister in the Church".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Keenan Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 264ff.

<sup>7</sup> Stanislaus Waywood, *A Practical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York: Joseph Wagner, 1952), 342.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Wood, "Introduction," vii.

## 2. Equal in Dignity and Responsibility

Already during the decades proceeding Vat. II, some theologians had started questioning the prevalent view about the Church as a hierarchical institution in which the laity had only an unequal and secondary status.<sup>9</sup> However, it is Vat. II which decisively brought the laity to the forefront of the Church's life and mission. The Council's teaching on the laity is based on the ecclesiology of communion, which as acknowledged by the Extraordinary Synod of 1985 and Pope John Paul II himself (*Christifideles Laici* 19),<sup>10</sup> is one of the most fundamental contributions of the Council. Along with it, the Council's mission ecclesiology also significantly shaped its theology of the laity.

Vat. II's decision to place the chapter on the people of God before the one on the hierarchy signaled a profound shift in the self understanding of the Church. It came to view itself primarily not as a hierarchical institution but as the community of the people of God who by their union with Christ share in the life of the Trinity (*Church* 4). Through faith and baptism they become united with Christ as well as with the other members of his body, the Church, and thereby constituting a communion. This communion with Christ and one another is supremely symbolized and realized in the eucharist. "In the sacrament of the Eucharistic bread, the unity of believers, who form one body in Christ, is both expressed and achieved" (*Church* 3).

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<sup>9</sup> The most noteworthy among them is Yves Congar. His book, *Lay People in the Church* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1967), first published in French in 1953, was the pioneering work on the theology of the laity and exercised a profound influence in the deliberations of Vat. II on the laity.

<sup>10</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World* (Boston: St. Paul's), 45-46.

This essentially communitarian nature of the Church is intimately linked to its missionary vocation. That is why Vat. II clearly affirms that the communion of the Church is not mere fellowship but a union "in fellowship and ministry" (*Church 4*). It is, in fact, a fellowship for ministry. The missionary vocation of the Church is not something secondary to its life and work, but is its very *raison d'etre*.<sup>11</sup> The Church is gathered together by the Word and the Spirit to fulfill the mission of giving the Father's love and life to the world. Thus, the Church's mission is not merely inwardly directed, i.e. towards the sanctification of its members, but primarily directed to the world outside. The Church exists for the world and it is sent out to transform the world into God's reign. And this mission is entrusted to all the baptized (*Missionary Activity 5*).

It is in this ecclesiology of communion and mission that Vat. II finds a solid basis to articulate a new theology of the laity and the common matrix to affirm the fundamental equality of all the followers of Jesus in their dignity and responsibility. So, underneath all distinctions in the Church between the ordained and non-ordained, clergy and laity, men and women, all the baptized share at the most basic level the common and equal privilege of being children of the same Father, disciples of the same Christ and members of the same Church.

From this equality in dignity flows their equality in the responsibility of fulfilling the mission of the Church. Mission being an essential characteristic and constitutive dimension of the Church, it is not an elitist call reserved to only some. But rather all the members participate in it equally though not all in the same manner. So, their functions may be different in the Church. But their responsibility towards the growth of God's reign is nonetheless

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Guillardetz, "Ecclesial Foundations of Ministry in an Ordered Communion," in *Ordering Baptismal Priesthood*, 29.

equal. That is why Vat.II categorically affirms that, "Although by Christ's will some are established as teachers, dispensers of the mysteries and pastors for the others, there remains, nevertheless, a true equality between all with regard to the dignity and to the activity which is common to all the faithful in the building up of the body of Christ" (*Church 32*).

Along with this equality in dignity and mission comes that of the call to holiness. This equality is further reinforced by the council's unequivocal affirmation of the baptismal priesthood or the priesthood of all believers. According to the council, not only the ordained ministers but also all the faithful participate in the one priesthood of Christ though in essentially different ways (*Church 10*). Because of the priority and more fundamental nature of the baptismal unity, their differences are complementary and oriented to the common mission. Along with the priestly function, all the baptized participate also in the prophetic and kingly functions of Christ (*Church 31*). This participation in the three-fold function of Christ and the call to the exercise of these functions is given to them directly by the Lord himself and it does not depend on the will and pleasure of any ecclesiastical authority. "From the fact of their union with Christ the head flows the laymen's right and duty to be apostles. Instead, as they are in the Mystical Body of Christ by baptism and... confirmation, it is by the Lord himself that they are assigned to the apostolate" (*Lay People 3*).

