

Theology of the “Laity”? (Reality or Mystification)¹

Enrique Dussel

1 DUSSEL, Enrique. *“Teologia do ‘Laicado’? (realidade ou mistificação).”* In: **Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira** (“Medicina da Reprodução e Bioética”), vol. 47, fasc. 186, June 1987. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1987, pp. 379-385. Translated by V. S. Conttren, July 2022. DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/T5K84.

I have been asked, as a “lay” theologian of liberation, to write an article about the “theology of the laity.” I must say, from the onset, that when someone asks me: — “How can you, a *layman*, possibly be a theologian?,” I respond to them: — “Look! First, do not insult me, because I am not any *layman*. I am a Christian. And as a Christian I can be a prophet, pastor, doctor... In short, I can exercise whichever one of the Christian charisms enumerated by Paul of Tarsus in his letters.” However, since I’ve affirmed that being a *layman* is an insult, I will now better explain myself in the following brief lines.

I have a vast experience in being that which has been designated as a “layman.” *As a layman*, I believe myself to have even more experience than any bishop of the Roman Catholic Church, and even more than the Pope himself, since, I believe, none of them have been “*laymen*” for 52 years — since much longer before that, they entered a seminary, were ordained priests and were promoted to the episcopate or elevated to the pontifical throne.

I was born in the evening of December 24th, 1934, in La Paz (what a beautiful name!), in the middle of the desert of Mendoza, Argentina. My father was a doctor who served peasants and the poor; my mother, catholic militant. That is why when I became 8 years old, after having received my first communion and had memorized the Catechism, I joined the Catholic Action in the city of Mendoza. Later, at 10 years of age, I became a candidate for the Catholic Action; at 15 years old, Youth of the same CA; as a 17-year-old, I became a diocesan Delegate of the Candidates and founded the Guides’ Movement. In Mendoza, we have the Añoncábua Mount, well seven thousand meters high; I was an Andeanist (not an alpinist), but one who faces actual mountains,

climbing summits with more than five thousand meters since I was 12 years old. I was President of my JUC (Catholic University Youth) Center, at the University. At 20 years of age, in 1954, I was a Founder of the Argentine Christian Democracy. Ultimately, all things which make up the *curriculum* of a good conservative and anti-communist during the "Cold War" era. Graduated in Philosophy at age 23 as a Thomist, I departed for Francoist Spain while being anti-Francoist. My doctoral thesis in Philosophy was both Maritainian and against Charles de Koninck (Canada's Thomist of the right). Always "lay;" a whole Latin American "history of the laity," from the 1930s to the 1950s.

A Doctor of Philosophy, I spent two years in Nazareth, Israel, with Paul Gauthier. Every Saturday we would go to the Synagogue of Nazareth, that of Jesus, and would read in Hebrew the text of Isaiah 61:1. The one Jesus himself read at that same place: "*Ruah Adonai halah...* The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...." This consecration or prophetic "anointing" of Jesus is mine, the one I received at baptism 16 days after being born, on January 10, 1935, an anointing requested by my parents for myself at St. Peter's Church in Mar del Plata—1,400 km from my home-town—already a pilgrim a week after being born!

While in Nazareth, Israel, I worked as a carpenter. I still have my Nazareth hammer made of hardwood, which I intend to take to the tomb, awaiting the resurrection day. I plan on presenting Jesus with my Nazareth hammer and my union card at *Istadrutz* (Israeli construction workers' union), which reads: *tavsán gimel* (Carpenter level C). At least we should treat each other as colleagues - of course he worked much longer than I did, but still, colleagues after all. Between 1959 and 1961 I had

this unspeakable “spiritual” experience in the Holy Land, and also on Lake Ginosar.

When I was 27 years old I returned to Europe, always “lay.” I then joined Sorbonne: Philosophy, History of the Church and Theology at the Paris Catholic Institute. There, I spent two years in Germany (1962-65, with interruptions), where I had as a Theology Professor in two different courses the then progressive Joseph Ratzinger, who in his humble bicycle went to give his Vorlesungen (Prelections) on the “Doctrine of Creation.” Lortz was my History of the Church professor in Mainz, where I had gained a scholarship. It was in 1963 when I met my future wife Johanna from Münster, Warendorf. We married soon after that. In Paris, my son Henrique was born. Soon after I became Licensed in Theology by the Paris Institute. In 1967, a Doctor in History through the Sorbonne, specializing in History of the Church in Latin America. After, I returned to Latin America. Professor at the Latin-American Pastoral Institute in Quito, Ecuador. A professor of many courses, of bishops even. D. Oscar Arnulfo Romero was in my courses three times at Medellín and Guatemala la Antigua—amongst a dozen others—. By the end of 1981, I was a Doctor *honoris causa* of Theology in Fribourg, Switzerland... And always “lay....”

