

AN EMPOWERED LAITY: A GREAT ASSET TO THE CHURCH

Dr. Bernard Onyebuchi Ukwuegbu

Abstract

If in the past the lay members of Christ's faithful have been conceived as passive recipients of the apostolic attention and care of priests; today, the talk is that the Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is she a perfect sign of Christ unless there is a genuine and active laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy. Through a historical survey of increasing appreciation of the role of the laity in the Church, especially in the light of the renewal of lay movements inspired by the Vatican Council II and subsequent magisterial teachings of the Church, this essay explores the different ways and means through which the laity of the local churches of Nigeria could be empowered to appreciate their role in the Church's mission of advancing the cause of Christ: the Priest, Prophet and King within the shores Nigeria and beyond. Its central thesis is that if the local churches of Nigeria are to effectively answer the universal call of bringing the Gospel to the very doorstep of every human heart, then a significant proportion of her members must be involved. Since the laity constitutes a greater share of the People of God, they should be empowered to assume a greater responsibility in sharing in the Church's mission of proclaiming salvation in Christ.

Introduction

The third millennium of the Christian Catholic faith is characterised by a paradigm shift in the self-understanding of the Church. Thanks to the more organic ecclesiology of the People of God initiated by the Fathers of Vatican II, there is today a greater appreciation of the dignity, role and mission of all the members of the People of God, clerics as well as lay. If the second Christian millennium looked upon the lay members of Christ's faithful as "passive recipients of the apostolic attention and care of priests, and quite seldom, as active protagonists in the life and future of the church and the world,"¹ today the talk is it that "the Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is a perfect sign of Christ unless there is a genuine laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy."²

Among the practical effects of this paradigm shift is the replacement of the canonical and status distinction that once operated in speaking of the three constituent parts of the Church – the ordained, religious and laity – with a functional distinction that places them in relation to the Church and to the World respectively. The ordained are said to be responsible for the sacred ministry, the religious to be witnesses to the beatitudes of God's reign, and the laity to have a call which has a clearly secular character immersing them in

the affairs of society.³ Giving the overwhelming number of the non-clerical members of the People of God, the third millennium Church has begun to appreciate the indispensable role of the laity in the mission of the Church. It is being increasingly realised that "... all of us, priests and lay people, are equally followers of Christ and all of us are equally called to contribute in our distinctive ways, to the growth of the Christ's body on earth down to the end of time" (Acts 1:8).⁴

How conscious are the lay members of Christ's faithful in our various dioceses, as a group and as individuals, of this paradigm shift? What is the cost of their ignorance of this shift on our local Churches in terms of their ability/inability to meet up with the challenges that such knowledge would have imposed? And how could the laity be empowered to come to this knowledge so as to contribute their own quota in advancing the cause of Christ: the Priest, Prophet and King within the shores of Nigeria and beyond? These are the questions that this paper poses and invites all of us to collectively search for answers.

Laity: Concept and History

The New Testament writers use the term "*laos*" (people) to refer to all the members of the church (1 Pet 2:9-10); it designates those who constitute the spiritual Israel, the new "People of God." Since in this context the term continues to bear the OT sense of consecration/election, the first Christians are routinely referred to as the elect, the saints of God. While differences among this "people" do exist, Paul explains that these are primarily a matter of function and stem from the different gifts (*charisma*) given by the Spirit for the purpose of building and strengthening the community. Thus while every Christian must serve the gospel (Eph 4:12), this service can and does take many forms. Paul's delineation of the different charisms (Rom 12:4-8; I Cor 12:4-11) underscores his belief that everyone has some specific contribution to the community and its mission that they must make; by this means too, the apostle indicates the various ways in which the Spirit's gifts are exercised to the benefit of all.

