

The Role of Laity in the Indian Church

After Fifty Years of Vat. II

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The year (October 2013 - October 2014) being the jubilee year of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, it is appropriate that we thank the Lord for the gift of Pope John XXIII who convened the Second Vatican Council. We also thank God for the Council itself, as it brought about a total renewal of the Church in various ways. More importantly we could take this jubilee period for reflecting on how the renewal of the Church set by Vat. II has been received in the Church in India during the past fifty years with reference to the theme of the Laity. For this, first the teachings of Vatican II need to be brought to bear upon the expected role of laity in the Church. So Part 1 of this article gleans the vision of laity as projected in Vat. II. Next the actual state of affairs regarding the laity is presented. This is done mainly with the help of some evaluative studies already made. The assessment reveals that the factual does not tally with the ideal. The third part therefore attempts to probe the challenges that caused the crisis. The fourth and final part hopes to suggest some remedial measures.

1. THE TEACHINGS OF VAT. II ON THE LAITY

Obviously the central theme of the Second Vatican Council was Renewal of the Church in all respects. So the Council's attempt was mainly to revamp the traditional understanding of the Church in the light of its sources and get an authentic picture of her own identity and mission today. It is important firstly to set forth the vision of the Church as discovered by the Council and unravel its implications on the laity.

1.1. The Ecclesial Vision of the Vat. II

As against former view that the Church was a 'mega organization', a 'hierarchical institution', or a 'bloc of people' membership of which gives you ticket to salvation, Vat. II emphasized such dimensions of the Church as 'Mystery', 'Sacrament', 'Mystical Body of Christ' 'People of God', and 'Communion'. Of these descriptions the two last mentioned are most prominent. They are also most pertinent for the consideration of the theme of the given topic.

(a) The Church as People of God

By re-claiming this biblical term to describe the Church (cf. I Pet. 2:9; Eph. 4:5), the Council proposes a participatory approach in the life of the Church. In the former view of the Church laity were considered as the passive, powerless and voiceless lot who were at lowest rung of a hierarchical structure. As against it, the Council now acknowledges that all the members (the laity, clergy and religious alike) are "God's own people", all participating directly in the life of God in Christ and through the Spirit. "All the members ought to be molded in the likeness of Him, until Christ be formed in them" (LG 7). Further the document acknowledges "that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity... In this way, the holiness of the People of God

will grow into an abundant harvest of good, as is admirably shown by the life of so many saints in Church history (LG 40).

It is significant to note that the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* made a deliberate decision to place 'People of God' as Chapter 2, immediately after Chapter 1 on 'The Mystery of the Church' and not to follow the preparatory draft in which the 'Hierarchical Structure of the Church' was to follow the mystery of the Church. The question was not simply the order of chapters but of accepting a paradigm shift. The bishops with old ecclesiology and its mentality, wanted to retain the original draft. As opposed to it, the bishops with the new ecclesiology and its mentality wanted 'People of God' to proceed the chapter on hierarchy. It was indeed after a long and bitter struggle that the Council finally settled in favour of the new ecclesiology. The present form was overwhelmingly approved by a vote of 2,151 bishops in favour, and only five negative.²

In fact the vision of the Church projected in the *Lumen Gentium* is indeed the earliest ecclesiology of the Christian history.³ Accordingly it decided to place 'people of God' first, and then only to deal with hierarchy. This vision of the Church has a lot of implications for the theology of laity.

No doubt the specific chapter on laity follows the chapter on hierarchy. But at the very beginning of the chapter the document states: 'Everything that has been said about the People of God is intended for the laity, religious and clergy alike' (LG 30). This gives the laity rightful place as people of God along with all others: hierarchy, clergy and religious. It also confers on the laity equal dignity common to "all the members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as children, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity" (LG 32). This is directly in opposition to the hierarchical vision of the Church which will be explained in 3.1 below. Thus it was indeed paradigm shift, vindicating the words of Pope Pius XII: "The laity ought to have an ever more clear consciousness **not**

only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church - they are the Church.”⁴

(b) **Communion** was another fundamental idea the Council used to express the core Mystery of the Church, contributing to renewal of Catholic ecclesiology. Communion is a complex concept with multiple connotations. First and foremost, communion means our sharing in the same source of divine life, given to us in Christ and fostered by the Holy Spirit.⁵ This sharing in the Trinitarian mystery evidently creates solidarity and fellowship among the believers and forms them into a real *eklesia*, Assembly of God's people.⁶ So, communion meant this bond of the Church members as brothers and sisters to one another, founded on faith and Baptism⁷ and nourished in and through the Eucharist.⁸ This ecclesial communion is not to remain in a ghetto. It has to embrace the unity of all the Christian churches⁹ as well as all the believers and even non-believers through dialogue and collaboration to establish the reign of God on earth.¹⁰

Such a description of the Church as communion opens up rich possibilities for understanding the identity and mission of laity. For, it is all the faithful, the hierarchy and the laity alike that are sharing the Trinitarian mystery, getting incorporated into the body of Christ and are built up into a more intimate communion by the celebration of divine worship and establishing the harmony of life both in both ecumenical circles and in those of wider ecumenism. In other words, the same vocation and mission of Christ, the head of the Church is given to all members of the Body of Christ, an organically structured community and “brought into one by the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”(LG 4/b).