Why is everything I have told so far nothing in comparison to that which the Lord has been asking for in Latin America, Africa (where we have just created the African Church’s History Association), or Asia (where we have organized a meeting with Buddhist, Hinduist, Muslim and Liberation Christian theologians)... And this *curriculum* for what? To show that after such wide experience as *lay* — wider than any Bishop or

Pope, as already said, "as a lay person," I shall present a few hypothesis on the solicited subject.

It has been some time since Yves Congar, a great master and friend, wrote *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat*. The following lines seek first to be *Jalons* (markings, bollards, stakes) towards a "anti-theology of the laicity" or a "theology of the anti-laicity," as you might prefer. As the "lay" that I am, just like another "lay" like Dante Alighieri — whose tomb I one day venerated in Ravene — I shall procure a little humour. He did not write the Divine *tragedy* but a Divine *comedy*, that is, *with a great sense of humour* he critiqued his epoch starting from a Happy God: history as "comedy." In the same way, if we were to make a *sociological* description (understood correctly as: what is seen under the light of *natural* reason), we would be able to say that the Catholic Church is a *roman episcopalian* institution. The power of the Episcopate is such that even through the Vatican Council II, ended just over twenty years ago, there were more than two thousand bishops, and a few priests and religious individuals invited. For the "lay," one could count them with their own fingers, and even them as "observers." There has never been in the history of the Church such a Council *with so little lay presence*. And, above all, with such minimal authority. At least in another epochs, through Kings and Sovereigns, although feudal, the "lay" were able to shine in a light from outside of the exclusive episcopal world. The episcopalian clericalization of the Church is total today. This is what a sociological observer would say — let us leave faith for other observations.

Now, if we were to recall to the very origin of Christianity, to the eye of the sociologist contrastively (that is, in the eyes of an observer who only has with him the light of reason), and if we observe the objective

conduct of Jesus — of which in an almost maniac manner I materially followed with my Israel stay (I walked from Nazareth to Tiberias and Capernaum, passing through Canaan's mountains, or descending through the Jezreel Valley and through the village of the young Naim; or walking from Jerusalem to Jericho and the Dead Sea, continuing towards Bethlehem or the mountain villages of Judea), we see that He never behaved as a priest, but criticized the Temple, had His last meal with friends inside a humble private home... Sociologically (attention: this is not said under the light of faith or theology), Jesus was not a priest.

How is such sociological change possible? How can it be possible that the Founder, who fought against the Temple, did not belong to any priestly family (though being of a real origin, that is, politically from the David's ancestry and not Leviticus), did not make any sacrifices to celebrate... And His Church is today *exclusively*—to what concerns authority—in the hands of priests, and not just them, but also bishops, and beyond, in the hands of Rome's Bishop. And this is said because not *until less than a century ago*, bishops were elected by the "Congregation for Bishops," located in Rome. It is known that within the primitive Church, the oldest and most venerable *tradition* (and here I am profoundly "traditionalist" e the more recent institutions do not bode well with me when not necessary or convenient), the diocesan community chose the bishops, as it still occurs in the Oriental Churches. Later, in the Latin Middle Age, through the abuse of Lords and Princes, Rome began to nominate its bishops. However, the kings accumulated powers, which Rome conceded to, and there the *Padroados* began. In such a way that Rome *alone* never was allowed to nominate bishops. The Latin-American bishops were not nominated only by Rome until recently,

in this very own 20th century, where the national *Padroados* perished. Though, inadvertently, instead of sharing with the national Churches the old State rights, which in reality were stripped away from the local Churches, Rome is today the only instance for the nomination of bishops. Such double abuse: of the lords, princes or States to nominate bishops, and the fact that Rome, to remediate it, begins doing it itself, leading to negating the rights of local communities in choosing their own bishops. And what does any of this have to do with the "laity"? A lot, as we shall see.