It is in this background of the priesthood of all believers and their full and equal participation in the life and mission of the Church that Vat. II presents its theology of charisms. According to its teachings, charisms are not private gifts meant merely for personal sanctification of the individuals, but are given primarily to carry out the mission of the Church. "Allotting his gift according as he wills (cf. 1 Cor 12:11) he (the Holy Spirit) also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes

them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for renewal and building up of the Church (*Church* 12).

Though the mission of Christ is entrusted to the entire Church involving all its members, Vat. II speaks of "the secular character (as)... proper and peculiar to the laity" (*Church* 31). It is the permeation and transformation of the temporal order, i.e. the socio-economic-political and cultural spheres, with the spirit of the Gospel that is considered as the specific task of the laity. Vat. II's repeated reference to the laity being 'in the world' does give the impression that their role is restricted to the secular order and all the ministerial roles in the sacred order, i.e. the Church, are the exclusive privilege of the clergy.<sup>12</sup> But Vat. II itself has suggested the possibility of assigning some ecclesiastical ministerial roles to the laity also. "The hierarchy entrusts the laity with certain tasks more closely connected with the duties of the pastor: in the teaching of the Christian doctrine, for example, in certain liturgical actions, in the care of souls" (*Lay People* 24).

This tentative attempt to open up ecclesiastical ministerial roles to the laity was confirmed and carried further by Pope Paul VI's apostolic letter, *Ministeria Quaedam* published in 1972. It instituted two ministries or offices, those of *reader* and *acolyte*, to which lay people are also admitted. The letter broadens the scope of lay ministries further by leaving open the possibility of instituting even more. "There is nothing to prevent Episcopal conferences from requesting others of the apostolic see, if they judge the establishment of such offices in their region to be necessary or very useful because of special reasons" (*Ministeria Quaedam*).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Elissa Rinere, "Canon Law and Emerging Understanding of Ministry," in *Ordering Baptismal Priesthood*, 69.

<sup>13</sup> *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, 728.

The *Code of Canon Law* of 1983 mostly follows the teachings of Vat. II in formulating the rights and duties of the laity. It first of all acknowledges that all the faithful through baptism are incorporated into Christ and thereby are “made sharers in their own way in Christ’s priestly, prophetic and royal function (and) they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church...” (C. 204:1). Because of this common incorporation and call to mission “there exists among the faithful a true equality with regard to dignity and the activity whereby all co-ordinate in the building up of the Body of Christ” (C. 208).

Though the Code has also the tendency to maintain the Church/world division and assign the temporal order for the mission of the laity (C. 225/2), it goes far beyond Vat. II in opening up many more opportunities and creating new structures to ensure their greater participation in the life and ministry of the Church at the parochial and diocesan levels. What is most significant and noteworthy is the Code’s elaboration of the concrete ways in which the lay people can live out their participation in the prophetic, sanctifying and governing offices of Christ and his Church.

The laity can fulfill their prophetic function, apart from their life witness, by carrying out the role of catechetical instruction to the children in their own families (C. 774/2) and in the parish (C. 776). They can also be given temporary deputation to be a lector (C. 230) and called upon to preach under certain conditions (C.766). Along with the fundamental duty of evangelization that all people have by way of their life of witnessing and communicating the Gospel (C. 781), some of them may also become missionaries (C. 784) or trained catechists (C. 785).

As for the sanctifying office, they carry it out when they function as extraordinary ministers of baptism and eucharist as well as by being the ministers at their own marriages. They may

also be delegated, with due permission of the Holy See, to serve in marriages as official witnesses. They may also be called upon to serve as ministers of sacramentals, such as the distribution of Ashes on Ash Wednesday.