All this is brought out succinctly by Cardinal Ratzinger in the following words:

The communitarian nature of the Church necessarily entails its character as “we”. The Church is not somewhere apart from

us, it is we who constitute the Church. No one person can say “I am the Church”, but each one of us can and ought to say, “we are the Church”. This “we” does not represent an isolated group, but rather a group that exists within the entire community of all Christ’s members, living and dead. This is how a group can genuinely say: “we are the Church”. Here is the Church, in this open “we” that breaches social and political boundaries, and the boundary between heaven and earth as well. We are the Church. This gives rise to a co-responsibility and also the possibility of collaborating personally.¹¹

1.2. The Laity’s Role Directly Spelt out by Vat. II

Apart from offering a new vision of the Church, having rich implications for understanding the identity and mission of the laity, Vat. II discussed the subject of laity so extensively that it had something or other to say with reference to laity in as many as fourteen of its documents. Only in two documents¹² there is no explicit reference to laity. In addition to all those bits of references to laity, Vatican II devoted a separate document to the theme of lay apostolate, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. The contents of this document have been reinforced by Pope John Paul II in Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, almost theme after the theme.¹³ So, it may require another long paper to deal with the parallels satisfactorily. However the fundamental theological points regarding laity are clearly expounded by Vat. II in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*. For our purpose, it may be sufficient to take up those points, in conjunction with the pertinent points from the Pastoral Constitution on the Church, *Gaudium et Spes*.

a) The Role of Laity in *Lumen Gentium*:

Lumen Gentium devotes Chapter 4 to the subject of laity in 9 articles: 30 -38. If we lay bare the basic principles propounded in these articles, it will bring to light the principal characteristics of the role of laity.

1. Laity's Services & Charisms for Cooperation:

The Sacred Pastors ...also know that they were not ordained by Christ to take upon themselves alone the entire salvific mission of the Church toward the world. On the contrary... it is their noble duty to recognize their (laity's) services and charisms, so that all according to their proper roles **may cooperate in this common undertaking** with one heart. ...For from Him the whole body, being closely joined and knit together through every joint of the system, according to the functioning in due measure of each single part, derives its increase to the building up of itself in love" (LG 30).

2. Participation in Christ's Triple Functions through their Specific Call:

These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made **sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions** of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world. A secular quality is proper and special to them...By their vocation they seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God (LG 31).

3. Basic Equality:

Therefore, the chosen People of God is one: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism,"(Eph.4:5) sharing a common dignity as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to

perfection; possessing in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity.... And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ (LG 32).

4. Mission Specific to the Laity:

The laity are gathered together in the People of God and make up the Body of Christ under one head...are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth (LG 33).

5. The Priestly Role of the Laity:

The supreme and eternal Priest... besides intimately linking them to His life and His mission, also gives them a sharing in His priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of men. For this reason ...all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne - all these become "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God (LG 34).

6. The Prophetic Role of the Laity:

Christ, the great Prophet ... continually fulfills His prophetic office...not only through the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority, but also through the laity... so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life... Consequently, even when

preoccupied with temporal cares, the laity can and must perform a work of great value for the evangelization of the world...Therefore, let the laity devotedly strive to acquire a more profound grasp of revealed truth, and let them insistently beg of God the gift of wisdom. (LG 35)

7. The Kingly Role of the Laity:

Christ, becoming obedient even unto death and because of this ...entered into the glory of His kingdom... has communicated this royal power to His disciples that they might be constituted in royal freedom and that by true penance and a holy life they might conquer the reign of sin in themselves... In this kingdom creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God... The faithful, therefore, must learn the deepest meaning and the value of all creation, as well as its role in the harmonious praise of God... The laity have the principal role in the overall fulfillment of this duty. Therefore, by their competence in secular training and by their activity, elevated from within by the grace of Christ, let them vigorously contribute their effort, so that created goods may be perfected by human labor, technical skill and civic culture for the benefit of all men according to the design of the Creator and the light of His Word. May the goods of this world be more equitably distributed among all men ...In this manner, through the members of the Church, will Christ progressively illumine the whole of human society with His saving light.

Moreover, let the laity also by their combined efforts remedy the customs and conditions of the world, if they are an inducement to sin, so that they all may be conformed to the norms of justice. ...the faithful should learn how to distinguish carefully between those rights and duties which are theirs as members of the Church, and those which they have as members of human society. Let them strive to reconcile the two, remembering that in every temporal affair they must be guided by a Christian conscience, since

even in secular business there is no human activity which can be withdrawn from God's dominion (LG 36).

8. Responsibility towards the Hierarchy

The laity ...by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, have the mission of expressing their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church. When occasions arise, this has to be done through the organs erected by the Church for this purpose. ...The laity should, as all Christians, promptly accept in Christian obedience decisions of their spiritual shepherds, since they are representatives of Christ as well as teachers and rulers in the Church.

The spiritual shepherds are to recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church by willingly imparting their prudent advice and by confidently assigning duties to them in the service of the Church, while allowing them freedom and room for action. Further, the laity are to be encouraged by the pastors to undertake tasks on their own initiative ... considering with fatherly love the projects, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity (LG 37).

9. Being a Soul to the World

Each individual layman must stand before the world as a witness to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus and a symbol of the living God. All the laity as a community and each one according to his ability must nourish the world with spiritual fruits. They must diffuse in the world that spirit which animates the poor, the meek, the peace makers – whom the Lord in the Gospel proclaimed as blessed. In a word, "Christians must be to the world what the soul is to the body (LG 38).

b) Teachings by the *Gaudium et Spes*:

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church, *Gaudium et Spes* is also relevant for comprehensive understanding of the laity's role. Especially its Chapter 2 on "The Community of Mankind", Chapter 3 on "Man's Activity throughout the World" and Chapter 4 on "The Role of the Church in the Modern World". The key point that is raised in these three chapters is that the Church should take an active part in the world because it is precisely its mission-field. Now, the Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium* has already ascribed that the 'temporal affairs' constitutes the specificity of laity's vocation. Given both these points as premises, then, it follows that whatever is said about the Church in the three chapters of *Gaudium et Spes* are applicable to the laity in a more pointed way. Only the most salient points are given here below:

1. Basic Equality of All

It is significant that *Gaudium et Spes* talks about the equality of the whole of humankind despite the rightful differences among them. If so, it is needless to draw out how much more it is applicable to the basic equality existing among Christians. The diversity of functions will be there, the rightful differences ought to exist, but the hierarchy will have to recognize the basic dignity and equality of the laity and the laity will have to realize it too, so that they will be able to contribute their mite to establishment of God's reign on earth, militating for social justice, equity and peace(GS 29).