Effectively, within the primitive Church *there was no lay*. There was the "People of God," and within this people one could find ministries, and many charisms. There were presbyters (elders), deacons (servants), episcopos (or inspector, or supervisors, like in Qumran).. however this *avis rara* named "lay" was not to be found. When did they come about? When Christianity emerged. When the identity between Mediterranean culture and Christianity was born; when the Roman State began to be justified by the Church; when being Christian and Roman were made to be the same: from the beginning of the IV century. The Church, being "invaded" by a mass of pagans, saw itself obliged into receiving them as a "crowd," as an almost passive "mass" who had to learn whatever they were taught. Thus, the priestly, pastoral ministry of the primitive Church of the first centuries started to become a traditional Roman priesthood: with the exclusive dedication for this function. In the Latin Middle Age this was expanded. The clericalisation of Latin Christianity was almost total. The "lay," no matter how great of feudal lords they became, were mostly illiterate, ignorant, rude. The Church should "teach them" everything. Being European, servant or lord, Christian, it was all the

same. Even beyond that they were “lay:” *passive* members — at the most they could participate in the Third Orders of the *perfect* life of the true Christians: the religious, the consecrated. To this it must be added that through the ill disguised Manichaeism of the great Augustine and through the Albigensian and other medieval dualists, the lay life, matrimony and sexuality were depreciated. Only those engaged with celibacy could stand away from these spheres of sin, of flesh, of family pleasures. Just as the Jews were given permission to loan money with interest, since by being Jews they were allowed to fall into the sin of usury and become eternally lost, in the same way the “lay” were allowed to bear children, something necessary though connected to the libidinous sin of sex.

During the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the lay practically did not appear as an ecclesiastical institution. Neither were they found in the first Vatican Council (1869-70). And, as we have already stated, in the Second Vatican Council, they were initially absent as a constitutive part of the Council (“observers”). Thanks to the great bishops and theologians, the concept “People of God” comprehended both the bishops and the “lay,” although there being a chapter on the “lay,” as well as within the newly promulgated Canon Law Code, they are devoid — sociologically speaking — *of all institutional power*. There must be very few institutions — again, sociologically — where its base members are so dejected of any power (not even in the old Masonry their newer members had so little power).

In such Episcopal, sacerdotal Church, where the totality of the decisive authorities is exclusively elected in the Roman Congregation for the Bishops, what place do the “lay” occupy? Practically none.

However, let us leave aside such sociological level and dwell into a theological one. What is the "lay" not for Christianity but for the ecclesiology of the "People of God"?

If the Church is "community" (cf. At 2,46), the members of such community, through baptism, are the "consecrated" (anointed). It is known that the first Christians received such name, "Christian," for their relationship with "Christ." Indeed, "chrestós" is the Greek word which translated the Hebrew "Mashiah" (Messiah): the one who receives the anointing "oil" (as oil was poured out in Hebrew, consecrated or "covered with oil" was the same thing). Now, "Christian" was the "consecrated one", the one who would receive the anointing in the Messiah. The Christian church was a community of anointed, messianic, consecrated people. *Every single one of its members*, due to the fact of having been received into the Church through baptism (understood as: we do not receive the baptism but instead we are welcomed into the Church through the baptism), are "consecrated" (before being religious, bishops or Pope). In such a way that, through good Theology, we are all "consecrated" by baptism. That is what one is: "someone consecrated," that is, a Christian and not a "lay." A "lay" is a certain function that the "consecrated" received during times of Christianity, of profound clericalism, wherein the disappearing "community" (the Base Community) were then transformed in some amorphous impersonal crowd of "chair warmers" inside the Church of European Christianity: "I have received the hierarchical apostolate of the Church." However, must the consecrated through baptism receive the "apostolate" of the Bishop or hierarchy? Does baptism itself not have — as a substantial Christian and ecclesiastical consecration — an essential exigency of the

apostolate, and of this essential-baptismal and communitarian apostolate, are the sacerdotal, episcopal or Papal apostolate derived from? In effect, inside the Catholic Action, where I was officially admitted to in 1942 (and I still store the badge with much pleasure and great honour!), the “lay” received directives from the Bishop. Why? Because no one had told them that the apostolate was itself something of their own baptism. Until then, there would come the great master Yves Congar. But there is something else.

Truly, is not from the personal baptism that the apostolate emanates. Each member of the Church is consecrated as a Christian (even if it is a tautology), when welcomed into the community. The community is the source and foundation of the apostolate, of life and the expansion of the Church. For being a member of the community which consecrates, each member is responsible for their brothers and the world, and for the Kingdom, and the liberty of the oppressed, and the struggle against sin...

