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Edited by  
NORMAN THOMAS

## *Mission as Ministry by the Whole People of God*

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"The movement away from ministry as the monopoly of ordained men to ministry as the responsibility of the whole people of God, ordained as well as non-ordained, is one of the most dramatic shifts taking place in the church today" (Bosch, TM, 467). With these words, David Bosch introduces the church's recovery of mission as ministry by the whole people of God. This was the secret of the phenomenal growth of the early Church—that witness and ministry were the prerogative and duty of every church member.<sup>1</sup>

The selections below go beyond Bosch's analysis as contributions to a theology of the laity. M. M. Thomas of India is representative of those Christian leaders who advocated a radical laicism following World War II. In contrast to those who would build the community of faith as a haven in the midst of a secular society, Thomas encourages laypersons to understand that theirs is a Christian vocation and ministry in every sphere of society. Rajaiah D. Paul of India concurs. To encourage laymen and laywomen to conceive of their ministries primarily as supplemental to overburdened clergy is a travesty, he argues. Nor can the peoples of Asia ever be won to Christ by that strategy! Instead, he favors laypersons in ministry in secular situations permeating society with Christian ideas supported by Christian living. In his important work, *A Theology of the Laity*, Hendrik Kraemer of The Netherlands judges missions since the eighteenth century to have been crippled, amputated missions due to their preoccupation with missionary specialists. For Kraemer, if the church is to be true to its calling to be diakonia, the entire membership must have a missionary or apostolic stamp, with the laity manifesting their ministries in all spheres of secular life. D. T. Niles of Sri Lanka concurs, adding the probing question to every Christian, "why not be a missionary?" He argues that to be a Christian is to be a member of a missionary community obedient to a missionary God.

For Roman Catholics, the theme of the apostolate of the laity has been a rallying cry for renewal. Selections from two Vatican II documents illustrate this understanding. *Lumen Gentium* (*The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*), in its section on "The Laity," states that "the apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church." Every layperson, therefore, is to be "the living instrument

of the mission of the church" in the world. Apostolicam Actuositatem (Apostolate of the Laity) elaborates on the Catholic theology of the laity. The apostolate is defined in terms of evangelization, sanctification, and the renewal of the temporal order.

How shall the laity be equipped for their distinctive missional callings? Jürgen Moltmann of Germany believes that all Christians need to understand how God is at work in a world come of age and their own vocations within it. He proposes that theologians provide that equipping both in university settings and in other centers for the education of the laity.

The issue of women in mission and ministry, scarcely mentioned by Bosch, deserves major development. Elizabeth Behr-Sigel challenges leaders of Orthodox churches to take the women's movement seriously. She contrasts the pyramid of authority (male-dominated) of the church with the example of Christ, finding the church's true koinonia to be that of "fellowship with Jesus Christ through the spirit, as a community of prayer and love." If through baptism all are in communion with Christ, and if the Creator has called women to fulfillment as persons, can not women aspire "to the charism of the priesthood?" she asks.

Virginia Fabella of the Philippines seeks to recapture the early egalitarian model of the ecclesia. The true disciple of Jesus was a person who heard the word of God and acted upon it. For St. Luke, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was the exemplary disciple and the model for both men and women in ministry.

What new models do we have of ministry by the whole people of God? Leonardo Boff of Brazil believes that the base church communities are salvific events, liberating the church from the hierarchical dominance of clergy and freeing the people of God for their ministries in the world. Finally, John de Gruchy of South Africa adds examples from the charismatic movement and the African independent churches of recapturing the New Testament vision of ministry "given to the whole church and to a variety of people within it."

## LAY LIFE AS VOCATION AND MINISTRY

"Lay life as 'vocation and ministry' ...in the secular world."

■ World War II proved a watershed in Christian thought concerning the ministries of the church. Established patterns of church leadership were disrupted. Where clergypersons were absent, lay women and men assumed new leadership roles. Conversely, some clergy assumed "secular" roles, as with the Catholic worker-priests in France. Following the war, the World Student Christian Federation resumed its avant-garde function in espousing the importance of the ministry and mission of the laity. In 1950, M. M. Thomas of India was its vice-chairman, as well as youth secretary of the Mar Thoma Church in India. The following article, based on a speech that "M.M." gave at the Federation Theological Students' Conference at Stein, Germany, contains his advocacy of a radical laicism.

