

WHY "BROTHERS" AND NOT "FATHERS"

Lay Religious for an Ecclesial Mission (6/9)

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4. THE LAY RELIGIOUS: WHICH ASPECT IS THE MORE IMPORTANT?

It may appear that we have taken the long way around but the trip was absolutely necessary in order to develop a sufficiently deep and broad background. Let us return now to the lay religious.

a) Religious

Historically, monks were laymen in their origin. Neither Pachomius nor his immediate collaborators were ordained, and they did not want clerics in their monasteries. At their beginnings, St. Benedict's group was lay; they only had the priests and deacons they needed for worship and religious services, but their being clerics did not set them apart from the rest of the monks. For this reason it is said that lay religious life is religious life, and that's that! There is, therefore, no question of renouncing anything. Nowadays the majority of male religious are clerics, for apostolic and other reasons. As the Church became more clerical, the religious life also became more clerical. Today, the thrust is in exactly the opposite direction: the desacralization of the monastery. For their part, the clergy adopted a more monastic style of life. This resulted in a widening gulf between lay persons, who were seen as the "non-consecrated ones" -- it being forgotten that Baptism is the most important form of Christian consecration! -- and those who were "consecrated" by ordination or by religious profession ("a second Baptism"). Evidently there is no problem with the coexistence in the same religious family of both clerics and lay religious (and not as simple working brothers either). It cannot be denied, however, that tensions destructive of fraternal unity do arise sometimes.

b) The Predominant Aspect-- A Key Question: Two Points of View

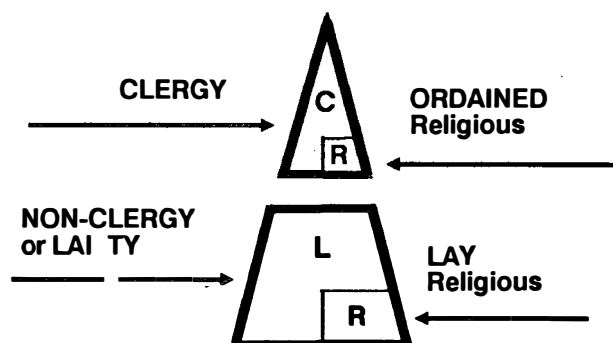
Let us focus our attention, not on life style, but on ministry. And let us ask ourselves: "What is the predominant consideration in the life of a lay religious?" Some answer that the accent is on the lay, in which case the religious should look to the seculars for a part of his identity. Other people insist that predominance belongs to the religious dimension--that being a lay person or a non-cleric is something merely

negative, that the better state, the positive position, is being a religious.

Let's examine each of these points of view more in detail.

c) If the lay aspect is primary, what is the relationship with the secular?

For those who espouse the first opinion, the lay component is the more substantive aspect of the lay religious state. The religious component comes afterward, as though it were second (though surely not secondary). The point of departure might be as follows: among Catholic Christians there are no more than two basic categories, clergy and laity. Clergy have ecclesial ministries and laity don't (whether religious or secular laity). The lay religious is glued, as it were, onto something more basic, the laity. This schema puts us squarely in the purview of pyramidal ecclesiology, which we have already gone over. Here is a possible illustration.



d) Critique

In Romance languages like Spanish words such as "hom-bre", "professor", "amigo", "alumno"... have two meanings, one particular (masculine gender) and the other general (both genders). Today a more precise (or politically correct) distinction is made by the addition of gender suffixes: "amigo, amiga", "professor, profesora". The word "lay" (whether in English or Spanish) has two meanings as well. One particular, positive sense is "what is properly secular", which is a more carefully defined and preferable meaning. The other meaning is general and negative: not to be a cleric, a state common to all seculars, to all religious women and to religious brothers.

1. From the "absence of" to a simple difference, from superiority to equality.

The "absence of" is more than "not to have"; there can be two levels of meaning.

i. lack of something one needs or ought to have. In this sense we don't have wings, but we don't need or lack wings. The same can be said of clerical ministries.

ii. lack of something possible, better, more valuable or which has no more or less equal counterpart. In this case one person has more and the other has less. If one is not blond, that is not important. But not to see, to be blind, is a serious lack or disability. The lay person doesn't have clerical ministries. Is this, then, a question of simply not having something or a need, in the second sense?

We have already seen that unfortunately the clergy often have taken themselves as more gifted, as those who have more. On the other hand, the laity are seen to be those who are less gifted, the have-nots or, if they do have, it is only by leave of the clergy. In this sad division of things, to be non-clergy (lay) is to remain in a position of inferiority, in a state of have-not.

There is another more profoundly Christian ecclesiology: God himself, through Baptism and Confirmation, gives to all Christians, clerics and those who are not, their respective missions, gifts equally valuable and equally necessary for the well-being of the Church. The whole Church is ministerial. Thus we can no longer speak of the lack of something but only of differences and complementary vocations. (Similarly one who is neither fair complexioned or young can be dark and mature; it is a question of what is different and not of what is lacking). This being the case, we can still talk about the non-clerics (laity) but only on condition that we speak also of the non-seculars (the clergy). Why does this seem strange? Why is it not done, even though it is clear that the cleric doesn't have the vocation of the secular and that the latter's vocation is as important as the other vocations? Do we not plod along beneath the yoke of inequality, consciously or not? Are there not still two classes, upper and lower?