It is in this community, starting and spanning through it, that the ministries and charisms emanate from. Some are pastors, others priests, and some are even bishops, and, finally, Popes, and religious doctors, prophets and even politicians, all in name of their faith, others.... And little by little each member achieves their own function. What will remain for the “lay” after such exhaustive enumeration? Nothing! Simply, this passive member, who is taught, who knows nothing, who comes to the Church to watch a Mass celebration... is the “observer” of a Council, of a Bishop Conference (to which Dom Alfonso López-Trujildo attributed, in Puebla, the only function of praying for the good success of *the bishops* works...).

Something is malfunctioning in the current theology of the "lay." One thinks that it would be wise to spend little time, before a Synod of Bishops — wherein, of course, no "lay" would have an active part, with authority — on the "lay people," suspiciously assuming that the mere act of talking about the "lay" already supposes a certain ecclesiology. And one must distrust that, having forgotten many years after the Second Vatican Council the theme of the "lay people," now their existence is remembered. Would a deeply clerical and episcopal Roman ecclesiology not be in need of a "good" theology of the "laity?" Of a "laity" that is fervent, obedient, disciplined, responsible for the temporal (in such a way as the Church is the function of the "spiritual" cleric: that is, idolatrous secularization of the world and also fetishistic clericalization of the Church), but, after all... "lay." Once one enters a blind alley, there is no way out.

Under a consequent theology of the Church of the Poor, a dedicated Church to evangelizing the oppressed, a Church made of the Base Ecclesiastical Communities, its Christian members do not have the experience of being *lay* any more. They are at absolutely "lay" (in Portuguese it is often said: "I am a layman on such subject," to indicate the lack of knowledge, of being specialists on such topic). On the contrary, the members of the Base Ecclesiastical Communities, carrying and reading the Bible in its real context of misery, oppression and suffering, *are specialists, they know what it means to be Christian*, they are able to speak with priests, bishops and even the Pope (as they have done when such a thing was allowed, such as the peasants, indigenous and others who in Colombia, Ecuador and other countries spoke to the Pope without taking into account the protocols determined by the

ecclesiastical order). They are not “lay;” they are consecrated living members of a Community-Church. They fulfil various function: some summon the community, others tidy the house for reunions, some read the Bible better, others build houses, some speak better, others take care of the injured... and another celebrates the Eucharist. The latter is Father Louis or Vicar John, a member of the community who has the ministry of celebration. Everyone agrees that he fulfils this function, one among others (important, no doubt, but not the only one!), knowing that the main function is that of charity, a charism that is perhaps possessed in full by “Granny Mary of Sorrows,” she who in her more than 70 years of existence never blasphemed the Name of God for her sufferings, in her works, and taught as a catechist (another of the fundamental charisms of the foundation of the Church) to many, many children.

Does that “grandmother” feel or consider herself “lay,” that member of the community, that boy who, at the age of 12 in the meetings, with his Bible on his knees, seated, clearly reading the text and explaining it to his elders—as I have seen in the Community of San Peter Martyr, in Mexico?

On the Cuban National Ecclesial Meeting (ENEC), realized in February 1986, the Cuban Church taught us something totally unprecedented: A whole year, in all the parishes, work was done for the meeting, based on reflection, prayer and study of history. Conclusions were drawn up. With these conclusions, a whole year was spent at the diocesan level doing the same thing. The interesting thing was that representatives of the parishes were chosen, not only priests but also other members of the community. Then, with the delegates from the dioceses (25% priests and bishops and 75% members of the parishes)

the same thing was done at the national level. Every hand raised was a vote in the conclusions. Non-priests or non-bishops were not "observers." They were active members with equal voice and vote: an ecclesial community which should give to the Cuban revolution a witness of internal institutional justice. Is this possible elsewhere? For the time being, I do not think so. But what is certain is that in this ENEC there were no "laymen," non-initiates, ignorant of the things of the Church. There were members, experts in the community, responsible for the poor, for the world, for the mission, for the Kingdom.

Theology of the "laity?" I would prefer to speak of "a theology of the members of the People of God." Of course, if some are considering more the "Perfect Society" (= Church), they will wish to speak of the "laity," obedient, faithful, fervent, passive, in short, and without authority or real responsibility in the Church. In the case of having an ecclesiology of the "People of God" and not confusing the Church with the Kingdom of God, the wrongly called "laity" would be the members of the Church who have been consecrated to build this kingdom as living stones of the Messianic People at the end of the 20th century.