

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

FURROW

The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Jack Mahoney

From Clericalism to Synodality

December 2019

From Clericalism to Synodality

Jack Mahoney

Over and above the rhetorical indignation that clericalism is deeply harmful to the Catholic Church, we need good theological grounds to counter it. These have been available for centuries, in the neglected belief that every one of the Church's members has a baptismal birthright to exercise a personal share in the risen Christ's own ministry as priest, as king and as prophet. In other words, all the baptized are expected to play their part 'fully, consciously and actively', not just in the Church's worship, as the Vatican Council declared, but also in the Church's governance and management, as well as in its teaching.

Pope Francis is now well-known for his regular attacks on clericalism as the root of many of the Catholic Church's internal ailments. His 'Letter to the People of God' in August 2018 on the subject of clerical sexual abuse, prior to his visit to the troubled Church in Ireland, left no one in doubt about his views.

'Clericalism' he explained then, 'whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today.' 'Today', he went on to point out in sharp contrast, 'we want solidarity, in the deepest and most challenging sense'.¹

In this appeal for solidarity the Pope was turning to the powerful tradition of Catholic social teaching, and applying it to the Church itself. The principle of human solidarity was first enunciated by Pope Pius XI in 1931, and it has been most fully expressed by Pope John Paul II in his 1987 encyclical, 'The Social Concern of the Church' (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, *SRS*). It builds on the fundamental

1 <http://www.vatican.va/content/Francisco/en/letters/2018>.

Jack Mahoney (jmahoney663@gmail.com) is a Scottish Jesuit, Emeritus Professor of Moral and Social Theology in the University of London, and a former member of the International Theological Commission. He is the author of *The Making of Moral Theology. A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford, 1987), and most recently of *Glimpses of the Gospels. Theological, Spiritual & Practical Reflections* (Dublin, Messenger Publications 2019).

THE FURROW

personal dignity of every one of God's human creatures, and highlights their interconnection, their *mutual interdependence*, in working together for the common, or shared, good.

A CLERICAL CASTE

Writing of solidarity, Pope John Paul II warned his readers of the danger in secular societies that 'instead of interdependence and solidarity, different forms of imperialism hold sway' (SRS 33). In a church context one can easily see how what the Pope here calls 'imperialism' takes the form of clericalism.

A popular understanding of clericalism views it as people putting their priests, or as priests placing themselves, on top of a pedestal in the Church. There they are considered to be above, and remote from, everyone else, and are shown unquestioned respect, consciously and often unconsciously. It is a sad traditional joke which describes a priest preaching from his pulpit as 'six feet above criticism'.

More insidiously, clericalism is an exclusive caste mentality operating within the Catholic Church. It is characterized by an expectation of position and privilege on the part of priests, along with a discounting, and a manipulation, of the laity. It lives and operates in a mental, and often physical, enclave, often unconsciously influenced by the Old Testament view that the priests constituted a separate tribe within the people of Israel.

Clearly, anything savouring of such a caste system in the Church is deeply hostile to its solidarity, creating what Pope Francis called above an 'excision', or a fault line, in the Church, which basically threatens the Church's unity and integrity, and which excludes the majority of its members from holding their rightful place among God's People.

SHARING THE CHURCH'S JOURNEY

Pope Francis was later to build on his appeal for the Church's solidarity as a counter to clericalism by adding to it the idea of 'synodality', that is, of the Church 'journeying together'. At the end of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI followed its recommendation by setting up the new 'Synod of Bishops', which was planned to meet regularly in Rome to represent the Church's whole college of bishops, and to advise the Pope as the Bishop of Rome.² On its fiftieth anniversary in 2015, the Synod of Bishops was addressed by Pope Francis, who developed the historical idea of 'synod' as meaning 'journeying together' (in Greek, *sun-hodos*),

2 Decree *Christus Dominus* (CD), 5.

and applied it to a movement of ‘synodality’ applying to the whole Church, thus turning an event into more of a process. As he observed, ‘the journey of synodality is the journey that God wants for his Church in the third millennium’.³ And to this he has added recently, in addressing the recent Amazon Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region, that ‘the church is always on the move, always going out’.