## The Significance of the Secular\*

The more one considers the relevance of the professional ministry in relation to the wholeness of the Church, the more one is led to think of the meaning of the lay and the secular world. I am not unaware of the present tendency in the ecumenical world to emphasize the place of the laity in the Church; but I have a strong suspicion that much of it is not within the perspective of the significance of the secular to the wholeness of the Church. The question we have to ask is, What is the meaning of the lay and secular to the life of the Church?...

There is no religion which is secure into which those who feel the insecurity of the secular life may run and be safe, or whose domination will save the secular world. The Church and the world stand together in sin, and therefore together under judgment. Any attempt of the Church to point to itself as the saviour is pure idolatry.

## A Radical Laicism

What then is the Church and the nature of its relation to the secular world? "The Church is not a sphere of existence distinct and separate from the natural world and from history," says J. H. Oldham. "It is a new dimension of reality permeating these realms and transforming them. The world contains the elements which find their renewal in the Church."...The Church is therefore not something other than the secular, but the secular which knows its own true reality in the new age inaugurated in Christ; it is the world which knows itself to be "in Christ" under the judgment and grace of the Crucified and Risen One....

Christian religion, therefore, is "a radical laicism," and the Church consists primarily of [laypersons] doing their secular jobs and witnessing to the true life of the secular "hid with Christ in God." This was the insight of the Reformation in its conception of the Call and Vocation of the [layperson]; "but the attempt of the Reformation to fill secular activities with Christian meaning was not carried to a successful conclusion." And even today when we think of the Church, we are not primarily thinking of the [laity] and their witness to Christ in and through their Christian participation in the world, but of the bishops, the clergy, and perhaps also [laity] who are doing full time "religious" work. And when we speak about the Church acting in the world, again our thoughts are about the sometimes relevant and more often irrelevant declarations of the ecclesiastics. And here, perhaps more than anywhere else, there ought to occur a real revolution in thought regarding the nature and witness of the Church, if we are to regain the wholeness of the Church. The famous Anglican Collect for Good Friday bids us to pray "for all estates of men [and women] in Christ that every member of the same in his [or her] vocation and ministry" may "truly and godly serve" Him; herein is a vision of the Church

\*Excerpts from M. M. Thomas, "An Irrelevant Profession," *Student World* 43 (1950): 319, 320-21; cf. Bosch, TM, 473.

fulfilling its ministry in the world through [laypersons] who consider their lay life as "vocation and ministry," seeking to serve Him in the day-to-day decisions they make in the secular world. This is the vision we have to recapture about the Church in the world today.

### THE ONLY EFFECTIVE ASIAN MISSION STRATEGY

"Ministry' in secular occupations."

■ *The Christian churches of India live amid a dominant Hindu culture. Swimming in that pond, they are in constant danger of becoming incapsulated caste-like communities, receiving new members only by birth, with young people rarely marrying outsiders. How can the church be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" in such a cultural context? In 1956, Rajaiah D. Paul of India placed his hope in the witness of laypersons in their secular occupations. A retired civil servant, he served also as general secretary of the Synod of the Church of South India and as chairman of the Working Committee of the WCC's Department of the Laity.*

#### *The Spearhead of the Christian Enterprise\**

It cannot be said that in India and other countries of east Asia there are what may be called [laity] movements, in the technical sense in which this term is used in some countries of Europe and in America. But the churches in the East are just beginning to understand that, in the new and changing situation in which they find themselves, the laity can no longer be kept in the background. They are coming to realize that "only by the witness of a spiritually intelligent and active laity can the Church meet the modern world in its actual perplexities and life situations." It is gradually being comprehended that the laity are not there to be used, if at all, to supplement or relieve an over-burdened and under-staffed ordained ministry, but that in the Christian effort to establish the rule of God in the world, [laypersons] in their secular callings form the most important, and can be the most effective, agency to be employed.

It is now widely recognized that in the present situation the message of the Gospel can be most effectively spread by the unobtrusive spiritual activity and imperceptible religious influence exercised by Christian [laypersons] in their daily life and work, rather than by paid preachers and elaborate evangelistic organizations. In the light of this, much thinking is being done in all Asian churches on the vocation, function and responsibility of [the laity], in order that they may be used more effectively in the Church's strategy....

\*Excerpts from Rajaiah D. Paul, "Towards a New Strategy in Asia: The Layman as the Spearhead of the Christian Enterprise," *Student World* 49 (1956): 271-73, 275-76; cf. Bosch, TM, 473.