The derivative term *laikos* appears for the first time in Clement of Rome's Epistle to the Corinthians (40:6), as denoting a larger body of Christians in contrast to the smaller group of individuals to whom special ecclesial tasks have been assigned. Tertullian makes similar distinction but never considered the laity to be a subordinate group in the Church. for "not only in their priestly dignity are they equal to that of priests, they also claim identical tasks."⁵ From the 6th century up to the Gratian Decree of the 11th century, the term laity took on a strongly juridical, institutional meaning. As an antonym for clergy, it became synonymous with "one under authority," that is, of the clerics.⁶ Following from this, most medieval authors subordinated the laity to the clergy. However, the Gratian

¹ F. Pierli, & M.T. Ratti, "From Clericalism to Collaborative Ministry for a Millennium of Communion," in *Collaborative Ministry: Tangaza Occasional Papers*, no. 112 ed. (Nairobi: Pauline Publishers, 2001), 11.

² *Ad Gentes*, 21

³ *Lumen Gentium*, 33

⁴ Bernard Kelly, *Lay Spirituality: Its Theory and Practice* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1980), 2.

⁵ Cf. J. Dupuis, "Lay People in Church and World," *Gregorianum* 68, 1-2 (1987), 347-390.

⁶ Ambrose Madtha, *Lay Person as Officiant at Marriage Celebration According to the Code of Canon Law* (Rome: Urban University Press, 1990), 110.

Decree pointed out the consequences of relegating the laity to a passive role in the Church, which includes the ruling out of proper collaboration in the ministry.⁷ The Council of Trent took up the traditional distinction between the clergy and laity and deepened its meaning; and it was this traditional juridical meaning that dominated until the turn of the 20th century.

Towards a Theology of the Laity

The concern to construct a theology of the laypersons in the Church is largely a 20th century development, evoked and stimulated by parallel advances in related doctrinal areas. Foremost among these was the liturgical movement begun under Pius X (*Sacra Tridentina Synodus*, 1905), and carried forward authoritatively by Pius XII (*Mediator Dei*, 1947). A renewed awareness of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, fostered by Pius XII *Mystici Corporis* (1943), revitalized the Pauline and Patristic concept of the Church as a supernatural organism composed of all the baptized united to Christ, the head of the Body, and to each other; a Church in which every Christian, lay and cleric alike, has a dynamic function to fulfil as a participant in her total mission, perceived as spatio-temporal extension of Christ, the mediator.

Added to this, advances made in scriptural studies recovered the communal aspect of the Church as the People of God, the New Israel; while sacramental theology discerned more clearly the consequences of the sacramental character communicated in Baptism and Confirmation, and the ecclesial dimension of all the sacraments, particularly, matrimony. All these and related developments made a theology of the Christian lay people an urgent quest for Catholic theology. At the pastoral level, Pius XI and Pius XII repeatedly appealed for trained and zealous laymen and women to participate in various apostolic efforts and agencies for the Christianisation of society. It is the accumulated efforts of pioneers in this endeavour that made possible the extra-ordinary Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*; the first conciliar document to extensively treat the subject of the laity from the theological rather than from a canonical point of view.

Vatican II and the Increasing Importance of the Laity in the Church

The emphasis placed by the Vatican Council II on the essential oneness of the People of God affected the council's understanding of the nature of the lay/cleric relation. Whereas the two terms were previously used to identify two classes within the church, the Fathers of Vatican II used them in a functional way. Reiterating the Pauline statement that there is in the Church a unity of purpose but a diversity of services,⁸ the Council spelt out the necessary but distinct contribution lay and cleric must make to the successful achievement of the community's twofold mission. Without strictly defining the concept of laity, the Council Fathers offered a typological description:

⁷ J. Bello, *The Structure and Competence of the Diocesan Synod* (Rome, 1987), 46.
⁸ AA 2

The term "laity" is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church. That is, the faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the people of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.⁹

With this descriptive definition, Council Fathers admit that the lay members of Christ's faithful have a definite charge in the church's work of evangelisation and sanctification. Not only were the equality and dignity of all Christian faithful by virtue of baptism highlighted;¹⁰ the common responsibility of all in the task of building up the Church was also recognised. While the clergy does its part in the work of evangelisation by proclaiming the gospel on behalf of the whole church;¹¹ the laity evangelises unofficially by the witness of their lives.¹² In the task of directing the world towards its salvation in Christ, the laity involves themselves directly in the conduct of secular affairs: the clergy, in the main, serve this cause magisterially and pastorally. To further overcome past efforts to negate the laity and their role, the Council Fathers assert that the same call to holiness is addressed to all, even if it is to be achieved by different means.¹³ They also make clear that just as there is a definite vocation to the Holy Orders, so also is there a special calling to be layperson; and that this condition is equally a result of the gift of the Spirit.¹⁴

