



Changing
PRIEST-PARISHIONER
ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

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The Year for Priests provided Catholic laity an unprecedented opportunity to show their support, appreciation and gratitude to the priests in their lives. It also provided laity the opportunity to reflect on the many changes that have occurred in the past several years. Had the Year taken place before Vatican II, its meaning and its celebration in the U.S. would have been markedly different from today. It would be different because of the radical shift that has occurred in priest-parishioner roles and relationships. While there were major cultural changes occurring in the 1960s besides Vatican II, the implementation of the Council's initiatives dramatically changed and shaped priest-parishioner roles and relationships. Few imagined that this meeting of the world's Catholic bishops over a period of three years (meeting face-to-face for two months per year from 1962 through 1965) would have effected such profound change. The implementation of *Lumen Gentium* was probably the most decisive factor in this relational change. Also known as "Light to the Nations" and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* is the first and most important of the 16 documents of the Council.

This article describes the changes in roles and the relationship of priests and parishioners within the context of broader historical changes and with *Lumen Gentium*. It begins with a description of Catholic parish life in the U.S. before and after the Vatican Council and identifies several concurrent factors that fostered a sense of economic and social equality that most Catholics had never before experienced. Then, it highlights the profound influence of *Lumen Gentium* on the roles and responsibilities of both priests and parishioners and how these changes have altered, and continue to alter, the relationship between priests and parishioners.

CATHOLIC PARISH LIFE: BEFORE AND AFTER VATICAN II

In the years prior to Vatican II, a “fortress” or “ghetto” mentality characterized life for many American Catholics. Many Catholics were descendants of immigrants, of lower socio-economic status (SES), and faced discrimination, limited opportunities, and other forms of adversity. Catholic parishes provided refuge and support which resulted in a subculture that was tightly knit, predictable, and emotionally secure. Catholics drew meaning and strength from the certainty of their beliefs, customs, rituals, rules, and the leadership and encouragement of their parish priests. Life was filled with statues, medals, holy cards, grace before meals, Friday fish fries, and priests and nuns in religious attire. Mass attendance was high, criticism of the church and its leaders was low, and a sense of “connection” to the sacred was as close as reception of Holy Communion, benediction and personal devotions. Few ever considered “leaving” the church and the promise of heaven seemed assured by remaining in the state of grace. Needless to say, this vibrant subculture promoted a common vision and a sense of unity among parishioners. Priests and religious were held in high esteem, and the expectation of obedience to priests and the church, often blind obedience, was normative.

Growing up in my parish in the years before the Council remains a most pleasant memory for me. The parish staff consisted of Monsignor, the pastor, three curates (we now call them associate pastors), 10 nuns in the school, a parish secretary and a janitor. There was a part-time male coach at the school, but no lay teachers. There were six Masses on Sundays that were always jammed. Most every parish member seemed to be involved in one or more of five parish activities: Holy Name Society for men, Christian Mothers for women (even if unmarried or without children),

Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) and Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) for children and adolescents, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society for those who wanted to help others. Mass attendance as well as attendance at parish activities was very high. The parish priest’s role was largely that of providing sacramental services while the parishioners’ role was that of receiving those services. Furthermore, the priest-parishioner relationship could be described as dominant–submissive, i.e., parishioners were submissive to parish priests.

In the years following the Council my parish underwent many changes. Within 20 years the pastoral staff was significantly reconfigured to a pastor, an associate pastor, a lay pastoral associate, and 10 full-time lay pastoral staff. Only one nun remained in the school, the principal, and the rest of the staff consisted of lay teachers, an assistant principal, a coach, and a school counselor. The liturgy schedule shifted to a Saturday afternoon mass, with two masses on Sunday. A parish council was formed that advised the pastor or actually made many financial and administrative decisions. Approximately 40 parish ministries evolved, including 12 related to the parish’s Office of Human Concerns, of which the St. Vincent de Paul Society is one. A group of highly committed parishioners became actively involved in all these ministries.

The most obvious differences pre- and post-Vatican II are that the parish has fewer masses, more professional lay personnel involved in the church and school, and the thrust of parish ministries is more outward into the community as contrasted with its inward focus in the past. Less obvious are changes in roles and relationships. The role of the priest is still that of provider of sacramental services, but now includes coordinator of parishioner talents and spiritual gifts. The role of parishioners is still that of recipient

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of sacramental services but also includes being more proactive in parish activities. For some parishioners, this proactivity also extends to their jobs and the larger community. The nature of the relationship of priest and parishioners has shifted to that of collaborators.

CONCURRENT CHANGES

In the U.S. a series social and political changes occurred concurrent with the theological changes of the Council. Unquestionably, the 1960s were a time of rapid and radical change. Besides the Vietnam War and its protest movement, there were a number of social movements that championed the cause of social equality and equity in American culture. These included the women's movement, the civil rights movement, various human rights movements, and the so-called sexual revolution. Some years earlier, government initiatives, such as the G.I. Bill, had the effect of greatly expanding the middle class and fostering economic equality.

