

The Role of the Catholic Laity in the Next Ten Years

Only a fool, an astrologer or an economist predicts the future. And in the religious context possibly only a fool who disrespects the often surprising love and grace of the Holy Spirit. With that caveat, I ask the question: How might one project the role of the Catholic Laity in the next ten years? The short answer is that the laity (and the clergy, too) ought to and will in future generally behave as Catholicism always tells us: with faith, forbearance and good moral conscience. These, of course, are fine words which are sometimes difficult for us to live up to individually, as well as states of behaviour which are arguably more vexatious than ever before to navigate in the contemporary Catholic 'scene'.

To go forward, though, we need first to go back from the present. The contemporary Catholic scene has a perceived fault-line between liberal and conservative. Very often, people on both sides dispute the legacy of the Vatican Council. The liberals are disappointed by what they see as the rolling-back of the reforms of Vatican II. The conservatives, when not completely dismissive of it, draw on the statements made by, and the practices of, two successive popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, which present the reforming Council as something still unfolding, as part of a 'hermeneutic of continuity' with the pre-conciliar Church. In this outlook the vernacular liturgy of the Mass (most especially in English) that came into being in the 1970s was simply a staging post to an improved, more authoritative, version in 2011. The liberals grind their teeth!

It is sad to see the near-despair of some Catholics, especially those in the over-60 age range, in the face of what they see as an all-too-brief period when the church took the 'priesthood of the people' at its word and extended the voice and participation of the laity. It is sad (and also slightly bemusing) to see the most scathing and uncharitable anti-lay voices coming from within the laity itself, from groups such as those vocal in both the castigation of the majority of baptized, 'too liberal', Catholics and supportive of the re-integration of the schismatic, ridiculously antiquarian Lefebvrists. It is most sad to see sometimes the out-and-out hatred, the lack of charity that passes between both liberals and conservatives. This is most marked from the conservative side, though they would say that, in a fallaciously secular, post-modern world, faith has to be asserted for the good of the liberals' souls; also, that charity is a purely worldly commodity that will not save the heretic from the fires of Hell. The conservatives gnash their own teeth in the present world to prevent the gnashing by others in the next!

The fact that the most extremely conservative, anti-conciliar voice is largely a lay one is not without some irony. It is a voice entitled by Vatican II itself, by the call to lay action therein, and enabled too by the mass media, especially in recent years, the worldwide internet with its online magazines and blogs. In England *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*, in Scotland, *Catholic Truth Scotland*, are two of the most energetic lay-run web-newsletters diagnosing, more or less, the alleged betrayal of the Catholic church since the Council. As I write the most recent issue of the former has an article entitled *Fifty Glorious Years: The Church before Vatican II*. In the case of the latter publication there is no more fearless example of lay opinion challenging episcopacy in the English-speaking world. *Catholic Truth Scotland* believes, essentially, that the

Scottish Catholic church has become Protestant, and it detests as agents of this heresy both Metropolitans - the Cardinal-Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh and the (outgoing) Archbishop of Glasgow - as well as Eucharistic ministers, female altar servers, the post-Council relocation of altars, the removal of altar rails and a host of other perceived liturgical abuses. It also looks somewhat askance at most other, more high profile, conservative lay commentators such as the philosopher John Haldane and the composer James Macmillan who are seen as too indulgent of 'secularism'. Any perceived concession to secular relativism by either clerical or lay Catholics, or 'Modernism', in that rather quaint pre-World War One terminology, is leapt upon by such publications.

At the other pole of the lay spectrum (though to be fair at the other pole simply because it brooks discussion of issues such as allowing the remarriage of the divorced, or the ordination of women) would be the likes of *Open House* magazine, along with *The Tablet* the most notable, theologically 'liberal' Catholic magazine in the UK today. *Open House* makes no bones about its activities being licensed by Vatican II's shining of the spotlight on the laity. It describes itself as "a Scottish religious magazine of comment, opinion and reflection", opinion being something that the ultra-conservatives believe Catholics should not have where at variance with the teaching of the Church of which they are members (on the face of it, not entirely an unreasonable proposition). Much more intellectually sophisticated, the magazine *Faith*, a solidly orthodox publication, aims to show through the use of the tools of theology, the interpretation of 'tradition', philosophy and science, alongside Biblical exegesis, that the Catholic position will essentially always be borne out by the exercise of 'reason'. It is the magazine of choice for the most orthodox young Catholics in the United Kingdom today. Broadly speaking, *Faith*, which is hallmarked by a notable collaboration between lay and consecrated contributors, will not give a platform to more liberal views, differing, then, from *Open House* or from *The Tablet* which very frequently allows the reporting and expression of 'anti-liberal' and conservative views (though again this is read by their detractors as merely part of the woolly and inclusive relativism of such magazines).