Further teachings of the Council on the laity and on lay apostolate are expressed in the document "*Apostolicam actuositatem*" the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People. Here, the Council Fathers outline the tripartite aspects of lay apostolate.¹⁵ They equally state that the lay person's being in the world has "a secular quality;" which among other things means engagement in temporal affairs, employment in secular profession and living in ordinary circumstances of family and social life.¹⁶ Concretely, the lay members of Christ's faithful participate in the ministry of the word as parents, educators, and as catechists both parochially and as missionaries.¹⁷ They also contribute time and money to every type of apostolic endeavour sponsored by their local, diocesan, national communities. Lay men and women offer support and advise to their bishops and pastors; and they serve on councils where among other things, they bring to attention contemporary problems that are in need of a Christian interpretation and resolution.¹⁸

All these reveal a rediscovery of the laity by the official hierarchy of the Church: an acknowledgement by the Church of the fact that it possessed a valuable resource in an

⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

¹⁰ Canon 208, Code of Canon Law, 1983.

¹¹ *Lumen Gentium* 19.

¹² *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

¹³ *Lumen Gentium* 32.

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium* 12, 31.

¹⁵ AA, 24.

¹⁶ AA 7.

¹⁷ AA 9.

¹⁸ AA 10.

educated and politically aware membership, one well able to promote and defend Christian interests in the secular society.¹⁹ One wonders to what extent the laity of our diocese are aware of this rediscovery, and to what extent they are prepared to claim the important role that the Council Fathers entrusted them with. Sometimes one has the feeling that the laity shy away from assuming this responsibilities, either out of fear of the overt clericalism championed by the Church in our own part of the globe; or because the present status quo favours those few elitist laity that are reaping personal gains from this overt clericalism or both.

Post Vatican II Development

In the light of the communion-ecclesiology of Vatican Council II, the third - millennium Church has begun to appreciate all the more the indispensable role of the laity in the mission of the Church and the need for incorporating the laity in the evangelising mission of the Church. Addressing the Council of the General Secretariat of the 1987 Synod of Bishops on Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World in May 1984, John Paul II said:

The mission of the laity, as an integral part of the salvific mission of the entire people of God, is of fundamental importance for the life of the Church and for the service which the Church herself is called to render to the world of humanity and of temporal realities.²⁰

A brainchild of the Council, the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* locates the basis of collaborative ministry of priests and lay on the common foundation of Christian baptism. As is clearly stated in Canon 204:

Christ's faithful are those who, since they are incorporated into Christ through baptism, are constituted the people of God. For this reason they participate in their own way in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ. They are called each to his or her particular condition, to exercise the mission which God entrusted to the Church to fulfil in the world.²¹

Among other things, this canon acknowledges that the participation of the lay faithful in the threefold mission of Christ as priest, prophet, and king finds its source in the anointing of baptism, its further development in confirmation, and its realisation and dynamic sustenance in the Holy Eucharist. Each of these dimensions of the common mission was reinforced and reemphasised in subsequent canons: priestly dimension (cc. 836, 839); prophetic dimension (cc. 748, 759, 781); and kingly dimension (c. 228). And it

¹⁹ Georgia M. Keightley, "Laity" in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Komonchak, J. A. et al (eds.) (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2003), 558-564.

²⁰ Synod Consultation Document, *Ex Ecclesiae Coetibus* (CTS Do 563 1985), 252-253.

²¹ C. 204, par. 1

is along the line of these three dimensions that we seek how our laity could be more empowered to fulfil their legitimate role and functions in our local Churches.