The crucial significance of synodality for the Church became evident last year, when the International Theological Commission (ITC) produced an important historical and systematic study, on ‘*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*’, which was approved by Pope Francis, and which concluded that ‘a synodal Church is a sharing and co-responsible church’.⁴ The Report spelled out the implications of synodality at all levels in the Church, beginning with Bishops’ Conferences at the national and regional level. It was known that Pope Benedict XVI, earlier Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, had been less than supportive of episcopal conferences. However, the ITC Report went into detail on how Pope Francis ‘reaffirmed their ecclesiological relevance’ and called for ‘a more developed synodal life at the regional level’ (no. 89), which should include encouraging participation by the laity and their appropriate consultation (no. 90).

PARISH SYNODALITY

Turning its attention to parishes, and to the laity’s participation in this all-important cell in the Church’s daily life, the ITC Report openly acknowledged that

‘here there is a need to overcome the obstacles resulting from the laity’s lack of formation, and from the lack of recognized opportunities for them to express themselves and be active, as well as a need to *counter the obstacle resulting from a clerical mentality which is in danger of relegating them to the margins of Church life*’ (73, emphasis added).

As a result, the International Theological Commission went on to propose the following momentous recommendation regarding parish pastoral councils:

‘It appears necessary to review the canonical norm which at present only suggests the setting up of a parish pastoral council, and to make this obligatory, as was done at the last Synod of the diocese of Rome. Introducing an effective synodal drive into

3 *AAS* 107 (2015) Nov, p. 1139.

4 www.vatican.va/roman-curia/congregationsw/xfaiith/cti-documents, no. 67.

THE FURROW

particular churches further requires that the diocesan pastoral council and the parish pastoral councils should work together, in order to be most effective' (no. 84).

RECOVERING LAY PARTICIPATION

These, then, are some of the ways which Pope Francis is advocating to combat deep-rooted clericalism in the life of the Catholic Church: the recognition and the promotion of the Church's solidarity; the practical expressions of this in collaborative synodality at different levels; and thus the regular participation by lay men and women in the Church's whole organizational life. What may not be appreciated is that this last is to a large extent a major project of theological recovery, reclaiming from theological oblivion, in effect, the baptismal birthright and commission of each one of the faithful to exercise regularly their individual participation in the 'triple office' (*triplex munus*) of Jesus Christ as priest, as prophet, and as king.

The title 'Christ' means 'the one anointed' (i.e., with chrism), as were the priests, the prophets and the kings in ancient Israel, all of whose roles have now been fulfilled and combined in the risen Christ. Since all Christians are 'baptized into Christ', as Paul teaches (Romans 6.3), the conclusion drawn early on was that they each receive in their baptismal initiation a personal sharing in this threefold office which is held by Christ, as Priest, as Prophet and as King, and are commissioned to exercise this within the Christian community, as well as throughout society.

As it happened, this early belief in the threefold ministry of the risen Christ being shared by all the baptised was *eclipsed* by the development of the sacramental system, as these regular rites came in the Middle Ages to articulate and dominate the devotional life of the faithful. Later, the sixteenth-century Reformers, especially Calvin, retrieved the earlier doctrine of Christ's shared threefold commission, or *triplex munus*, and used it as a theological weapon to combat what they considered the priest-ridden and 'works'-dominated sacramental system – which the Council of Trent then committed itself to defending and consolidating against the Reformers. In the nineteenth century the active sharing by all the baptised in the triple office of Christ was recovered by Catholic theologians, including the Church's new saint, John Henry Newman; and in modern times the doctrine was brought to prominence by the leading French Dominican theologian, Yves Congar, in his pioneering study, *Lay People in the Church* (Newman Press, 1957). It thus occupied the attention of the Second Vatican Council, which then declared strikingly, in its *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, that the laity

‘share in their own way in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ, and therefore have their own role to play in the mission of the whole People of God in the church and in the world’.⁵

UNRAVELLING CLERICAL CONCENTRATION

It is important to appreciate that, although exercising the threefold office of Christ had, early in history, dropped from the Church’s attention and life as applying to the lay baptized, the theme continued to be applied to the bishops in the Church; and, in fact, it became transformed into the three traditional episcopal offices of ‘sanctifying, teaching and governing’ the Church. This is how the Council’s decree on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG 21), was able to declare that ‘bishops in an eminent and visible way undertake Christ’s own role as Teacher [i.e., prophet], Shepherd [i.e., king] and High Priest.’