2. Gifts to be dedicated for Service

While the Council gives recognition to different charisms and diverse gifts, it lays greater emphasis on the dedication required of all to dedicate those gifts to service.

Now, the gifts of the Spirit are diverse: while He calls some to give clear witness to the desire for a heavenly home and to keep that desire

green among the human family, He summons others to dedicate themselves to the earthly service of men and to make ready the material of the celestial realm by this ministry of theirs. Yet He frees all of them so that by putting aside love of self and bringing all earthly resources into the service of human life they can devote themselves to that future when humanity itself will become an offering accepted by God (GS 38).

3. Secular Involvement is Specific to Laity

Secular duties and activities belong properly although not exclusively to laypeople. Acting as citizens in the world, whether individually or socially, the laity will keep the laws proper to each discipline, and labour to equip themselves with a genuine expertise in their various fields. They will gladly work with men seeking the same goals. Acknowledging the demands of faith and endowed with its force, they will unhesitatingly devise new enterprises, where they are appropriate, and put them into action.

Since they have an active role to play in the whole life of the Church, laymen are not only bound to penetrate the world with a Christian spirit, but are also called to be witnesses to Christ in all things in the midst of human society. (GS 43).

4. Secular Involvement, not an Option but an Obligation

Far too many Catholics in India, living in the multi-religious context as they are, think that religious faith is too private and personal to involve it in the 'worldly' affairs. If one does it means that they are not only insensitive to the secular dimension of the modern Indian State but also that they display a sort of arrogance which decent people cannot tolerate. But Vat. II makes such a serious connection between the laity's life as Catholics in the world and their eternal destination that it becomes an obligation to them.

This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of two cities, to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit. They are mistaken who...think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they **are more obliged** than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation. Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age. ... Therefore, let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other. The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbour and even God, and **jeopardizes his eternal salvation**.¹⁴ (GS 43)

PART 2. THE EXISTING PROFILE OF THE LAITY IN INDIA

So much was the assurance given by Vat.II. But how far has it been realized? It is a matter of gratitude that many attempts have been made to study the existing status of the laity in the Indian Church. It is also matter of appreciation that the Indian hierarchy has taken initiatives to evaluate how much progress the church here has made on lines with the Vat. II. As early as in 1986 the CBCI Laity Commission attempted to prepare a scientific Study Aid for the Bishops Synod.¹⁵ There is also an Evaluation Report of the Indian Church (1995), made available by the CBCI. It devotes a section on "Lay Participation and Leadership"¹⁶ as well as another section on "Action Plan" with reference to lay leadership.¹⁷ Again, on the occasion of the Great

Jubilee year 2000, Krist Jayanti National Committee got a survey made by an Evaluation Committee, which also contains quite a lot of material on the existing position of the laity. Further, the Laity Commission of the CCBI has made a research-based study on *The Vocation of the Laity in the Life and Mission of the Church* in view of the CCBI Plenary Assembly at Alwaye (Jan. 2007).¹⁸ Apart from these official studies, I have undertaken a research with the help of my students of theology both at the M.Th. and B.Th. levels.¹⁹ This research was based upon the Observation method, in reference to the role of the Laity all over the country. Here an attempt is made to cull the principal points of their findings from these various evaluation reports and present them here briefly in three categories.

2.1. Observation-based Study:

Given the pluriformic nature of the Indian Church, I deemed it proper make the study region- wise to find out the actual position of the laity in their respective contexts. The observers were divided into six zonal groups, comprising of all the states of India and all the three ritual churches. The following questions were given and responses sought:

1. What is your impression in general, regarding the participatory role of the laity in the Church structures in your region?
2. Describe specifically the laity's participation in Liturgy?
3. Do the laity in your region have any role to play in the policy-making and decision-taking?
4. What is the role that the laity play in financial matters of the parish?
5. What is laity's participation in the administration of the parish?
6. Do the laity involve themselves in justice and peace work?
7. What role do the laity play in civil / social issues?
8. What part do they take in cultural matters?

9. What is the stand of the laity with regard to the socio-economic issues of the nation today?

10. What is the laity's involvement in politics?

The findings were finally tabulated.

(a) Positive Features

It is indeed laudable that there are many positive developments in the Indian Church contributing to the realization of the promises of Vat.II regarding the laity's role.

1. **Liturgically**, there is certainly dramatic change in laity's role. Thanks to the efforts the Indian hierarchy has taken immediately after the Council, altars were changed and priests began celebrating the Holy Eucharist facing the assembly. The laity could feel that they are part of the celebration. Similarly steps were taken in all the regions to use the vernacular rather than the Latin. Local music and even dance began to be used according to the local culture. The active participation of the laity is more visible in the Sunday liturgy. People of the different SCCs are involved in planning, carrying out and evaluating the various liturgical activities of each Sunday.