Participation in Christ's Priestly Office

That Jesus is the priest par excellence is seen in the various priestly languages that the New Testament used to speak about him. He is variously described as the temple, the place where God dwells (John 2:21); his faith and obedience, his self-giving love constitute a sacrifice pleasing to God (Ephesians 5:2; 1 Corinthians 5:7); the words instituting the Eucharist include among their many references the claim that his Body and Blood are offered for the sanctification of the many. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews described Jesus as the great high priest who once and for all entered into the heavenly temple bringing not the blood of animals but his own blood, thus achieving forgiveness and sanctification for all (cf. Hebrews 9:11–14; 10:1–18).

This priestly or sanctifying function of Christ is what all Christians share in various degrees – by virtue of their baptism. Prior to its implication for *cultus*, participation in Christ's office of sanctification entails a dedication of life and activities to God, after the manner of Him whose food is "to do the will of Him who sent me" (John 4:34). In this light, it is reasonable to consider the daily works, prayers, and apostolic undertakings of the lay persons in family, office, market, and other fields as avenues of participation in the priestly office of Christ in so far as these are allowed to be permeated with the Spirit of Christ.

No where is this sanctifying function so much demanded today as within the context of the nuclear and extended family. Brought about through the Christian marriage covenant of a baptised mature man and a baptised mature woman, the family is not only the nucleus of the society, it is also "the domestic Church" (*ecclesia domestica*). The spreading of the Good News, in fact, begins in this miniature Christian community of love and life. In the family, particularly, parents share in the office of sanctifying, by leading a conjugal life in the Christian Spirit and by seeing to the Christian education of their children. It might be necessary to point out that family prayer, in which all members of the family participate, is a veritable opportunity of sharing in the priestly ministry of Christ. The same also goes for ensuring that all the members of the family participate, at least, in the Sunday community celebration of the Eucharist as well as in other Church activities.

However, certain questions and issues go beyond family boundaries to embrace the wider scale of social structures and institutions. Issues of social justice and community harmony, for instance, belong to this category. Here also, the laity are called upon to rise up to their function as sanctifiers of the secular society. When Christ exhorted his disciples to "let their light so shine before men..." (Matt 5:16) he is reinstating the indispensable mission of all Christians – cleric as well as lay – to permeate the temporal order with the light of authentic Christian spirit, which invariably expands the "frontiers" of God's reign.

Today, the Church needs an active presence of trained and committed lay people working within the temporal structures of labour, business, politics, etc; who, conversant

with the problems of their environment, strong in their Christian life and well grounded in Catholic social teaching, will conscientiously and effectively express the Christian values they profess in what ever fields they find themselves.

Acting as citizens in the world, whether individually or socially, they will keep the laws proper to each discipline and labour to equip themselves with a genuine expertise in their various fields. They ... should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city.... They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good.²²

A special responsibility comes here to those who find themselves at the centre stage of the socio-political theatre. As Ochiagha passionately admonishes:

Always remember that the public arena is your own pulpit for proclaiming your own fidelity to our collective Christian ideals and commitments. Strive to free yourself from the dominant and attractive enslavement to wealth and power; instead, strive to excel in the search for God's kingdom and His righteousness among our people (Matthew 6:33). Not your private interest or that of your interest groups, not even the interest of your political affiliation should be uppermost in your agenda, but the welfare of our people.²³

Even as worshippers in the cult of the Eucharist, the lay faithful consecrate the world itself to God. As Catholics we respond at Eucharist.²⁴ We give thanks. Here, the lay members of Christ's faithful should assume their rightful functions as active participants and not just as spectators. This they do by fulfilling those functions which the Church's liturgical law allows them to do; like singing in and with the choir; functioning as lectors and minor ministers, and where circumstances warrant, as extra-ordinary ministers for distributing the Eucharist and sending the Eucharist to the sick and the elderly. I do not see a reason why, for instance, in a parish where the parish priest is incapacitated either by age or ill-health, well informed lay members of Christ's faithful should not seek for and obtain the required permission to assist the priest in the distribution of communion during Mass. What is needed is adequate catechesis to prepare the people and proper training – theological as well as devotional – of those concerned.