### "Ministry of the Laity"

The churches are anxious that the laity be helped to perform their "ministry"—but only within the Church. They have not yet planned for the "ministry of the laity" outside the Church in the secular callings. They still need to learn, what Evanston so emphatically asserted, that "all Christians must become ministers of Christ's saving purpose and messengers of the hope revealed in Him," and that "in daily living and work the laity are not mere fragments of the Church who are scattered about the world but are the Church's representatives"—Christ's own ambassadors—"no matter where they are. It is they who manifest in word and action the Lordship of Christ over that world which claims so much of their time, energy and labour. This is the ministry of the laity."<sup>2</sup>

### "Ministry" in Secular Occupations

What has been left out is that very large body of lay people who work full time in the secular world and who have no time, inclination or intellectual competence to help in the administration or day-to-day running of the Church and its organizations. These people are the majority. They are in the very heart of the secular world and are open to all its corrupting influences. If they could be helped to use their very occupations as the means by which they serve the Church in her mission to the world, they would then perform the real ministry of the laity—the most effective of all....

The time has come, especially in the countries of the East, to emphasize the essential unity of the laity and the clergy as ministers of God and together making up the *laos*, the people of God. The view of the laity as a non-essential portion of the Church which exists merely to enable the clergy to exercise their ministry, or at best so that some of the good ones among them may be used for reading lessons in church, for teaching Sunday school, or as secretaries of committees and members of synods, must all be changed. For their part, the laity must rid themselves of the pernicious idea that their Christianity involves no further responsibilities than living "goody-goody," socially respectable lives, committing no overt sin, and providing no occasion for scandal, and that their relation to the Church need only be one of benevolent passivity, nominal adherence and conventional submission to her regulations.

### *Evangelism from Within*

It is fast becoming clear that the only way in which the lives of these Eastern nations can be Christianized—if they are to be Christianized at all, and if that is what the Church is trying to do—is through a process of leavening, of fermentation from within, a process which has already begun and which has now become sufficiently evident to cause alarm. If the social, political, economic and administrative systems of these Eastern nations are to be brought under the sway of Christ, if this is what we Christians are after, it can only be done by Christians who have

been placed by God within those very systems and who have been called by Him to exercise their Christian ministry as the *laos* in their own secular situations, by intense devotion to their Lord in the power of His redemption. The people of these countries can no longer be preached to in the old way. They can only be reached from within. The whole system must be permeated with Christian ideas and ideals which must be supported by Christian living. The only effective evangelistic method for the future in this part of the world is the promulgation of the gospel by consecrated Christian laymen [and laywomen] in their secular occupations.

### THE MISSIONARY CALLING OF THE LAITY

“The laity as the proper missionary body of the Church.”

■ *Fundamental to the rethinking of the church's mission is a recovery of the apostolic understanding that all Christians are called to witness and service. The noted Dutch theologian and missiologist Hendrik Kraemer, in A Theology of the Laity (1958) provides one of the clearest statements. Kraemer judges missions since the eighteenth century as “crippled, amputated missions” in their preoccupation with missionary specialists. Diakonia (service) has its root in the being and work of Jesus Christ. We are called to join Christ in that ministry in the world—a ministry which laity far more than clergy can carry out.*

#### A Theology of the Laity\*

The only fully legitimate Mission is the Mission of the one Church. Missions as they have been happening since the 18th century up to now, grateful as we must be for them, are crippled, amputated Missions. The Unity or Oneness of the Church is the legitimation of Christ's and the Church's apostolate. The missionary or apostolic aspect expresses as well the being as the calling of the Church. This applies to the whole Church, to *all* its members. All members have this basic stamp and should acknowledge it with heart and mind. This has to stand as a basic affirmation and basic orientation of the Church. “All the members” for whom this is indicative as well as imperative, means to say that “ministry” or “clergy” and laity are equally implied. The particular emphasis upon the laity as the proper missionary body of the Church, which in all present writing on the laity is customary, is understandable and justified from the angle of the history of the Church, in which the laity has been so perseveringly ignored. It is understandable too in our present situation, because it is not exaggeration to say that in the last decades the laity as an essential part of the Church, especially also in the discharge of its task, is a new discovery. This explains why the missionary calling of the laity is figuring so largely in the ever-increasing literature on the laity. From the

\*Excerpts from Hendrik Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 135, 147, 149, 154; cf. Bosch, TM, 470.

standpoint of thinking on the meaning of the Church, however, it should be kept in mind that this missionary or apostolic stamp regards the total membership of the Church, and consequently the laity.

### Diakonia—Rooted in the Person of Christ

Our conclusion is therefore that diakonia as the true spirit and pattern of the Church has its root in the being and the work of Jesus Christ her Lord Himself....