2. **Participatory Structures**: The Laity commission of the CBCI, already since the 1980s has been keen on promoting participatory structures in parishes, especially through formation of Small Christian Communities (SCC). They play a major role in the making of PPC and also in making Sunday liturgy more vibrant. Even those that were traditionally known as Pious Associations of the laity (meant to promote personal piety and devotion) have been successfully incorporated into the PPC structure and which in turn promote to certain extent lay participation in policy-making and decision-taking processes of the parish. It is heartening that the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPCs) have been created almost in all the dioceses of the South

West, South, West and North East, and the lay participation is clearly visible in those structures.

3. In the **general administration** of the parish lay leadership of the laity is widespread in the South West, West and North East regions. Lay participation is on the increase in most of dioceses in the South where such structures like SCC s, Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) have been implemented.

4. **Lay Movements:** Over the years the laity in India have acquired a greater awareness that the Church is not constituted by just the clergy and the hierarchy, but that it is of all the baptized believers in the Church. As a result there is a significant growth in ecclesial movements like the Charismatic, the Neo Catechumenate Way, Evangelization Groups, Couples for Christ, Jesus Youth Movement. There has been an extraordinary evidence of laity's thirst for Word of God, and a deep craving for living the Divine Life among the lay faithful, so much so that many are even tempted to join other Fellowship Movements of the Pentecostal type, where they don't find enough 'pastures' in their parish-ambience.

5. **Justice Movements:** There is more and more awareness among the laity that the church's ministry requires social action and even direct action for justice and equality. The mushrooming of thousands of action groups all over the country is a good sign. Other people's movements like the Dalit liberation movements have been actively promoting a social and liberative consciousness among the laity

6. **Salvation-Consciousness:** Again the laity are trained to think that that salvation is available to all, not by simply being Catholics. Formerly we used to think and pray for the conversion of the Protestants, Muslims and Hindus, Pagans. Now that public practice is no more there.

(b) Areas of Concern

The lay participation in the Church's renewal process that was gleaned from the profile above has not been a mainstream process. The so called laity's participation in Church's life and mission has been restricted to a committed minority within the local Church. The vast majority of laity still remains passive and inactive.²⁰ Like this, there are many points of concern. They may be categorized into three groups: (i) Those that are related to the attitude of laity (ii) Those that are related to their formation (iii) Those that pertain to the clergy and hierarchy

(i) Attitude Related Areas of Concern

1. Ignorance and illiteracy may be the main reason for the lack of awareness regarding the outlook of the Vat. II on their identity and mission. Most of the laity in the north are illiterate.

2. Indifference and apathy of the vast majority of the laity could also be a reason for the lack of lay participation. Many of the laity simply want to be left alone. They want to remain unchanged. They just want the status quo, allowing the priest to take all responsibilities of the parish. They don't want to assume any active leadership role.

3. Insecurity in the sort of changes wrought by Vat. II may be the reason for others to take up active role. They feel safe in the pre-Vatican liturgy, old devotional practice. It may be owing to lack of proper education or lack of understanding of the need

(ii) Formation-related Concerns

4. The implication of all the three points mentioned above is just that there is obviously lack of proper faith education and training of the laity.

5. The Formation Programmes that are already taken up are too academic and information-packed. They lack a pointed focus on spirituality

and leadership techniques which can prepare lay people to assume responsible roles in PPCs and other decision making bodies in the Church and in society.

6. Given the multi-religious as the living context of laity in India, do the formation programmes of the laity take this aspect into account? Are they helped to enter into dialogue with others without any compromise to our core of the faith? Are they taught to what extent one can appreciate the traditional, cultural and spiritual values of other religions and incorporate their ways and wisdom in the process of living in harmony with diversity?²¹

7. The Formation programmes attempted in various regions as well as in most of the dioceses do not seem to challenge the laity to make option for justice part of their faith? They don't seem to include a thorough knowledge of the social teachings of the Church so as to be enabled to make the social teachings of the Church part of their daily decisions at their home, workplaces, and streets, contributing to the world a socio-economic development, that serves the people, promote life and protect the environment.²²

(iii) Clergy/Hierarchy Related Concerns

8. Lay formators and animators, if any, are not given a follow up support by the clergy. Most often training is given at a formation centre either in the regional or at the national level. But when they get back to their parishes, the parish priests never consider their training seriously, leave alone giving them the encouragement they need. They are not given scope by the local parish priest to put their training into practice?

9. It is not merely a grave matter of concern that Church in India is over-institutionalized but also that its structures are manned exclusively by the clergy. It has disappointed laity who took seriously the new understanding of the Church, proposed by Vat. II. In some places it has created a conflict between the parish priests and the 'enlightened' laity.

10. Many others have been alienated by certain crises like the divisive approaches of the hierarchy/ the religious on the basis of caste, or feel a undernourishment for their spiritual life in the Church and so show their protest by leaving the Church and joining the new Pentecostal groups that allow spontaneous religious sharing or faith sharing groups or in some Fellowship Meetings or Assembly of God Churches

11. The so called lay participatory structures like the PPC and DCP have been smothered by the hierarchy, either by outnumbering the laity by nominated members who are either religious sisters or brothers or lay people who are too docile and passive to raise a voice, or by the veto power on the ground that it is only a consultative body. Such practice of the hierarchy frustrates the well-meaning laity who spent hours of their precious time in discussing the issues threadbare.