The same also goes for greater acquaintance with the fundamental teachings of the Church. We all are familiar with the famous maxim of Francis Bacon that "knowledge is power." As such, no greater empowerment could be done to a people than their conscious effort to inform themselves on the basic tenets of their faith. We need to probe our religious faith to know God, God's work, and God's will for us. Such a study can itself be

²² *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

²³ Gregory Ochiagha, *Events of Today: Lessons for Tomorrow*, Lenten Pastoral 2002 (Orlu, 2002), no. 40.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, December 30, 1988: *AAS* 81 (1989), n.14.

a very positive form of prayer. The same diligence and energy spent in learning what is necessary for our jobs, markets, products, and services can – when focused on the history, practices, and grounding of our religious faith – produce rare and enriching fruit. It is not without reason that Christ admired, praised and even commended “the dishonest steward for his shrewdness; for the sons of this world are shrewder in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light” (Luke 16:8). Who knows how better our faith-commitment would be, if we invest half the time we devote to knowledge of worldly affairs in deepening our knowledge about God and His Church.

If the laity are to sanctify the temporal order, they must not only be well-informed about the Church’s *mythos*, *ethos*, and *cultus* for their own sanctification, they must, in addition, be in a position to challenge and oppose any charlatan that comes up with erroneous teachings all in the name of Jesus and of the Gospel. The charge given by the blessed Apostle Peter: “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15), is valid for the laity as it is for the clergy. And this charge still remains valid and necessary even when these charlatans come disguised as priests, or even in the persons of those who are supposed to be in the clerical or religious state. Even in this rather strange situation that is becoming increasingly the practice among us today, the onus is on all – clergy or lay – to remember the stark warning of St. Paul to the Churches of Galatia: “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:8).

By boldly confronting and standing against such errors and preventing others from buying into them, the laity, as individuals and as a group will be contributing their own quota towards the sanctification of our world. Who knows, it is the inability of the Church, in her clerics or hierarchy, to empower the laity in this regard that makes them susceptible to being all too easily “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles” (Eph 4:14). How many times have we in our various local churches been victim to such feeble deccits? And how often have we fallen prey and allowed ourselves to be led by the nose by charlatans?

Participation in Christ’s Prophetic Office

That Jesus is a prophet – if not the Prophet – is among the few areas where there is almost a unanimous agreement among students of the New Testament. Not only were the circumstances surrounding his birth similar to that of Israel’s prophets; that very birth itself was said to have taken place in fulfilment of the prophecies of old (Matt 1:23). The adult Jesus was recognised by others in various occasions either as “a Prophet” (John 4:19) or as “one of the Prophets” (Matt 16:14; Mark 8:28; Luke 9:19). As to the concrete content of Jesus’ prophetic office, he himself describes it in terms of “preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, setting at liberty those who are oppressed and proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19).

It is in this prophetic mission of Jesus that we all share in by virtue of our baptism. If there is any of the tripartite office of Jesus where the laity have an upper hand than priests, it is precisely here. As a matter of fact, the proclamation of the dawn of God's kingdom and His acceptable year is much more concretised in the temporal order after the "ite missa est" ("The Mass is ended, go in peace") by the lay faithful, who disperse into the world with a share of/in the "go into the world..." (Mark 16:15) mandate of Christ to the Church: so as to spread far and wide those "seed of the sower" (Matt 13:3). Evangelisation, primary as well as ongoing, is not able to incarnate, inculturate, permeate or transmit into social affairs, without the cooperation or collaboration of the laity. It is they, more than the clergy, that are called upon to witness to Christ in the different circumstances of their daily life: in the family, in the workplace, as well as in their different and varied support groups.

A special area that calls for our attention is advancing the cause of the Social Gospel, i.e., using the Good News of what God has done in Christ to address social and political issues of our time. If there is anything that comes out loud and clear through the pages of the gospels, it is the fact that the prophetic message of Jesus effects a salvation that is total and concrete. Total in the sense that it concerns the whole of the person and belonged not only to the individual, but to the entire community; and concrete in the sense that it contains the deliverance from concrete evils and the promise of concrete blessings. To be effective, the prophetic message that the Church, especially in her lay members, is expected to carry should also do the same.