Laity's participation in the Church's office of governance can be exercised by their membership in the parish pastoral and finance councils (CC 536, 7), diocesan pastoral and finance councils (CC. 511-4, 492) and the diocesan Synod (C. 463/5). They can also serve as a judge in a collegiate tribunal (C. 1421/2) advocates (C. 1481), assessors (C. 1424), auditors (C. 1428), relators (C. 1429), promoter of justice and defender of the bond (C. 1435) and notaries (C. 1437). Lay persons can also be appointed as diocesan chancellor or vice chancellor (C. 482), financial administrator (C. 494) and notary (C. 485).<sup>14</sup>

Despite making available to the laity many ecclesial ministries and offices in such an unprecedented manner the new Code seems to also make admission to them too heavily conditioned, qualified, institutionally circumscribed and hierarchically controlled. Besides, as archbishop Anandarayar has pointed out, "the laity are included in the ministries more from a sense of absence or non-availability of the clergy rather than from consequence of a theologically grounded sense of vocation and ministry in the Church..."<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Towards a Contemporary Theology of the Laity

Recent theological trends, particularly in Christology, ecclesiology and sacramentology of baptism, confirmation and Holy

<sup>14</sup> Anandarayar, "Participation of the Laity in the Governing, Teaching and Sanctifying Office of the Church," *Canonical Studies*, Sept. 1996, 40-41.

<sup>15</sup> Bishop Antony Anandarayar, "The Role of the Laity in the New Millennium," *Canonical Studies*, Oct. 2000, 22.

Orders favour a much greater role of the laity in the Church. They not only call for the equality of the laity in the Church's life and ministries but also suggest that their responsibilities and roles be given primacy in the Church's mission to the world.

### **Radical Novelty of Jesus' Priesthood<sup>16</sup>**

Recent Christologies well point out that the ministry of Jesus was significantly different from that of the priests of Judaism. First of all, in the eyes of his contemporary Jews, Jesus was not a priest but only a layperson. For, he lacked the most essential credential of a Jewish priest which is the birth from a priestly family belonging to the tribe of Levi. Nor did he ever assume the role of a Jewish priest, much less the high priest.<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the New Testament books never speak of him as making any offering or sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple.

In fact, his ministry did not revolve around the Jerusalem temple nor the synagogues. Occasionally we find him preaching in the temple precincts as well as in the synagogues. But most of his ministry was done in the streets, houses, fields and shores of the lake of Galilee. It was primarily a ministry of establishing kingdom communities of love, justice and peace. Even his death, later interpreted in the letter to the Hebrews as the final and supreme sacrifice, took place on a hillock outside the city walls of Jerusalem.

All this clearly points out that Jesus' ministry was more akin to that of the prophets of Judaism than its priests. In fact, Jesus'

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<sup>16</sup> The following three sections are taken, with some additions and modifications, from D. Alphonse, "Presbyter as Coordinator of Ministries," in *The Church in India in the Emerging Third Millennium* ed. Thomas D'Sa (Bangalore: NBCLC 2005), 334-335.

<sup>17</sup> J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. I: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday 1995), 345-349.

ministry was not only very different from that of the temple priests but also, in many of its aspects, ran counter to it. This is borne out by the fact that he relativized the temple cult by giving priority to brotherly reconciliation and to compassion than to making offerings and sacrifices in the temple. Further, though he cleanses the temple out of zeal for his father's house (Jn. 2:13-17), he does not hesitate to prophesize against it predicting its destruction (Mk. 13:1-4). He goes further and gives out a prophetic call to even destroy it promising to build up a new temple (Jn. 2:19). The new temple that he promised to raise was not another material edifice in which the Judaic sacrificial system would be continued but rather the body of the community of his disciples united with him and with one another through the bond of brotherly love and compassion and of commitment to justice and peace which is the sacrifice of praise more acceptable to the Father.

An element of the radical novelty of the priesthood of Jesus, therefore, is its world transforming character.<sup>18</sup> It was not closely identified with the cultic function, as the Catholic priesthood has often come to be. His was the liturgy of life celebrated in the streets and public places of Palestinian villages where he carried out his Kingdom ministry which culminated in his total self-offering of death on the cross. It is through this Kingdom ministry of transforming society into God's own household with all its socio-political-economic-cultural-religious dimensions that Jesus exercised his priestly ministry.

This is the reason why the New Testament writers avoid speaking of Jesus as a priest and his ministry in cultic terms. Even the letter to the Hebrews, though it draws parallels to Jesus' ministry

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999, re.ed.), 165.

from the Jewish priesthood, temple and sacrifice, gives a new definition of Jesus' priesthood in terms, not of any temple sacrifice, but of his sacrificial life of self-surrender to the Father's will in the ministry of bringing to people the fullness of life and liberty of the children of God climaxing in his death. "... 'you have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings' (these are offered according the laws), then he added, 'see, I have come to do your will.' He abolishes the first in order to establish the second" (Heb 10:8-9).