12. Lack of recognition and respect by the clergy is another reason for the laity to shun all active participation. Some lay persons who are most experienced and competent, and who serve as top executives in corporate managements, are most often cowed down sometimes by the 'authority' of a newly ordained man who may not be any older than their own sons, and who may even be much less competent and knowledgeable. People are legitimate in raising questions like this: "Administration, policy decision, educational techniques, goal planning, financial management, are they part of the grace of the Sacrament of Holy Orders? Do priests have any protection against serious mistakes in these areas?"²³

2.2. CBCI Research Committee

The findings of CBCI Evaluation Committee²⁴ corroborate the findings of the participant observation study given above. Today the Church in India,

as a body, is fairly strong with its various structures, institutions, influence etc., the report says. However, this strength and power is primarily in the hands of the clergy and various Religious Congregations of both men and women. The role of the laity in the life of the Church is negligible and they are hardly involved as they have been kept out of the mainstream. Some of the discriminations suffered by the laity are:

- Most of the Church resources are spent for the formation of the clergy and the religious;
- CBCI organizes seminars and meetings to foster lay leadership mostly at the national level but not at the regional level and as a result the ordinary people are unable to benefit by these programmes;
- The laity are not involved in the administrative and decision making processes of the Church at different levels;
- The laity are not given an adequate role in the secular sphere which is proper to them according to the Second Vatican Council;
- Serious efforts have not been made to train lay leaders and the laity are not encouraged sufficiently. ²⁵

Among the laity in India, there is a feeling that they are still at the receiving end and are only beneficiaries rather than partners in the life of the Church. The respondents, ranging from a near majority to an absolute majority agree that the Church should offer lay persons: (a) different positions like Secretaries of Commissions, Directors of different units, etc. (b) opportunities to be actively involved in the decision-making processes of the dioceses and parishes; (c) definite roles in the administrative work of the Church. ²⁶

The laity today are just destined to pray, pay and obey. This should be changed by involving them in the administration of the Church at all levels. ²⁷

The dioceses are run by Bishops, priests and the religious and the laity are kept away from the active functions of the Church. Many of the laity don't know about the actual functions of the Church at present. In such a situation they become passive towards the Church. ²⁸

2.3. Findings of the Survey by the Jubilee Committee

On the occasion of the Great Jubilee Year 2000, a national survey was conducted on the impact of Vat.II on the Church in India, by the National Committee of Yesu krist Jayanti. It was carried out during Sep.1999-July 2000. A total of 1892 respondents from 52 dioceses were covered in the survey. It may be relevant to take into account the findings of this survey, too.

As regards the **familiarity with the teachings of Vat. II** by laity, just a handful of the respondents have given an affirmative answer.²⁹ Nearly two thirds of the respondents have also said that only a small percentage know what the Council says.

As regards **faith education**, only less than half of the respondents have said that it is being organized well, while almost an equal number give a negative answer. The rest of them acknowledge that they do not know about it. Of these are included some priest-respondents and some sister respondents. Very strange indeed.³⁰

As regards **the running of the institutions** (schools, colleges, hospitals etc.) owned and run by the dioceses or the religious congregations, only about one third of the respondents say that the lay people have a definite say in. But more than two-third of them say that they do not have a definite say in running these institutions. ³¹

As regards **the participatory structures**, a little more than half of the respondents say that there is a parish council in their respective parish.

But one third of them say they do not have a parish council. It is surprising to note that the rest of the respondents including some priests and nuns do not even know whether there is a parish council or not in their own respective parish. ³²

As regards **finance committee** only about one fourth of the respondents say that there is a finance committee in their respective parish. A little more half of them say that there is no finance committee in their respective parish. One fifth of all the participants are not even aware. Here also are included some priests and nuns. ³³

As regards **functioning of parish councils**, only less than half of the respondents expressed satisfaction. A little more one fourth say that to some extent they function well. Only a handful of the respondents agree that they function satisfactorily. ³⁴

As regards **the life of the Laity**, less than half of the respondents view that the lay people have a positive approach to other religions: tolerant, respectful, understanding their worship etc. One fourth would agree to this view to some extent. Almost one third of them acknowledge that they do not have a positive approach to other religions. ³⁵

As for **the consumerist life style**, a vast majority from all categories agree that the consumerist values are swallowing up the Gospel values. Exactly half the respondents say that only a small percentage of lay people are able to resist the consumerist values of the market such as power, prestige, comfort, unhealthy competition, excessive profit mindedness, self-centered approach etc. A little more than one third agree with this view to some extent. Only a small number of respondents say that majority of Catholics are able to resist. ³⁶

Thus, the actual profile of the laity in India suggest the lived reality of the laity in the Indian Church is not up to the mark. It may even be said that

the existing profile of the laity is even far away from the vision of Vat. II, and that promises given by Vat. II have gone woefully unfulfilled.

PART 3. THE CAUSE OF THE CRISIS

The foregoing assessment clearly establishes that although there are many laudable attempts made in the Indian Church to encourage the laity to play their role. Yet the laity are still farther away from the ideal set by Vat. II. So it is necessary to probe into the challenges that have caused this crises.

3.1. Outdated Ecclesiology in Practice

A real major challenge is that the medieval ecclesiology still operative is in practice. This ecclesiology was articulated by St. Robert Bellarmine and accepted by the Church as a whole maintained that the Church is the perfect society on earth, reflecting the hierarchical society of heaven in earth. Just as in heaven God, angels and saints are all arranged in a pyramidal structure, so too the Church is organized with Pope at the top with fullness of power and shared by the bishops, presbyters and deacons in decreasing degrees. The laity are on the lowest rung of this hierarchical order, having no power whatsoever. Even a saintly Pope Pius X re-affirmed the medieval views of the Church as an “unequal society” comprising of two ranks: the clergy and the laity. His encyclical letter *Vehementer Nos* (1906) affirms:

It follows that the Church is essentially an *unequal* society, that is, a society comprising two categories of her sons, 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 (**laity**) is to **allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock**, to follow the Pastors.³⁷

From this sort of thinking there was some improvement with Popes Pius XI and XII. But a complete reversion to the traditional thinking was made by only Vat. II. However, in practice, the former thinking is continued even today. There is clearly a discrimination of the laity by the clergy in all their dealings, behaviour and treatment of laity and in management of the institutions and administration of parish. In other words, the pre-Vatican II ecclesiology is in effect in the actual functioning of Church in India. This is particularly visible in the South, and South West regions.