Exactly how these could be achieved is contained in the social teaching of the Church: especially in her insistence on the need to give prime of place to maintaining the fundamental principles of personhood, solidarity, subsidiarity and common good in all her social engagements. If the laity are to be empowered in this regard, they must be acquainted with the relevant social teachings of the Church. These teaching are not lacking in number today, both on the universal and local Church levels.²⁵ What is lacking is the absence of effective network of dissemination as well as concerted efforts to follow up "such pronouncements with actions in situations of non-adherence to their prescriptions and appeals."²⁶

This is where I think that our laity should be more proactive. First and foremost, there must be an organised effort to acquaint all Catholics with the positions of the Church on relevant social issues; and monitor their compliance with these positions in the policies and programs that they support or promote as public office holders. Among the goals of the Church's prophetic mission is to help her members, especially those of the laity, to integrate their faith in the workplace and to address specific situations therein from the standpoint of Catholic belief and social teaching. May be such strict adherence to basic Church tenets and teachings in one's sphere of engagement should then be factored into

²⁵ For a review of the Social Teaching of the Church as it affects the Nigerian Church and the Nigerian Nation, see Bernard Ukwuegbu, *Confrontational Evangelisation: Foundations, Features & Prospects* (Onitsha: Effective Key Publishers, 1995), 100-132.

²⁶ Ukwuegbu, *Confrontational Evangelisation*, 119.

any consideration for enrolments into knights and ladies auxiliaries and or reception of honorary titles and positions in the Church and Church-related associations.

Admittedly, witnessing to Christ today is not an easy task. It involves regularly going against the current of the society in which we live. Too many destructive influences sway us from accomplishing our prophetic mission. Values of contemporary Nigerian culture – such as materialism, relativism, individualism, greed and the desire to progress at the expense of others and of the common good – can imperceptibly yet definitely sway us; even in the Church. These counter-Christian values, found in our culture and society, often entice us to make choices contrary to the interests of our faith. To offset such influences calls for ongoing conversion of life and an enduring renewal of our discipleship. If we are to remain faithful to Christ, we must commit to doing what is necessary for the relationship, not only to persevere, but to remain strong. Like salmon that swim upstream against the current and only then are able to spawn and create new life, the Christian who values his or her faith must struggle against the influences that would lead to infidelity.²⁷

This calls for constantly immersing ourselves into the life of the Risen Lord. What he taught, how he lived, the standards and principles he valued, must be the measure for what we believe, the lifestyle we lead, and the values we hold. The more truly he is at the centre of our lives (and at the centre of all the members of the Church), the more fruitful and effective will be our prophetic witness, both individually as his disciples and collectively as the lay members of Christ's faithful.

Participation in Christ's Kingly Office

That Christ is a King is an incontestable fact in the Scriptures. At his birth, we were told that wise men from East came all the way from their homeland to inquire after "he who has been born king of the Jews. For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him" (Matt 2:2). His entry into Jerusalem was heralded as that of a King (Matt 21:1-7). When during His trial he was asked by Pilate: "Are you the King of the Jews?" His answer, according to John the Evangelist, was simple and direct: "You say that I am King" (18:33, 37). On His cross, stood written, in all the then known main languages of the then world: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19).

The kingship of Christ, though not of this world, is visible wherever there is the reign of his justice, peace, love, truth and divine order in all hearts. The lay members of Christ faithful have an irreplaceable role in helping to foster the reign of the heart of Christ wherever they find themselves. They contribute to the promotion of this kingdom in their various walks of life by witnessing to the salvific truths of the gospel, something akin to their priestly or sanctifying role.

