

WHY "BROTHERS" AND NOT "FATHERS"

Lay Religious for an Ecclesial Mission (1/9)

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1. INTRODUCTION

a. An Important Issue, including at the General Chapter

In our last General Chapter lay religious institutes were a topic for discussion. This is an important issue for us, as our history demonstrates. It is also visible in the importance the laity continues to achieve. It can be seen in our "lay" avocations in education. Finally and most importantly it can be seen in the lack of understanding we have suffered in this area, as a recent booklet emphasizes. (1) According to the booklet the vocation of the Brothers has not always been well understood (p. 5). There are those who do not understand how we can achieve personal fulfillment without being priests (p. 6). We are looked upon as a kind of hybrid (p. 10). We have personally occupied ourselves more, at times, with defending the lay religious state than in deepening our understanding of its theology and in understanding that just as a cleric is not a non-laic, neither is the Brother a non-cleric (p. 10f). In short, "Perhaps the lay religious life is that form of religious life which has suffered the most profound identity crisis. Indeed, it has been the most affected numerically" (p. 25f).

The topic is quite broad. Our focus is more general than immediately practical. The practical is a more complex and variable field, which needs to be put into local and cultural context. Primarily we will direct our reflections to the Brothers; but we also have in mind the laypersons who share our common ecclesial mission.

b. First considerations

To say that the Brother is a lay religious is to equate him with laypersons or seculars. Nevertheless, persons who are not familiar with our vocation still look upon us as priests: "You're a priest, right?" And when we say no, they are puzzled. Furthermore, how is it possible that there are religious who are lay persons just as seculars are, when their life

style is so different in terms of matrimony the use of money and personal freedom of action...? The answer is that such religious are not seculars but do fall into the same grouping as them in that "they are not priests" (and in broader terms "they are not clerics").

We have, then, a first indication of the problem: the word "layperson" (or "lay" or "laic") has two levels of meaning: "secular" and "non-cleric"

Well then, what is the importance of this not being a cleric? The Most Blessed Virgin was not a cleric either. Nor was any female saint. Nor were many male saints.

More questions:

- Is there such a great difference between lay religious and religious who are not lay, between Brothers and priests?
- In the life of the Brother or lay religious, what is the most substantive aspect: the religious, the lay, or perhaps some other aspect?
- In the field of Christian education, do the seculars and the Brothers have exactly the same ecclesial duty?
- Why are there "Christian" parents who say to their sons: "A priest, all right; a Brother, never!"

A further consideration: Where does one place the line of demarcation between the clergy and seculars? For centuries there has existed a relationship of superiority/inferiority. Here is a broad outline of the principal stages of that relationship.

1. Seculars are seen as mere clients of the clergy. This relationship was based more or less vaguely on two principal presuppositions: the cleric was the only dispenser of grace; and the church was the only place where religion was lived out.

2. Seculars are seen as mere agents "ad extra" (outside the Church), as an arm that lengthens the reach of the hierarchy, rather than as God's vanguard in the world. (This precisely was the origin of a serious crisis in the various branches of the Spanish Catholic Action movement in 1966-68.)

3. Seculars are seen as substitutes "ad intra" (within the Church), owing to a dearth of clergy.

4. Beginning with Vatican II and quite slowly, there is a growing tendency toward co-responsibility and complementarity, as we shall see.

c. An inseparable linkage of three words.

And in the background: Ecclesiology

In order to understand the lay religious we first must know the history of the laity or seculars. And having achieved such an understanding we discover a surprising thing: that their history depends upon another history, that of the clergy.

These three words, then, interest us: priest, laic, and religious. The three are commonly used words which nonetheless--and here is another surprise!--are not found in the New Testament (at least in the sense which they have today). Like it or not, these three words form an inseparable threesome, a most complicated system of interconnected reservoirs whose levels nevertheless may be quite unequal. Everything depends on the ecclesiology we embrace. That is the key to everything. In other words, in order to re-think the vocation of the lay religious, we must re-think also the vocation of the cleric, of the religious in general, and of the secular; and prior to that we must examine again the Church and the theological meaning of the world. The new ecclesi-

ology of Vatican II has inevitably called into question the way we understand these vocations. At times it is said that the vocation of the lay religious is in crisis. But it must also be said that the vocation of the religious in general and the vocation of the clergy are equally in crisis. It cannot be any other way. Many "traditional" ways of understanding vocation rest upon the bedrock of superiority and privilege. On the other hand, nowadays service, complementarity and the shared responsibility of all Christians are spoken of.

d. A long, turbulent and very sad history

On the family tree of the Church "lay" is a very ancient title, but one with a past freighted with inferiority and obligations. In the beginning it was not so; all were called "brothers" or "sisters". With the passage of time such harmony was destroyed: some people (priests and clerics) rose and others (laics or seculars) descended. Later still the monks made their appearance. But the laity were always on the lowest rung of the ladder. The Church and even the religious life became more and more "clericalized" until very recently, that is, until Vatican II and its "first vespers".