3.2. Exaggerated View of Ministerial Priesthood

Another challenge is that the pre-Vatican II theology of the Holy Orders is still dominant among all the faithful in Indian Church. Accordingly, the recipient of the Holy Orders³⁸ is supposed to become ontologically one with Jesus, the High priest so much that he is become 'another Christ' really. Such a standpoint obviously implies an essential difference between the clergy and the laity. Further it is considered that this sacrament gives the priest sacred power to perform the threefold ministry of Christ: sanctifying (through administering the sacraments), teaching (through the preaching the Word of God) and governing his people (be it at the parish level or otherwise). In other words, laity are supposed to be just beneficiaries of the bishops, priests and deacons. The laity are denied of any sacred power. Even the present Canon Law stipulates that "the Christian faithful have the right to **receive assistance from the sacred pastors out of the spiritual goods of the Church**, especially the word of God and the sacraments."³⁹ A clear division is implied in these words.

3.3. Ambivalence in Vat. II

No doubt, there is certain ambivalence in the theological stand of the documents of Vat.II. On the one hand LG chapter 2 speaks of the Church as an active presence of Christians in the world and for the world with the consequences it involves for the priesthood and the religious life. On the other hand chapter 4 of LG and AA also upholds a clerical approach in which the laity is once again considered as a subordinate, a kind of subject to the hierarchy, despite its attempt to reinstate the original unity, dignity and equality of the laity.

Such an ambivalence of positions is understandable in a Council in which 2600 -2800 bishops participated. Given their diverse backgrounds, varied theological outlooks and training, the documents also are bound to reflect the different strands of theological positions: conservative as well as progressive. But this is not a problem at all. For, the main task of the Council was not meant to create a theological treatise in which many schools of theology will be evaluated to arrive at a correct position. In fact certain pluralism of theological position may be welcome too.

3.4. The New Promises in Old Structures

But the real problem lies in this that while Vat.II promised to lay people new roles and a new identity, they were not pursued consistently in the Church, with corresponding models to support the new promises. Nor was there any attempt to create such structures as to implement the new roles assigned to the laity by Vat. II. To put it one word: New roles were promised in an old-structured church. With old theological models still prevailing in the Church there has not been any scope for laity to play their roles meaningfully. No new arrangements have been made to uphold the new ideas. Nor new theological models encouraged. Rather the voices of

new and valid theological voices seem to have been stifled. Even reactionary responses are cropping up almost with a view of restoration of the pre-Vatican II status.

3.5. Abuse of Power in the Hierarchy

Still worse problem is that some of the hierarchy have even dared to abuse their special rank, status power and position to inflict wrongs in the Church. The most patent example is the Child-abuse cases of North American Church. This concern is very well corroborated by the following words by people related to Laity movement over there:

These [bishops] were people we trusted, as if they were practically God, and they were allowing our children to be raped,” said Anthony T. Massimini, who as a young priest from Philadelphia served as a page during the first session of Vatican II, and now, decades after he left the priesthood and married, is one of many thinkers advising Voice of the Faithful. “We still have no sense of talking to a bishop on an adult-to-adult basis. But something is going to change, because they’re losing the people.”

The bishops, however, are increasingly reasserting their authority as the church’s official teachers, reminding their flock that the church is not a democracy. The most visible evidence is the increasing frequency with which bishops bar Voice of the Faithful from meeting in dioceses in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, and in parishes in Maine and Massachusetts.

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In the Indian Church the abuse of authority may not be as glaring as it has come up in the West. However, no one can say with certainty that the abuse is not there, at all. But a day may come when it boomerang into a big fiasco. If the Roman proverb “Caesar’s wife should be above suspicion” is applicable to any person who holds a public office, it is much more appropriate in ecclesiastical office.

3.6. Laity to be Blamed for Apathy and Ignorance

Most of the times the laity themselves could be blameworthy for the dismal situation of today. The vast majority of the laity in the Indian Church may actually want to remain unchanged according to the expectations of Vat. II. Many of the laity simply prefer to be left alone. They don't want to assume any active leadership role in the Church. They feel so safe in the pre-Vatican II vision that they are led to a sense of insecurity in the sort of changes wrought by Vat. II. They are so satisfied with old devotional practices that they are not at all interested in the challenging roles to play in the new structures, if implemented according to the Vat. II.

3.7. Major Share of the Blame by the Hierarchy

However these attitudes of apathy on the part of laity could be traced to lack of proper faith education or sheer ignorance of the need for change. But, given the existing situation in the Church where all power and knowledge and position has been in the hands of the clergy it was principally their responsibility and even duty to have dispersed the knowledge to the laity. At least, the teachings of the Vat. II must have been brought to the notice of the vast majority of the rank and file. There has not been tangible attempts made on the part of the hierarchy to have propagated the teachings on their role and call. There has been some silver lines as the voice of Bishop Bosco Penha.

If the laity are a passive and lifeless, if they have no sense of their role/ mission in the Church and in the world, who takes responsibility for this situation? Is it not the leaders of the Church? Unless bishops and priests accept responsibility for the situation and move swiftly and effectively, on a priority basis, to alter this situation, nothing will change.⁴¹

Thus failure to impart the knowledge of Vat. II to the laity by the hierarchy of the Indian Church and lack of tangible expression in the style of its functioning⁴² could be said to be the most basic cause of the gloomy scenario.