The laity, living in the world as an integral part of it, is the primary body through which the reality of the phrase: the Church *is* diakonia, *is* Ministry, has to be manifested in all spheres of secular life.

The Church then as a whole being ministry or diakonia, it follows that, theologically speaking, the ministry of the laity is as constituent for the true being and calling of the Church as the ministry of the “ministry” (the office-bearers or clergy). Both, the ministry of the clergy and the ministry of the laity, are *facts* inherent in the Church's being, are divine data. Only from this angle has the present much-used expression “the ministry of the laity” real content, and is not a mere pious phrase.

### WHY NOT BE A MISSIONARY?

“All Christians share in the Church's missionary task.”

■ *Who is a missionary? Just as the entire church of Jesus Christ is weakened whenever the ministry is narrowed to the set-apart ordained clergy, so also the church's mission is stunted when only those in missionary orders or commissioned are affirmed as missionaries. The noted Sri Lankan ecumenical church leader D. T. Niles brought a radically different understanding out of Asia. God's nature is to reach out for the lost. The church, the living body of Christ, exists to be in mission. Therefore, every Christian is called to be a missionary.*

#### All Are Missionaries\*

The ordinary Christian and every Christian has so to face the missionary implications of his faith as to recognize that a description of the mission of the Church is, in a true sense, but a description of the Church's day-to-day life.

All Christians must face the question “Why not be a missionary?” because to be a Christian is to be a member of a missionary community and to become a participant in the activity of a missionary God. The apostolic privilege belongs to all who are Christ's, and each has to decide in what form and what measure to share in the Church's missionary task and destiny. So that no responsible answer to the question “Why not be a missionary?” is possible except as it is rooted in an obedient

\*Excerpts from Daniel T. Niles, *Upon the Earth* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 10-11; cf. Bosch, TM, 472.

answer to the more primary question "Why not be a Christian?" If the missionary is a symbol of the Christian faith it is because all Christians share in the Church's missionary task and the missionary enterprise belongs to the very nature of the Gospel.

### LAITY'S COMMISSION TO WITNESS AND MISSION

"Every lay person...the living instrument of the mission of the Church."

- *Vatican II gave a new and creative approach to the role of the laity in the church. In the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (Lumen Gentium), the church is understood first and foremost not as an institution but as a people to whom God communicates in love. The result is a new people (laos) of God called to be witnesses and prophets for their Lord. Their baptism and their confirmation is their commissioning for this missionary apostolate.*

#### *The People of God\**

(From Chapter 2, "The People of God")

12. The holy People of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office: it spreads abroad a living witness to him, especially by a life of faith and love and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips praising his name (cf. Heb. 13:15).

#### *Vocation of the Laity*

(From Chapter 4, "The Laity")

33. Gathered together in the People of God and established in the one Body of Christ under one head, the laity—no matter who they are—have, as living members, the vocation of applying to the building up of the Church and to its continual sanctification all the powers which they have received from the goodness of the Creator and from the grace of the Redeemer.

The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church. Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself. Moreover, by the sacraments, and especially by the Eucharist, that love of God and man which is the soul of the apostolate is communicated and nourished. The laity, however, are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth.<sup>3</sup> Thus, every lay person, through those gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church itself "according to the measure of Christ's bestowal" (Eph. 4:7).

\*Excerpts from "Lumen Gentium" (1964), Art. 12, 33, in VC2, 363, 390-91; cf. Bosch, TM, 471.

Besides this apostolate which belongs to absolutely every Christian, the laity can be called in different ways to more immediate cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy,<sup>4</sup> like those men and women who helped the apostle Paul in the Gospel, laboring much in the Lord (cf. Phil. 4:3; Rom. 16:3ff.). They have, moreover, the capacity of being appointed by the hierarchy to some ecclesiastical offices with a view to a spiritual end.

All the laity, then, have the exalted duty of working for the ever greater spread of the divine plan of salvation to all [persons], of every epoch and all over the earth. Therefore may the way be clear for them to share diligently in the salvific work of the Church according to their ability and the needs of the times.

### THE APOSTOLATE OF LAY PEOPLE

"Bearing clear witness to Christ ...in the midst of the world."