What follows from such Christological findings is that no Christian ministry, including the presbyterate, can be exclusively identified with mere performance of cult. All Christian ministries are only different ways and forms of carrying out Jesus' own Kingdom ministry of world transforming praxis, which he exercised as bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed and proclaiming the year of the Lord's jubilee (Lk 4:18-19). The liturgical cult and performance of sacraments are never a substitute for such Kingdom ministry, but are means and motivations to it. Ritual actions have meaning and relevance as they symbolically realize it and make available divine grace to pursue it in everyday life.

### **Church as Community of Ministers**

The vocation to such Kingdom ministry is given to all the followers of Jesus and it certainly can not be considered as the privilege of the small group which makes up the hierarchy of the Church. Since it is such a call which constitutes the very essence of Christian discipleship all the members of the Church have an inalienable right and duty to respond to it. This is to be seen in the life of historical Jesus himself. Apart from the twelve, he not only had some women disciples (Lk 8:1-3) and called and sent out the seventy two disciples (Lk 10:1-12), but also many others. The

clearest example is that of the Gerasene demoniac who after being healed by Jesus begged to follow him. But Jesus' reply to him was that he should return home and proclaim the Lord's mercy to his friends (Mk 5:19). We find also the Samaritan woman doing the same (Jn 4:28-30). A similar command is also given to Mary Magdalene who, as the first witness to Jesus' resurrection, is asked to go and announce the good news to the other disciples.

In fact, it is not to some select few that Jesus entrusts the task of continuing his ministry, but rather he envisages all his followers to constitute a ministering community. That is why he calls out to the entire community of his followers to be the salt of the earth, light of the world, city built on a hill (Mt 5:13-16) and the yeast that leavens all of the flour with which it is mixed (Mt 13:33).

The ministry of St. Paul is also a clear example of being non-exclusive. Instead of making any monopolistic claim to all ministry on the basis of his call by the risen Lord to be his apostle, Paul enlisted and enabled many others, men and women, to exercise the Lord's ministry. One has to just look at chapter sixteen of Paul's Letter to the Romans for a long list of men and women who carried out various ministries according to their abilities and charisms.

In the Churches founded or ministered to by Paul there were a variety of ministries (1 Cor 12:4-11; Eph 4:11). In fact, Paul seems to have encouraged every one in his communities to perform ministries each according to the charism he or she has received from the Spirit. Though Paul speaks of spiritual gifts as the foundation of such ministries (1 Cor 12:1) we are not to understand them as only associated with the cultic gatherings of the community. Such ministries could also be very secular. This is borne out by the institution of the ministry of diaconate in the post - Easter community "to wait on tables" (Acts 6:2). Undoubtedly one of the

factors that in no small part contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity in the first three centuries was the realization by all the believers that to be a Christian is to be a minister of Jesus' good news according to the needs of the context and the charism of each one.

According to contemporary sacramentology, the primary sacrament of Christian ministry is not Holy orders, but Baptism and confirmation. They confer on each Christian a full share in the ministry of Jesus Christ which, of course, each one has to carry out according to the exigencies of the context and one's charism. For, as the presbyters are configured to Christ the priest through the sacramental character of the Holy Orders, so are all the believers configured to him in a even more fundamental way through the character conferred by baptism and confirmation.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the rites of both Baptism and Confirmation contain anointings on the head that are clearly indicative of ordination to ministry. The verbal formula of the second anointing at Baptism is quite explicit about it: "God, the father... now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed priest, prophet and King, so may you live always..."<sup>20</sup> Pope John Paul has also explicitly acknowledged that the lay ministries flow from baptism, confirmation and even matrimony: "The ministries, offices and roles of the lay faithful... find their foundation in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, indeed, for a good many of them, in the sacrament of matrimony" (*Christifideles Laici* 23). What is unfortunate is that due to the vicissitudes of history not only the term ministry came to be identified only with the clerical orders

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<sup>19</sup> According to Thomas Aquinas, the sacramental Characters "are nothing else than certain participation in Christ's priesthood" and so all Christians, through baptism and confirmation, "put on Christ, through being configured to him by the character" (*Summa Theologiae* Pt III, q 63, a.3 & q 69, a 9).