Particularly for Catholics, the G.I. Bill made a college education a reality for an entire generation of returning Catholic servicemen. Access to and attainment of a college education, otherwise out of reach for many Catholics, led to managerial and professional jobs. This resulted in a dramatic shift upward in socio-economic status for a large segment of the Catholic community. But with these changes the laity's sense of unity and common vision began to fade as the church became increasingly heterogeneous. This heterogeneity would be reflected in all indicators of religiosity ranging from theological beliefs, level of parish involvement and participation, and views of priests (Rinaman, 2009). It also led to the demise of the "fortress" mentality that had provided a subculture that had supported and assisted generations of Catholic in their parishes.

While some might attribute the loss of this subculture to Vatican II, the Council was more likely a reflection of its demise rather than its cause (see Doyle's book for more details). The impact of Vatican II, particularly *Lumen Gentium*, has been immense and it has been well received. National surveys show that some 80% of Catholic laity voice support of it (Rinaman, 2009).

PRIEST-PARISHIONER ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS: THEN AND NOW

Before Vatican II, some 50 or more years ago, the role of the laity was very limited and very well defined. Theologian Thomas O'Meara, O.P., characterized good and loyal Catholic laity as those who would "sit at the sermon, kneel for communion and reach into their pockets for the collection: in short, 'to pray, pay, and obey.'" O'Meara points out that this pray, pay, and obey role for laity was normative behavior throughout Christian history. Not only did theology texts of the time have almost nothing to say about the laity's role but "the code of canon law said they had one right: to receive from the clergy spiritual aid for their salvation; thus they were defined negatively." In short, priests were theologically trained, ordained and expected to function as leaders in active ministries.

As a result, priests had nearly total decisional control of both sacramental and parish life. In contrast, parishioners were not theologically trained (with a few exceptions) nor given leadership positions, but instead were passive recipients of ministry. Consequently, they had little if any decisional control. The relationship between priest and parishioner reflected a superior-inferior dynamic. Parishioners were to be seen and not heard, nor to question or disagree with their priests. The preferred relational interaction was

simply: "Yes, Father." Prior to the Council, Sunday Mass attendance rates were high, probably exceeding 80%. However, after Vatican II, a new model of church emerged and the roles and relationships of priests and laity began to change.

Lumen Gentium, the central document of Vatican II, effected a paradigm shift in ecclesiology, i.e., the theology of the church. In this document the church was described as the People of God. "Everything which has been said so far concerning the People of God applies equally to the laity, religious, and clergy" (n 30). Particularly striking in this document is that the People of God are called a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9) (n 9) with the unique designation and recognition of the "common priesthood of the faithful." A similar designation is the *priesthood of the laity*. "Though they differ essentially and not in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are none the less interrelated; each in its own way shares in the one priesthood of Christ" (n 10). What this means is that fundamentally, the members of the church—laity, religious, deacons, priests, bishops—are equal by virtue of baptism. This means that the laity are not second-class Catholics. Instead, clergy, vowed religious and laity are called to collaborate in implementing the mission of the church. All are called to "play" together to bring about the kingdom.

The implications of this recognition are profound and far reaching. Thus, instead of priests shouldering all the responsibility for the church's mission, their role now is to coordinate the gifts, charisms and ministries of parishioners such that "all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart" (n 30). No longer are the laity to *participate in the ministry of the hierarchy*, instead: "The lay apostolate . . . is a

participation in the saving mission of the church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation, all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord himself" (n 33). In terms of calling,

The laity, however, are given this social vocation: to make the church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that it can become the salt of the earth. Thus, all lay people, through their gifts which they have received, are at once the witnesses and the living instruments of the mission of the church itself 'according to the measure of Christ's gift' (Ephesians 4:7)" (n 33).

In short, not only is the role of the lay person changed to that of active participant in the mission of the church (in a way different from the role of priests), but the role between priest and lay person is now to be "interrelated."

Following *Lumen Gentium* increasing numbers of parishioners participated in a wide array of ministries, mostly within their parishes. With the inauguration of parish councils, accountants and others with financial and managerial training shared their expertise with pastors. Others completed ministry degrees and took responsibility for religious education and a host of other parish-based ministries.

DIVISION OF LABOR: THE FOUR SPHERES OF LIFE

Essentially, *Lumen Gentium* established a division of labor in the kingdom. Priests were to focus their efforts primarily in the parish and the church, while the laity should focus their efforts primarily in the three areas or spheres of family, work, and society (n 31). That call involves bringing about the kingdom of God in the world; in other words, primarily to "play" or participate

in non-parish spheres, and secondarily to "play" in their parish community. Hopefully, in the context of parish ministries, both priest and parishioner would "play together" in a collaborative fashion. Pope John Paul II was adamant that this division of labor be upheld and insisted that priest and religious should not hold public office since this worldly activity is the sphere of the laity. Accordingly, in 1981, Robert Drinan, S.J., elected to the U.S. Congress four times by a largely Catholic vote in Massachusetts, resigned his office in response to the Pope's directive.