2. Not to have the clerical state in common does not suppose that everything else is shared equally. It is evident that all we Christians share the most basic and important traits of religion. Furthermore, the lay religious and the secular share their not-being-cleric status, a negative slant on their situation. This does not mean that they have everything else in common, what is particular and proper to each--and here we are placing a positive emphasis. Actually if two people differ from a third, the two do not necessarily share the same vocation. This is especially true if there are three or more basic alternatives. Yellow and blue are not red, but they aren't the same either; and people who are not fairhaired, for example, can also be enormously different in personality, tastes, employment and pastimes. In other words non-clerics or laity can have different (and complementary) missions in the Church; such is the situation of both seculars and lay religious.

3. Positive similarities? In spite of what has been said, there are those who insist that there are important similarities between the lay religious and the lay person or secular; similarities, that is, beyond those common to all Christians. For example, one sometimes hears things like this:

i. The lay religious should look to the mission "ad extra" of the laity for the inspiration or invigoration of their own lay character. But we have already seen that this mission "ad extra" is incomplete, ambiguous and, at times, a disguised form of clerical monopoly. Furthermore, everybody is present in and to secular society, but not in the same way. Secular Christians are present as Christ-in-the-flesh, so to speak; religious (lay or clerical) as counter-cultural or prophetically different people, distinct and distant from secular society, precisely so as to be prophets and symbols of the Kingdom of God. As for the situation peculiar to the clergy, it is more than muddled enough; the apartheid with which they have surrounded themselves has its basis more in historical developments than in the Christian ethic or in theology. Another episode in this story, which does not fall into the purview of our selected topic, is the whole matter of secular institutes (those which involve "a true and full profession of the evangelical counsels in the world...") (PC, 11)

ii. That the lay religious is involved in secular matters (medicine, education...); that he/she exercises a profession, with the serious danger of being too much the professional, too much the provider of a needed service (losing sight of the obligation to be in the world but not of the world), etc. The truth is that matters are much more complicated. There are a number of contemplative women (lay religious, evidently) who are not busy about the things of the world. Certainly lay brothers have sometimes been reduced to the status of cheap labor; but what has been done to them is hardly good example! Simple professionalization is a real and serious risk! But the same thing occurs with many clerics who become cogs in the bureaucracy of the Church, even at

the highest levels. Finally and most importantly for us, the work of Christian education, for example, is very much more than a mere profession or a mission "ad extra". In fact, by way of example, it has been said of every lay Catholic teacher, catechist or not, that "he/she exercises a specific mission within the Church.... To this lay person... the family and the Church entrust the school's educational endeavor. Lay teachers must be profoundly convinced that they share in the sanctifying and therefore educational mission of the Church; they cannot regard themselves as cut off from the ecclesial complex."⁽¹²⁾ The lay religious teacher and catechist adds to all this his/her religious consecration and the special mission received through his/her religious congregation. In this regard, St. John Baptist de La Salle has some texts that are, frankly, both marvelous and unbeatable for their clarity. For example, Meditation 201: "Let it be clear, then,... in all your relations with the children who are entrusted to you that you look upon yourselves as ministers of God.... (Recognize) that it is God Who has called you, Who has chosen you for this ministry, and Who has sent you to work in His vineyard.... You are not only ministers of God but also of Jesus Christ and of the Church.... It is for the Church, which is the body of Christ, that you work. You have become her ministers through the commission God gave you to preach His word to these children.... Tell the parents, too, what Jesus Christ said about the flock which he shepherds and saves: 'I have come that they might have life and have it to the full.' For this had to be the kind of ardent zeal you had for the salvation of those you teach, when you were led to sacrifice yourself and to spend your whole life to give these children a Christian education and to procure for them the life of grace in this world and eternal life in the next."⁽¹³⁾ Along these same lines, the latest edition of the Rule, only recently approved, often speaks of our apostolate in terms of "ministry."⁽¹⁴⁾

iii. That the lay religious should serve especially the most needy (sick students, cast-off children) on the margins of society (working not from power but from impotence) and on the cutting edge (where the need for imagination, creativity and risk is greater). This is true. But it is the obligation of all religious, not just of lay religious.

iv. That the Brothers find in their lay vocation a special reason to go "ad gentes" (like the seculars). But the same can be said about any religious at all, and even more so if he is ordained. Lay persons tend to have added difficulties and limitations.

v. Finally, it has also been said that, because they are laymen like the ordinary faithful, lay religious enjoy a special affinity to seculars and therefore they are endowed with special gifts to understand them and walk with them.... Certainly! But nothing is quite so simple. For example: the life style of ordained clerics and of secular institutes has more similarities to the secular life style. We have already seen that, in theological terms at least, clerics can marry as they did in the early Church, that they enjoy greater independence in the use of money and in their personal choices, and so forth. On the other hand, their having reached majority requires seculars to take into hand their own formation and movement to greater responsibility, always within the limits of the ecclesial complementarity of different callings or vocations. Such complementarity springs more from differences than from similarities. Nor should we lose sight of a certain historical confusion: the religious life, promoted as the ideal for every Catholic, robbed the laity of their identity and put them into an ecclesial cul de sac. In conclusion, according to some people, lay religious are more apt to adopt an attitude more akin to the seculars and simpler, more evangelical and fraternal than that which many clerics have, even if they are religious.⁽¹⁵⁾

See the notes in the next article: 30-13-B-143.