PART 4. REMEDIAL MEASURES

In the light of the foregoing sections, this final part attempts at proposing some remedial measures so that the Church in India will be able to realize the ideal vision of Vat. II more concretely and empower the laity to play their role more authentically.

1. Take appropriate steps to ensure that the participatory structures like the Parish Pastoral Councils(PPC) and the Diocesan Pastoral Councils (DPC) are formed in every diocese, with bylaws clearly defined with the vision and the spirit of the Council.⁴³

2. As against the exaggerated view of ministerial priesthood, the mystery of missionary communion as hinted at by Vat. II⁴⁴and elaborated by *Christifideles Laici*⁴⁵ must be put into practice, in such a way that “a member of the lay faithful ...must live in a continual interaction with others with a lively sense of fellowship, rejoicing in an equal dignity and common commitment to bring to fruition the immense treasure that each has inherited”⁴⁶

3. Encouragement must be given to new theological attempts so that the ambiguity that existed understandably in Vat. II might be resolved. It is gratifying to note that in the Indian Church colloquium of bishops and theologians has been regularly convened once in two years. But what participation in such meetings?

4. It is high time that at least after fifty years new structures and new practices were set up on a top priority basis so that pre-Conciliar ideas,

perspectives and old attitudes will cease to persist in the Church. Otherwise they will not only be in conflict with the vision of Vat. II but also will thwart the vision itself. Shall we not take seriously the warning of our Lord “not to pour new wine into old wineskins? If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined (Mt.9:16-18).

5. In all that the hierarchy do with regard to the Church affairs, let them take the laity into confidence. Otherwise the two water-tight compartments in the Church will continue in the same way. ⁴⁷All the posts in the Church which can be juridically held by non-clerics must be thrown open to the laity. A national policy may be evolved so as to facilitate more responsibilities for lay Catholics in Catholic institutions. The administrative work of the Church may be handed over gradually to the laity at all levels: parish, diocesan, developmental, constructional, and educational.

6. The laity will have to take responsibility for the roles the Vat. II has granted them. The identity of the laity, according to the Council, consists in being Christians but characterized by “secular nature.” It means that they should not want to get into the ladder of clericalization. Rather they should be involved in the ordinary tasks of everyday life as an important part of their Christian vocation. So they have to live out the ordinary tasks of everyday life with extraordinary love for God and love of others, thus establishing a unity or coherence between the faith and the world, between Gospel and culture. For instance the family people need to train their children with due consideration for altruism, sharing and sacrifice, spending even the leisure-time activities with due reference to God and others, not being succumbed to a ferocious consumerism, but always being concerned for the neediest. Professionals and politicians need to direct their service to the common good, businessmen need to be involved in trade with a sense of social justice, the media persons will have to be not selling themselves to that which sells the most, but to be keen on spreading what is valuable before God and the needy.

7. If the mission of the Church as envisioned by Vat. II were to be carried out faithfully, then it is laity who will have to take God into temporal realities such as the family, work, culture, the communication media, politics, sports, technology, etc. They are called to do this from within society, in and for the ordinary realities that make up their lives. This mission they may carry out, personally or along with others. Those others with whom we cooperate may or may not be believers. But we will be cautious to establish coherence between our faith and our lives, with an attitude of dialogue, in search of love and justice, participating in cultural and political life, and with special attention to the neediest people.

8. Let us remember that today we are living in an age of faith crisis. This is the result of many factors: secularist culture spreading fast, social fabric changing into amorphous on account of migration and urbanization, globalized economy, purely a scientific technological approach to life, excessive and often improper influence of media, politicized religious movements becoming militant fundamentalism.⁴⁸ If there is any hope for the Church to meet this crisis successfully, it is the laity who have a greater role to play.

9. For this, the laity need to be trained not only in matters connected with faith, spirituality, theology, social analysis but also in leadership skills, administration techniques. In this connection the CBCI Evaluation Committee also has proposed that “one of the first priorities of the common National Body should be the formation of the laity and the promotion of their active role in the life of the Church at all levels”.⁴⁹ There is need to progressively increase the volume of the budget provisions of the common National Body like the NBCLC for training of the laity.

CONCLUSION

In short, Vat II by offering a new self-discovery of the Church specially in such descriptions as ‘people of God’ and ‘communion’ and also by openly

and extensively speaking out the laity's role, has clearly emphasized that the laity are in no way less in dignity or in capability or in responsibility than the clergy to carry out the saving mission of the Lord Jesus.

Now it is the duty of the hierarchy to give back to laity their due recognition of their dignity and equality. It is their responsibility to lay confidence in the competence of the laity and give them concrete opportunities to exercise their roles and promote lay participation wherever it is possible.

On the part of the laity it is their responsibility to realize the call of the Second Vatican Council and shed all their diffidence, fear, apathy and indifference and take the ball thrown to them by the Council and begin to play their role actively in the mission of the Church towards the world.

Thus there is the mutual need of the clergy working together with the laity in an atmosphere of **co-responsibility and collaboration, not taking over.**

Certainly in the Indian Church much has been done, but much more could be done. Given the fact that Church is perhaps largest organization in the world, a period of 50 years is nothing for bringing about a change in it according to the Vat. II's vision of the laity's role. However, this is no excuse for being stagnant or indifferent. A time bound programme with concrete measures and steps must be chalked out as per the ideal. A monitoring committee must be set up to assess the 'action taken' and ascertain new ways of realizing the ideal properly and in time.

Above all, the vision of the Church by Vat.II with all its implications for laity's role must be kept glowing. Deep complementarity of laity and the clergy must be encouraged for realization of God's Reign through the Church.