<sup>20</sup> *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, 101.

but also all ministries became their monopoly. But as Yves Congar rightly points out, "The Church of God is not built up solely by the actions of the official presbyteral ministry but by a multitude of diverse modes of service... They exist now, but up to now were not called by their true name, ministry, nor were their place and status in ecclesiology recognized".<sup>21</sup>

The contextual exigencies of the Church in India today also demand that the charisms and resources of all its members are put at the service of its mission of establishing the reign of God. Faced with the multitudinous challenges of extreme and widespread poverty aggravated by the process of globalization, the increasing number of people who go without even elementary education and medical care, the political system that deprives vast sections of the population of their right to have an effective say in the vital decision making processes and breed corruption, social systems that leave untouched the entrenched caste and gender discriminations, the cultural decadence accelerated by the mass media, the rising tide of religious fundamentalism that periodically disrupts the communal harmony and unleashes forces of hate and violence, the Church's mission cannot be effectively carried out by the ministry of the clergy alone, however numerous and well-trained they may be. And God has blessed the Indian Church with so many laypeople who possess such a variety of skills and scholarship and who are occupying key positions in diverse areas managing their responsibilities with great competence. The deep divide between their professional life and commitment to the Gospel needs to be urgently bridged.<sup>22</sup> Without making them aware of

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<sup>21</sup> Yves Congar as cited in Thomas O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, 163.

<sup>22</sup> Indian Theological Association, *Layty in the Church: Identity and Mission in India Today – Final Statement of Twenty-Ninth Annual Meeting – April 22-26, 2006* (Bangalore: Vidya Deep, 2006), 8-9.

their role and participation in its mission, the Indian Church would certainly remain much impoverished.

### **Presbyter as Coordinator of Ministries**

If, as Thomas O'Meara rightly points out, "Ministry has moved from being the vocation for the few to being a gift and work of many, a facet of baptismal life,"<sup>23</sup> the question arises as to what exactly is the specific nature and function of presbyteral ministry. And a variety of responses to the question have been put forward by various theologians and the magisterial documents.<sup>24</sup>

However, any right interpretation of the specific nature of the presbyteral ministry should in no way negate or eclipse the ministerial character of the entire Christian community, but should rather be deeply anchored in it and enhance it. For, as James Whitehead forcefully asserts, "Ordained leaders are priests not because others are not, they are priests in order to call others to their priestliness. The ordained ought not absorb all the priestliness in a community; their own sacramental ministry should reflect on to others, making priestliness more abundant."<sup>25</sup>

And, therefore, (the specificity of the presbyteral ministry has to be sought in its function of inspiring or recognizing and promoting a plurality of ministries carried out by all, each according to his/her God-given capacity and the community's need.) As such the presbyterate is not a super-ministry but an auxiliary ministry vis a vis the ministries of all the baptized. For as L. Milch points out, "The orders of ministry exist within the Church to support the rest of the community in carrying out the wider ministry of the

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> For a summary treatment of their proposals see Daniel Danovan, *What Are They Saying About the Ministerial Priesthood?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> J. Whitehead, "Priestliness: A Crisis of Belonging," in *Being a Priest Today*, ed. D. Goergen (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 26.

Church."<sup>26</sup> Thus the specific function of presbyteral ministry may be described as coordination of all the community's ministries. Hans Küng has already suggested it. For according to him, "It is placed among a multiplicity of diverse functions and charisms; its task is to stimulate, coordinate and integrate; it serves the communities and other ministries."<sup>27</sup>

(The presbyteral ministry of coordinating the other ministries of the community involves many sub-functions. Discerning and fostering the charisms of the community members, promoting their ministries by encouraging them to take up or entrusting them with appropriate ministries, regulating and coordinating their ministries removing gaps and overlaps, resolving conflicts etc.) It is in fulfilling this function of coordination that the presbyter exercises in his own unique way the threefold ministry of Jesus. For, above all it is by his prophetic function of officially proclaiming the word of God and the priestly function of celebrating the sacraments, especially the eucharist, in which he supereminently symbolizes Christ the High Priest and the pastoral function of leading, organizing and regulating that the presbyter calls and holds together the believers as a community as well as stimulates, sustains and coordinates their diverse ministries. In the performance of such functions, he acts officially in the name of the community as well as in the name of Christ. Thus the presbyteral ministry only serves the more basic and primal baptismal ministries of all the community members and should not in any way substitute or supercede them. The presbyter is, therefore, (not a lonely hero who is 'set apart' from and superior to the other members of the community, but one of them who does the ministry of coordination in collaboration with them.) Thus, a

<sup>26</sup> L. Milch, *Understanding the Sacraments Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987), 140-1.