I have at some length sketched part of the context in which lay Catholics in the United Kingdom operate today to suggest that, first of all, obviously, there is a lack of precise consensus about the exact role of the laity, but, tacitly, none in general about the validity of their voice as a voice. This represents a situation that is radically new in Catholic history. Even if the conservatives are right that the genie is now out of the bottle following the Vatican Council, they themselves are part of that genie. There may be rather less than intellectually cogent, impractical positions on both sides, whether a desire to turn the clock back to almost any time before the autumn of 1962, or, perhaps, on the far side of liberalism, the proposition that Catholicism does not offer anything distinctive from other religions. Simply, however, the lay voice is a factor as never before, whether asking for more or less power. And there is nothing to suggest, with both the call for radical lay action on the one hand, and a hugely increased number of reports to Rome of clerical (usually 'liberal') misdemeanour on the other, that the laity in the next decade or so is going to be any more silent or less active.

Lay organisations pre-date Vatican II, but they are more usually prayer sodalities such

as the Legion of Mary or confraternities engaged in non-political works of charity, such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul. But of course it should be remembered that in 2012 the Newman Association has been celebrating its 70th anniversary. The history of the Newman Association now needs to be written up in scholarly fashion (the organisation could do worse than seek to obtain funding for a PhD scholar to undertake this task, drawing on the extensive archives of the association). What this would certainly show is that the call to dialogue and discussion that marks out the Newman Association's charism pre-dated, although it was accentuated by, Vatican II. Catholic lay activism in the United Kingdom from the 19th century had several key priorities. These included the achievement of social and intellectual respectability for a historically mistrusted, despised and eventually – in the case of Irish immigration and to some extent too *à propos* the highlands of Scotland – a violently displaced, migrant community. No-one did more than the third Marquis of Bute to endow fine places of Catholic worship in 19th century Britain, and also to enable the increased presence of the religious orders bringing education and good works to the Catholic community. Upper-class Catholic patriarchs, such as Bute, were joined by prelates like Cardinal Vaughan who established the Catholic Truth Society in 1868. It was efforts such as these that began to bring Catholicism into the mainstream of British society as its status, and cultural and intellectual heritage, became generally 'respectable'. Leaving aside certain theological niceties the apologetic pamphlets of the CTS differed little in overall moral substance from the teachings of the Church of England or the Church of Scotland. Transubstantiation or the theology of saints were safely 'in-house' matters, while sexual matters and social morality, broadly, formed part of a universal Christian cultural consensus. By and large, then, Catholicism – for most of the 19th century and into the following one – found little difficulty in situating itself within British society and culture. Indeed, it became increasingly 'at home' there, despite real prejudice against it at times whether in the shipyards of Clydeside, in middle-class boardrooms, or elsewhere in the world of work.



G.K. Chesterton

Upwardly-mobile, better-educated British Catholics were not hugely involved in the Modernist crisis in the church during the early 20th century, the main opponents in such seemingly rarefied debates being clerics. Perhaps the most influential British lay voice in the church in the early decades of the last century was G.K. Chesterton, who expressed a mistrust of both conservatives and what he called 'progressives'. Although in many ways a unique character himself Chesterton represented the comfortable 'orthodoxy' of the early 20th century British Catholic Everyman. However, in this context, he also notably objected to humanity's increasingly selfish materialism, including its megalomaniacal appropriation of a Godlike status to itself. In many ways these were (and are) standard Catholic positions offering dissent from the western narrative of unremitting 'progress', but ones that took on added urgency a decade after his death in the post-World War II world.