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(Endnotes)

¹ A revised paper delivered in Catholic Council of India (CCI) 12th General Body Meeting at Varanasi (Nov.14-17, 2013)

²William Madges, "Formulating a New Understanding of Church" in Eds. William Madges and Michael J. Daley, *Vatican II: Forty Personal Stories*, Bayard: Twenty Third publications, 2003, pp.69-76.

³S.Karotemprel, "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Asian Context" in *Indian Missiological Reveiw*, Vol. 8 No 3, July 1986. p. 143.

⁴As quoted by Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, London: Chapman 1965 p.55, emphasis added

⁵ The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation presents revelation in terms of 'the salvific work of Christ, who, through his words and deeds, makes an invitation to openness to communion with God and others' Cf. *Dei verbum*, Nos. 2, 4, 17. Also 10).

⁶ F. Wilfred, *Sunset in the East*, Madras: University of Madras, 1991, p.311

⁷ The dogmatic Constitution on the Church describes the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation, a sign and instrument of communion with God and others (*Lumen Gentium* 1, 3, 48. Also LG 4, 8, 13-15, 18, 21, 24-25).

⁸The Constitution on Sacred Liturgy teaches how the Church, on her earthly journey towards the fullness of the Kingdom, finds the source and summit of her communion of ecclesial life in the celebration of the Eucharist, the memorial of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5-10, 47-48).

⁹ The decree on Ecumenism deals with the unity and collaboration with the Christian churches (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 2-4, 14-15, 17-19, 22).

¹⁰ Finally, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* describes the specific contribution that the Church can make to society in collaborating for the unity of humanity by bearing witness to the Church's communion, which is founded in Christ (GS 42. Also, GS 32).

¹¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II", <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/cdfeccv2.htm> >

¹² *Perfectae Caritatis* (on Religious Life) and *Nostra Aetate* (on Church's Relation with other Religions)

¹³ The parallels between the two documents have been discovered and presented in systematic study establishing that the Post Synodal document *Christifideles Laici* is proven to be a commentary on the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Cf. *Anointed for Others Vocation and Mission of the laity Bangalore: NBCLC, 1993*

¹⁴ Emphasis added

¹⁵ Stella Faria, *The Laity's Perception of their Own Status in the Church in India*, Bangalore: WINA, 1986.

¹⁶ CBCI Evaluation Committee, *CBCI Evaluation Report*, 1995 New Delhi, Cf. pp.87-95

¹⁷ CBCI Evaluation Committee, *CBCI Evaluation Report*, 1995 New Delhi, Cf. pp.208-212

¹⁸ CCBI Laity Commission, *The Vocation of the Laity in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2007

¹⁹ Unpublished paper on "The Laity in the Local Church", presented in XV Colloquium of Bishops and Theologians, on "Office and Charism within the Understanding of the Church as Participatory Communion" Organized by the Doctrinal Commission of the CBCI, at NBCLC, (July 8 – 10, 2010)

²⁰ L. Doohan, *The Lay-Centered Church Theology and Spirituality*, Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1984, pp.26- 61

²¹ Final Message of BILA 6: "Second in the Series of BILA's on Formation in Ed. Franz-Josef Eilers, *For All Peoples of Asia*, FABC Documents from 19920-1996 Vol2, Manila: Claretian Publications 1997, pp.81-85

²² The Message of the Fourth East Asian Regional Laity Meeting, Thailand, See Ed. Franz-Josef Eilers, *For All Peoples of Asia*, FABC Documents from 19920-1996 Vol2, Manila: Claretian Publications 1997 pp. 133-135

²³ Leonard Doohan, op. cit p. 33

²⁴ CBCI Evaluation Report: New Delhi: CBCI Evaluation Committee, 1995, p.208

²⁵ CBCI Evaluation Report: New Delhi: CBCI Evaluation Committee, 1995, p.208

²⁶ CBCI p. 209

²⁷ CBCI, p.89

²⁸ CBCI p.90

²⁹ Sebastia Raj, "Our Journey from Vatican II to the Great Jubilee 2000", in Paul Puthenangady Ed. *Yesu Krist Jayanti 2000 Towards a New Society*, Bangalore: National Committee, p.149,

³⁰ SebastiaRaj, p.149

³¹ SebastiaRaj, p. 150-151

³² Sebastia Raj, p. 151

³³ Sebastia Raj, p. 151

³⁴ Sebastia Raj, p. 151

³⁵ Sebastia Raj, p. 144

³⁶ Sebastia Raj, p. 149

³⁷ No. 8. Emphasis added. The translation here is that the Holy See as found on the Vatican Internet website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_x/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_11021906_vehementer-nos_en.html

³⁸ D.Alphonse, "Identity and Mission of Laity in India Today", in CCBI Laity Commission, *The Vocation of the Laity in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2007, pp.50-52.

³⁹ *The Code of Canon Law*, No 213. Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Michael Paulson, "Citing Vatican II, Laity seeks change" Boston Globe on 10/13/2002 http://www.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/stories3/101302_laity.htm

⁴¹ Bosco Penha, "The Church, Today and Tomorrow: Empowering the Laity- Problems and Possibilities" presented to the CBCI Commission for Laity and Family, 31.3.1989 pp. 5-6.

⁴² CBCI, p.209-210.

⁴³ CBCI, p.211.

⁴⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, Nos. 4, 6.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, *Christifideles Laici*, Nos. 19-22.

⁴⁶ *Cristifideles Laici*, No. 20

⁴⁷ CBCI, p.90.

⁴⁸ *Instrumentum Laboris*, Synod of Bishops, Xiii Ordinary General Assembly on the New Evangelization for The Transmission of the Christian Faith. Nos. 51-67.

⁴⁹ CBCI, p.211.