In the visible manifestation of this kingdom of Christ here on earth, i.e., in the Church, the laity also have an all important role. The hub of the debate on collaborative ministry in the Church is actually all about how the laity could participate in the kingly

²⁷ Michael W. Warfel, "Fathers, Sons and Brothers: Catholic Men Transforming the World," in United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Hearing Christ's Call: A Resource for the Formation and Spirituality of Catholic Men* (Washington DC: USCCB, 2002), 640.

office of Christ, how they could be more involved in Church governance. Even if much of the Church's administration is entrusted to the clerics, especially to the diocesan bishop, significant provision has been made, especially since Vatican II, for active involvement by the lay members of Christ's faithful. In the words of the Council Fathers:

Every layman should reveal to his sacred pastor his needs and desire with that freedom and confidence which befits a son of God and a brother in Christ. An individual layman, by reason of the knowledge, competence, or outstanding ability which he may enjoy, is permitted and sometimes even obliged to express his opinion on things which concern the good of the Church. When occasions arise, let this be done through the agencies set up by the Church for this purpose.²⁸

The Council Fathers also recognises that occasions may arise when the laity may also be given a direct mandate "by the hierarchy to exercise church functions for a spiritual purpose."²⁹ Fortunately, thanks to Vatican II, a lot of structures and institutions have been put in place to facilitate this collaborative ministry; all supported by relevant provisions in the Code of Canon Law. These include the Financial Committee (cc. 492-494), the Pastoral and Laity Council (cc. 511-514) on the Diocesan level and their equivalents in the Parish levels (cc. 536-537). Others include the different organisations for the different categories of the lay members of Christ's faithful: the Catholic Men Organisation, the Catholic Women Organisation, the Catholic Youth Organisation and the Mary League Association. What is required in our case is not so much the establishment of structures but a re-orientation; a creative search for how to galvanise the resources of these organisations to ensure a more active participation of the laity in Church governance.

We must not deny the basic truism that the role of the laity has not been fully explored in this regard; perhaps due to a wrong orientation or even a lack of understanding of the possibilities at our disposal. What Echema observed with reference to the African Church in general, applies to a greater degree to the Nigerian Church:

The Church in Africa has a challenge of realising the relevance and irreplaceable role of the lay faithful. The church is truly all of us together – pope, bishop, priests, religious, and lay.... One fact which many people have always overlooked is that it is not priests or the religious who can bring about the self-reliance of a church. The laity, because they are the Church, the majority among the people of God are the only force that can decisively influence the life of the Church as a whole.³⁰

Among the areas where the laity needs to be more proactive is in their involvement with the management of the Church's temporal goods. The obligation imposed by C. 222, § 1, on all the Christian faithful to help meet the financial needs of the Church also imposes on the bishops (and to a lesser degree on all pastors) the concomitant

²⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 37.

²⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 33.

³⁰ A. Echema, "Autonomy of the Local Churches of Africa," in *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, 9, no. 1 (2007).

responsibility to assure the faithful that such financial donations are utilised in the best way possible. Granted, the diocesan bishop possesses the authority to regulate the administration of ecclesiastical goods according to legitimate customs and circumstances (C. 1276, par 1). But in doing so, he is obliged to also ensure greater financial accountability and involvement by lay faithful in diocesan governance. The Church's law empowers the laity to rightfully demand financial accountability from the clerics, including even from the Bishop; who in turn are obliged to discharge their stewardship role responsibly.³¹

One wonders whether our laity are aware of the existence of the provisions of these canons; and how wonderful the temporal goods of the Church will be managed if they exercise their functions as provided by these canons. If no other thing, it will minimise the high rate of financial mismanagement that we are experiencing in our local churches, oftentimes championed by priests in collaboration with a few privileged members of the laity. All boils down to the issue of educating ourselves on our duties and responsibilities as lay members of Christ's faithful, instead of waiting to be told what to do by priests or by the few privileged laity.

In fine, the participation of the lay members of Christ's faithful in this threefold dimension of Christ's office must be distinctively understood as both similar to and different from those of the clergy with respect to the common mission and the distinctive ministries in the one Church. Yves Congar puts it well when he writes: "Lay persons are members of the People of God by their state. They are Christians to the fullest extent as touching life in Christ, but they have no competence or only a limited competence, touching the properly ecclesial means to life in Christ. These means belong to the competence of clerics."³² To this effect, lay persons should be aware of the position and responsibilities of the priests; and should therefore cooperate with them in the discharge of their duties, including those involved with the training and formation of the laity.