Ronald Knox, who gave the homily at Chesterton's funeral, and was avowedly hugely influenced by Chesterton's outlook, was outspokenly appalled by the atomic bombing of Japan, one of the most striking and first acts of real Catholic dissent from the British world-view in the twentieth century. Hiroshima and Nagasaki represented one of two world events that created a moral fault-line in the western world, the other being the existence of the Nazi death-camps. These horrible occurrences meant that for the first time the value of human life had become in practice brutally relative, challenging the universalism supposedly espoused at the heart of western Christianity. For the post-World War II generation, including Catholics, the university-educated ranks of whom burgeoned from the 1950s, this new world demanded intellectual and practical activism where spiritual, moral and political action was urgently compressed together. The new, later 20th century, middle-class Catholic constituency had, in a sense, no choice but to engage with the moral, political, social and cultural climate, whether this meant condemning much of this, or on the other hand, attempting to find places of accommodation. In other words, neither the conservatives nor the liberals could - or can - avoid engagement with the secular world, even as these two groupings may be in huge disagreement as to what to do about it, resenting even the response of one other. The conservatives cannot pretend, as many would like to, that politics (or social work) and religion represent entirely separate spheres. Liberal Catholics cannot endlessly accommodate themselves, as some do, to an ever-more-secularised moral relativism. Within all Catholic positions there are fine judgements that need to be made and this is where the Newman Association has its continuing value in promoting 'open dialogue', which means openness of conscience, and in love and charity, towards those who sincerely disagree with us whether Catholic or anything else. It means dialogue, not merely the invention of the Enlightenment, but the necessary constituent along with authority in the unfolding of the tradition of Catholic belief and teaching on all issues. This is borne out by numerous examples of popes and church fathers (and mothers) and councils developing the discussion and understanding of what it means to be Catholic. This development happens not because we adapt ourselves to the world but because Catholicism constantly needs to find new ways of speaking its essential truths to a changing world. That is how Tradition actually works, dynamically and with its own sense of 'progress', that it is a tool constantly re-sharpened to pierce the hearts of today as much as those of yesterday. Retreating into the catacombs will make us merely museum pieces.

The Newman Association was at its strongest in the 1960s, an exhibit in the case for the prosecution so far as some of its detractors are concerned. The image of the lefty, Tablet-reading Newman member (*the Tabletista*, *à la* the smear of association with Liberation Theology) is one that has perhaps stuck in recent years - indeed some NA members would proudly wear that description - but there are others who are somewhat more conservative. The Newman Association continues throughout the United Kingdom to provide a platform for different shades of Catholic viewpoint. The Glasgow Circle's highly varied programmes over the past decade have been variously attacked for allowing a voice to speakers who are either too liberal or too conservative. However, I believe it is not too trite to say that 'giving voice' to all Catholics in good faith, and indeed to those who oppose them in discussion (other Catholics, or just others), is the right, as well as inescapable reality of the intellectual Catholic position

in the early twenty first century. Lay people are increasingly involved in the running of many parishes either - according to whom you believe - because of the profligacy of authority following Vatican II, or because of the conservatism of the Vatican in not allowing changes in the rules for priestly ordination. Sensible projections of relative clerical and lay strength over the next decade show that the lay participation in the parishes, meaning especially the liturgy, will accelerate. Blog and publishing activity by lay Catholic opinion of all shades will also increase. British society, or at least the political class, with its apparently shifting views towards acceptance of euthanasia, homosexual partnership and a range of other issues, will ever more come into conflict with traditional Catholic teaching.

The Church rightly demands its participation within the civic space and that is necessarily a lay space where the lay Catholic voice often has as much, if not more, to contribute than the clerical one. Ultimately, Catholic logic – precisely because of its rootedness in tradition - cannot resist the forward momentum of human culture.

There may well be individual social and moral abuses within this momentum to be protested against, but it is also a sin not to believe in the presence of divine providence in the world available as part of a forward momentum of its own. There are times, certainly, when the Church and its members should be counter-cultural, to tackle that which is wrong and bad but accepted in our society. But God's grace, or goodness, will always emerge from evil, and we have faith that He is always in the world bestowing bounty to His entire universal people. To paraphrase, "He is in the world, and yet the world knows him not". We Catholics should not make the mistake of 'giving up' on the world, which would be a sin against our Saviour.

A long-standing Catholic view is that Good and Evil are in constant battle within the temporal world. Both liberals and conservatives come close at times to the heresy that Evil is on the verge of winning out, specifically of vanquishing Holy Mother Church. We have faith that this will never happen. We have faith, as well as ample evidence (paradoxically from all sides as I have been arguing), that the laity is here to stay. To paraphrase one of the greatest Catholic fiction writers of the 20th century, we should go on our way rejoicing within the Newman Association into the next decade and well beyond.



Gerard Carruthers