For many Catholic laity participation in parish ministries is viewed as their primary "calling." Some lay people are indeed "called in different ways to more immediate cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy . . . and may be appointed by the hierarchy to certain ecclesiastical offices which have a spiritual aim" (n 33). But this calling is limited to a very few laity. Interestingly, a key indicator of lay participation in a parish is church attendance. In 1993, some 51% of those identifying themselves as Roman Catholic said they regularly attended Sunday Mass. However, the actual percentage of those attending was a mere 26% (Chaves). Figures from a 2007 national survey find that 39% report Mass attendance, but data on the actual percentage of attendance was not reported (Rinaman).

In his apostolic exhortation, "The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World" (*Christifideles Laici*) Pope John Paul II warns against the "temptation of being so strongly interested in church services and tasks that some (laity) fail to become engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural, and political world." He insists that church—for the laity—should serve as a source of faith and holiness and as a place to be outfitted with the spiritual resources to serve their mission in the world.

LAY PERSON AS PRIEST, PROPHET AND KING

Lumen Gentium also declares that all the People of God participate in the threefold-ministry of Christ as priest, prophet, and king. Formal initiation into this threefold-ministry occurs in the rite of baptism. During the anointing with chrism, "a sign of the royal priesthood of the baptized," the presider says: "The God of power and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin and brought you to new life through water and the Holy Spirit. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that, united with his people, you may remain forever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King."

Lumen Gentium spells out specific ways in which the laity are called to participate and share in Christ's threefold ministry. They carry out Christ's priestly function as they live their lives in the world by making God present to others as they strive to live a holy life. To the extent to which they consecrate their daily activities at home and in the workplace they fulfill this priestly function.

For 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." Together with the offering of the Lord's Body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God (n 34).

They carry out Christ's *prophetic* function as they give witness (verbally or in silent witness) to their faith by the

way they live in the world. Being a truth teller and seeking justice while refraining from criticism and judgment of others also reflect this function. In short, "it is the duty of all lay people to cooperate in spreading and building up the kingdom of Christ" (n 35).

They carry out Christ's *kingly* function by working to bring the world in the direction of truth, life, holiness, grace, justice, peace and love. "Therefore by their competence in secular disciplines and by their activity which grace elevates from within, let them do all in their power to ensure that through human labor, technical skill and civil culture the goods of creation may be developed for the benefit of everyone without exception . . ." (n 36). In short, it is the very way in which parishioners live in the world that the threefold mission of Christ is enacted.

CELEBRATING THE YEAR OF THE PRIEST: THEN AND NOW

A celebration of the Year for Priests prior to Vatican II might have included a novena, a potluck dinner in honor of the pastor and other priests and would have been attended by most if not all parishioners. Inevitably, there would also have been a heartfelt gift presented to the beloved pastor. Today, a celebration would more likely involve a much smaller number of "core" parishioners, i.e., those who are highly participative in parish ministries and supportive of the parish's priests. It might include ongoing personal and communal prayer along with formal reflections on the emerging roles and relationship of priests and parishioners. This is exactly the way in which my own very active parish celebrated the Year.

How this momentous year was memorialized and celebrated may reveal differences, differences that reflect the extent to which these role and relationship changes have been internalized by both priests and parishioners in a given parish or diocese.

This is to be expected as it typically takes a minimum of 50 years for a major cultural and institutional initiative to be reasonably accepted and implemented, and another 50 years for it to be fully assimilated and accommodated in everyday life. Accordingly in the years to come, the laity's role in transforming the world can be expected to increase and the priest's role in empowering laity will also increase. This is likely to result in even greater changes in the priest-parishioner relationship.

CONCLUDING NOTE

The roles and relationships of priests and parishioners have dramatically changed because of the profound shift in our basic understanding and view of the Christian life. Largely because of Vatican II, the understanding of what it means to be a lay Catholic is radically different than before the Council. While this understanding has yet to be fully internalized in all persons in U.S. parishes, the role of the parishioner has expanded from passive recipient of parish services to proactive missionary to both the parish and the world. As such it has shifted from "pray, pay, and obey" to "*play*, pray, pay, and obey." Actualizing the baptismal charge to share in Christ's threefold mission means that their role has shifted from being largely receptive to more active, while their relationship with their parish priests has become less submissive and more collaborative. The nature of this change has been much more basic than obvious post-conciliar changes such as mass in the vernacular and related liturgical changes. This change in priest-parishioner roles and relationships represents a basic paradigm shift in the theology of the church. It could well be that *Lumen Gentium* and its implementation is one the most important moments in the entire history of Catholicism.

RECOMMENDED READING

Chaves, M., and J. Cavendish. "More Evidence on U.S. Catholic Church Attendance." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, pp. 376-381.

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O'Meara, T. *Theology of Ministry, Revised Edition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1999.

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Rinaman, W., M. Loveland, R. Kelly and W. Barnett. "Dimensions of Religiosity Among American Catholics: Measurement and Validation." *Review of Religious Research*, 50 (4), pp. 413-440.



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