In summary, the history of the laity is woven from the cloth of inferiority--religious, civic, economic and cultural. It is characterized more by the brand of the slave than the ring of a happy marriage. It is a word so badly scarred that I would be delighted to erase it from the lexicon and return to the original, very beautiful and very evangelical practice: simply "brothers and sisters" or "Christians", shared without distinction by religious, clergy and seculars (or whatever word might be preferable, if this one has connotations too similar to those of "laic").

The clericalization of the Church is something insidiously profound, like a hidden substructure that goes beyond organization and daily liturgy. It is a substructure that gives shape to everything, including the interpretation of the Bible and dogma. (2) But almost all of us are so imbued with this global vision that has been given to us that in our judgments and evaluations we do not realize that we are making use of a very unreliable system of weights and measures. With this attitude as our starting point, we can so "Yes, but no!" and "No, but yes!" so very often that we end up demonstrating a well known fact: The contradictions inherent in any system cannot be corrected by the logic of that same system. And even so, are we not often satisfied with aspirins, a dab of cosmetics and little skirmishes won?

e. A history that stains all of us

This history of nobility and plebians causes us pain and scandal. Nonetheless it is a blot on the escutcheons of all of us. Clericalism is elitism. It supposes that some are more and others are less, that to be a priest, for example, is better than not to be a priest. Now then, we should have the courage to recognize two facts: that all of us want to be more, which is quite normal; and that just about all of us commit the sin of elitism or clericalism. Let's examine that a bit.

– One of the fundamental and inviolable thrusts of the human organism is the tropism of growth: to go higher, to become more. The problem lies in this, that such a drive can be translated into action in many different ways, according to the influences brought to bear. Some say: "Get ahead, get on top, you are only worth as much as you have." Others say: "There is more happiness in giving than receiving." (Acts 20:35) "If anyone wishes to rank first, he must remain the last one of all, the servant of all." (Mark 9:35) "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:25) Yes, the thrust to growth is a wonderful thing, but may it carry us in a beneficial direction, overcoming the three temptations as Jesus did in the desert when he faced the allure of a messianism at once temporal, rich and full of glory and power. (Matthew 4:1ff)

– Many of us Christians complain--and with every reason to do so--that there is still so much clericalism in the Church. But then in our daily lives we also fall into the trap of being more or being less. Such is the case, for example, of those parents who do all in their power to assure that their children climb higher in society and become more than those around them because, they say, philanthropy and brotherhood serve no useful purpose in the rat race of daily life. That position may be understandable, but one also wonders if we are not impoverishing Christianity by locking it up in a tiny little ritualistic ghetto. Such is also the case with those parents who say to their son who speaks to them about a religious vocation: "The priesthood, well...all right; but to be a Brother, never!" It is also the case with those Brothers who stoutly hold that in our own schools, there are some who are in charge and give the orders and others who just help them and fill in for them on occasion.... These are small examples of profoundly human histories, as old as humanity itself and present at the origins of Christianity. "What were you discussing on the way home?" At this they fell silent, for on the way they had been arguing about who was the most important. So he sat down and called the Twelve around him and said, "If anyone wishes to rank first, he must remain the last one of all and the servant of all." (Mark 9:33-35) On their own behalf the sons of Zebedee petitioned the Master: "See to it that we sit, one at your right and the other at your left." That is why "...the other ten, on hearing this, became indignant at James and John," and Jesus reminded them that "...the Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve and to give his life." (Mark 10:35-44)

(1) Hermano en los Institutos Religiosos Laicales, Rome, 1991.

(2) cf. R. Parent, *Una Iglesia de bautizados: Para una superación de la oposición clérigos/laicos*. Sal Terrae, Santander, 1987. F. Martínez, *Iglesia sacerdotal, Iglesia profética; La comunidad cristiana entre dos tradiciones*. Sígueme, Salamanca, 1992. J.A. Estrada, *La identidad de los laicos. Ensayo de eclesiología*. Ed. Paulinas, Madrid, 1990. Idem, *La Espiritualidad de los laicos. Una eclesiología de comunión*. Ed. Paulinas, Madrid, 1992. A. Faivre, *Les Laïcs aux origines de l'Eglise*. Le Centurion, Paris, 1984. Y. Congar, *Laïc et laïcat*, in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 9, col. 79-108, 1976.