What had happened historically was that the bishops, supported by their priests, had taken over, and had absorbed, alongside their own, what had been intended to be the laity’s share in the risen Christ’s triple office as Prophet, Priest and King.

This episcopal takeover was most evident in the development of the Church’s worship, where ritual and ceremony were elaborated, and in a language increasingly unknown to most people, creating a chasm between the multitasking ‘celebrant’ on the one hand, and, on the other, the passive recipients, even silent spectators. Also, in a way similar to that of Christ’s priesthood, the sharing in his kingship, which involved the exercise of authority and decision-making within the Church, became legal jurisdiction, restricted by canon law to the clergy. And, most comprehensively of the three, the shared ‘prophetic’ role of all the male and female laity who are baptized in Christ, which commissions and empowers them to proclaim God’s moral truth and to witness to Gospel values, became absorbed by the moral teaching activity of the bishops, and in particular of the Bishop of Rome, to become the Church’s *Magisterium*, that is, its exclusive ‘teaching authority’ in the whole field of faith and morals, as the Council of Trent made abundantly clear. As a consequence of this, the Church’s membership became divided sharply into the ‘teaching Church (*Ecclesia docens*)’ and the ‘learning Church (*Ecclesia discens*)’, a theologically degrading distinction which Pope Francis has seriously questioned.⁶

Thus, the historical professionalizing of the Church’s clergy

5 Decree of the Apostolate of the Laity, #2.

6 AAS 107 (2015), 1140.

THE FURROW

in history was accompanied by their theological imperialism, resulting in a corresponding impoverishment of the baptized laity. In fact, it can be maintained that this historical absorption of lay office into the bishops' three exclusive prerogatives of 'teaching, governing and sanctifying' resulted in a strong ecclesial imbalance, which has been the historical and theological *source* of clericalism developing and flourishing in the Church.

'ACTIVE PARTICIPATION'

Where does the remedy lie? To answer this, we can learn from the liturgy. As the liturgical movement grew and became active before and during the Vatican Council, the popular slogan heard on all sides was that of 'active participation.' This was picked up by the Council's Decree on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC 14), when it proclaimed that the Church 'earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy'. It would therefore be logical and eminently desirable, if this reinstatement of the whole People of God's active participation in Christ's priestly mission was applied equally to the other two baptismal commissions which all the faithful also receive from the risen Christ, their kingly mission and their prophetic mission.

In this way, the laity could 'fully, consciously and actively participate', not only in the Church's whole *priestly* activity, where much remains to be done, including a theological and pastoral review of the Church's Eucharistic rite as it has developed, and a broadening of recruitment to the priestly ministry. A similar radical renewal could well occur with regard to the Church's governance and its management, that is, the exercising of Christ's shared *kingship*, where there is no lack of scope for the laity to contribute to the planning and review of diocesan and parochial structures, as well as to the selecting, appointing and deployment of clerical personnel. And finally, a long overdue acknowledgement could be accorded to the theological mandate and commission given to all the baptized lay women and men in the Christian community, to share Christ's role as '*prophet*', and thus to contribute their personal experience and insights to help shape the content of the Church's teaching on religious belief and moral behaviour.

A CHALLENGING ALTERNATIVE

Pursuing and actively promoting this theological *rebalancing* of the Catholic Church's life and activity must be considered in society today a high, even overriding, priority in its own right, aiming

as it does to create a mature and theologically-rooted ecclesial culture in which all the Church's members without exception are invited to share, live, and spread the Gospel in their different ways. In practical terms this can provide for all regional, diocesan and parish councils in their regular meetings, duly including the laity, to include as standard in their agenda matters relating to the community's *worship*, its *management*, and its Christian *witness*. A challenging program such as this will also provide overwhelming theological warrant for definitively putting an end to all clericalism in the life of God's People.

Choosing the ground. How does one discuss liturgical matters in the Church of today? My experience is that if one tries to do so in terms of a debate between conservatives and liberals one gets nowhere. Such a debate hardly exists anyhow because people who define themselves in those terms rarely listen to one another, preferring more often to shout at one another across a great divide. And a discussion simply on the plane of aesthetics has its own special limitations. For myself, I have dared to think that, beyond these divisive forums, there might be a workable way of having such a debate. It would be a debate that would give dominant place to a theological understanding of the nature of Liturgy.

– LIAM G. WALSH, OP, *The Mass: Yesterday, Today and Forever*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications) p.10.