<sup>27</sup> H. Küng, *Why Priests?* (London: Collins, 1972), 61.

community with the presbyter as the coordinator will have a whole variety of ministries ordained and non-ordained, installed and not installed, part time and full time, official and private, paid and voluntary. The presbyteral ministry will unfold itself only as the service of actualizing, energizing, harmonizing and celebrating the ministries of everyone in the community.

Thus, the prophetic function of the presbyter has value and validity in that it contributes to the making of the other members of the community to exercise their own prophetic function both in the church and the society at large. His priestly function as president at the liturgy is best carried out when all the members of the congregation are enabled to participate fully by assuming as many active roles as possible each according to his God-given ability and to offer their entire life as a spiritual sacrifice of praise. His function as the pastor is fully fruitful when it makes a kenosis of all tendencies of domination, control, seeking for honour, privileges and first places, clinging to institutional headship and the management of money and dedicates himself to the promotion of the active leadership of every one in the community as well as in the various fields of the civil society.

#### **4. Some Urgent Measures**

In recent years there has been a lot of talk and quite a few decisions made at the national and various regional and diocesan levels on steps to be taken to empower the laity and ensure their fuller participation. Some laudable measures have also been already taken such as the establishment of the CCBI commission for the laity as well as such commissions and training centers in some regions and dioceses. Some regions have also the creditable record of placing trained lay catechists in various positions of pastoral

responsibility at the parish and diocesan levels as well as installing lay ministers such as lector, acolyte, ministers of the sick and justice. Some dioceses have also appointed lay men and women as secretaries to the various commissions of pastoral ministry. However, such measures are in general few and far between. What is sader is that even the canonically mandated participatory structures with the provision for lay participation have not been established in many dioceses and parishes. So the following steps need to be urgently implemented if our talk of the promotion of the laity is really serious:

1. The directives given and the possibilities opened up for the greater participation of the laity by Vat. II and the *New Code of Canon Law* need to be fully implemented not only with a due sense of urgency and enthusiasm but also within a set time frame of 2 to 5 years.

2. The laity's greater role in the life and mission of the Church be ensured on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity. That is, whatever could be done by the laity should be entrusted to them (e.g. financial administration, school management, secretaryship of diocesan commissions, directorship and editorship of all Catholic media).

3. The sense of vocation needs to be instilled in the minds of the laypeople so that each one of them becomes convinced that he/she has been given, according to one's charism, a share in the Church's mission of establishing God's reign in the different areas of ecclesiastical and public life. In this regard the scope of the Vocation Sunday and vocation camps should be enlarged to focus primarily on the vocation of the laity.

4. Formative programmes of various durations and focuses for promoting lay leadership and capacity building should be launched at the parish, diocesan and regional levels so that each

layperson feels empowered to fulfill his vocation in the Church as well as in the different spheres of public life.

5. Apart from opening our theological institutes to a larger number of lay people and making adequate number of scholarships available to them so that they can follow the regular graduate and post graduated studies, a one year theological-pastoral formation programme specifically oriented to the laity, should also be offered to the laity in such or separate institutes.

6. Steps need to be taken to restructure the formation of the seminarians so that they cultivate a proper attitude and ability to regard the laity as brothers and sisters and equal partners in ministry, recognize and respect their skills and competencies and to play their role as the coordinators of lay ministries. Such an attitude and ability are to be treated as a pre-condition for promotion to priesthood.

7. Titles and privileges need to be avoided that give the impression that the clerics and religious are a separate and exclusive super class members in the Church.

8. A lay spirituality of Christian discipleship needs to be evolved which will properly integrate their active liturgical participation and prayer life along with their commitment to their families, local ecclesial communities (prayer groups, small Christian communities, family, catechetical, evangelizing, preaching ministries, charitable works, ministry to the sick etc.) and their involvement in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of their civil society (especially their work of promoting justice, peace, inter-religious harmony and cooperation, healthy media, human rights, cooperation with social movements etc.).