Some Final Words

What we have laboured to say in this article is very simple. The lay members of Christ's faithful are no longer those "*who also belong*" to the Church; but those "*who are*" the Church. They are the community of Christ's faithful who competently function in the temporal order but also participate in the affairs of the "ecclesial sacred space." Both "belonging to" and "being" the Church, all spring from our common priesthood traceable to our baptism "into Christ" (Gal 3:28).

If there is anything that our exposition of Post-Vatican II ecclesiology has revealed, it is this one fact: The major obstacle to the laity coming to terms with this their new found position and role is not to be found in the content of Church's ecclesiology. It is rather to be located in the structural inertia which retards a natural growth of the laity from the

³¹ For instance, c. 1280 requires a financial council for each juridic person; c. 1287 § 1 requires certain administrators to present an annual report to the local ordinary; and c. 1287 § 2 requires a report to the faithful on their free will offerings.

³² Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 18.

seminal stage of "belonging to" to the evolving and fruition stage of "being" the Church; from the stage of initiation to the stage of maturity, from a spoon-fed laity to a self-fed faithful; from an incorporated laity to a fermenting (leavening) laity.

As we all know too well, it is not unusual for humans to prefer the first set of opposites to the second. May be because the first guarantees them the comfort of having somebody to blame when the status quo is not as it should be; may be because it is always easier to stay in the margin and apportion blames than to get involved and take the shots yourself. Who knows! May be those of us who are comfortable with this status quo and who would prefer it to continue do so either because they are benefiting from it or because they are content to shy away from the responsibilities that a more committed, or in our language, an empowered laity, may bring.

Against this tendency of being satisfied and tolerant of the present status quo, it has been our goal here to fan the flame of lay ministry in the Church, or in our language to empower the laity to rise up to the demands of their state and the duties. No doubt the Post Vatican II Church has too readily granted the laity a great amount of leverage in meeting up their new roles and responsibilities in the Church. But as with every other thing in life, the laity themselves must educate themselves as to their new found roles, rights and responsibilities.

We are very much aware that for a Church that for a very long time has been steeped in clericalism, coming to terms with an empowered laity will not be a bed of roses. But in spite of the many unavoidable difficulties that may be encountered in any human situation, including when priests and laity interact in the discharge of their duties, neither should be discouraged nor be at loggerheads with one another as they are only working for God and for the promotion of his Kingdom on earth.³³

Are we canvassing for the laity to rise up against the clergy? Not in the least! All we are saying is that through proper understanding of their various roles, both clergy and laity should work hand in hand, each with his/her assigned roles, to enhance evangelisation. Each member of the Church has a very unique role in the mission of the Church to proclaim Christ. No other person shares the exact time and space in history or the specific circumstances in life as any one of us. No other person has the exact same talents or the exact same personality. No one person who ever has existed or who will exist in the future is exactly like any one of us. Each of us shares Christ in the unique way that only we can share him. As such, we must never discount nor diminish the unique role each of us plays or can play in bringing Christ to another person. In a very real sense, God depends on us all — clergy and lay — to do our part.

Realising this is very empowering indeed. But more empowering is helping others to come to the same realisation. In so doing, we will be helping all of us appreciate our collective mission to be the Church, and to answer our universal call to discipleship in the world, and our common mandate to bring the Gospel to the very doorstep of every human

³³ Cf. Communiqué Issued at the End of the Annual Conference of the Catholic Laity Council of Nigeria on Priests and Laity Formation in Nigeria, 1987.

heart. In other for the local churches in Nigeria to carry out this mission effectively, a significant proportion of its members must be involved. And since the laity constitutes a greater share of the People of God, they have a greater responsibility to share in the Church's mission of proclaiming salvation in Christ. Too often, this responsibility has been left solely to the clergy. Our submission is that it is high time the Laity assumed their legitimate role if we as a Church will ever make a definite impact in the world around us.