- *Although the lay apostolic had existed in the church since the time of Christ, no official Catholic Church document set forth the theology of the laity until the Second Vatican Council. For five years, a Preparatory Commission worked on drafts of the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem). Adopted by the council in 1965, it sets forth an understanding of the laity as co-responsible for the mission of Christ, both in the gathered community of faith and in the world.*

#### *Participation of the Laity in the Church's Mission\**

(From Chapter 1, "The Vocation of Lay People to the Apostolate")

2. In the Church there is diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing in his name and by his power. But the laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ; they have therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole People of God.<sup>5</sup> In the concrete, their apostolate is exercised when they work at the evangelization and sanctification of [persons]; it is exercised too when they endeavor to have the Gospel spirit permeate and improve the temporal order, going about it in a way that bears clear witness to Christ and helps forward the salvation of men [and women]. The characteristic of the lay state being a life led in the midst of the world and of secular affairs, laymen are called by God to make of their apostolate, through the vigor of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world.

\*Excerpts from "Apostolicam Actuositatem" (1965), Art. 2, 6, 7, in VC2, 768, 773-75; cf. Bosch, TM, 471.

## The Apostolate of Evangelization and Sanctification

(From Chapter 2, "Objectives")

6. [Laypersons] have countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very witness of a Christian life, and good works done in a supernatural spirit, are effective in drawing men [and women] to the faith and to God; and that is what the Lord has said: "Your light must shine so brightly before men that they can see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 5:16).

This witness of life, however, is not the sole element in the apostolate; the true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers to draw them towards the faith, or to the faithful to instruct them, strengthen them, incite them to a more fervent life; "for Christ's love urges us on" (2 Cor. 5:14), and in the hearts of all should the apostle's words find echo: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16).<sup>6</sup>

## The Renewal of the Temporal Order

7. That men [and women], working in harmony, should renew the temporal order and make it increasingly more perfect: such is God's design for the world.

All that goes to make up the temporal order: personal and family values, culture, economic interests, the trades and professions, institutions of the political community, international relations, and so on, as well as their gradual development—all these are not merely helps to [humanity's] last end; they possess a value of their own, placed in them by God, whether considered individually or as parts of the integral temporal structure: "And God saw all that he had made and found it very good" (Gen. 1:31)....

It is the work of the entire Church to fashion men [and women] able to establish the proper scale of values on the temporal order and direct it towards God through Christ....

[Laypersons] ought to take on themselves as their distinctive task this renewal of the temporal order. Guided by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church, prompted by Christian love, they should act in this domain in a direct way and in their own specific manner. As citizens among citizens they must bring to their cooperation with others their own special competence, and act on their own responsibility; everywhere and always they have to seek the justice of the kingdom of God. The temporal order is to be renewed in such a way that, while its own principles are fully respected, it is harmonized with the principles of the Christian life and adapted to the various conditions of times, places and peoples. Among the tasks of this apostolate Christian social action is preeminent. The Council desires to see it extended today to every sector of life, not forgetting the cultural sphere.<sup>7</sup>

## A THEOLOGY FOR CHRISTIANITY "COME OF AGE"

"A theology for the laity in their callings in the world."

■ Should seminaries monopolize the future development of theology? No! answers the noted German Lutheran theologian Jürgen Moltmann. He believes that in the future Christian theology will become more practical and political. All Christians need to understand how God is at work in a world come of age and their own callings (vocations) in the world. Both university departments of religion and Christian centers for the education of the laity will be lively places for theology to develop in future.

## A Theology for Christianity "Come of Age"\*

Christian theology will in the future become more and more a practical and political theology. It will no longer be simply a theology for priests and pastors, but also a theology for the laity in their callings in the world. It will be directed not only toward divine service in the church, but also toward divine service in the everyday life of the world. Its practical implementation will include preaching and worship, pastoral duties, and Christian community, but also socialization, democratization, education toward self-reliance and political life.

Until now, most churches have developed theology in their seminaries. Theology was studied in a professional school for preachers. But theologians were thereby separated from the members of their communities—the educated from the uneducated as Greeks from Barbarians (cf. Rom. 1:14). The more people begin to "grow up" in our communities today, the more we shall need a theology for the [layperson] who has "come of age," and for the theologians who can answer his critical questions as well as listen to the [laity's] answers. In many Western countries today, seminaries are becoming empty, wherever they are not integrated into universities. Courses in departments of religion in the universities are surprisingly well attended, and indeed by students who are interested in theology and religion but do not want to become clergymen. I believe this is a good development. First of all, it removes the distinction between clergy and laity; and secondly, the church must finally accept the fact that its theologians do not have to be sent into the world before anything can happen: its laity are already in the world.

Pastoral-theology remains a part of theological formation, but it must be integrated into the wider horizon of the theological formation of the whole of Christianity, which is at work in very different practical spheres of society. This theology for the whole of Christianity "come of age" is only in its initial phases. Lay persons should not be trained to become "mini-pastors" who can relieve the pastor of his work. They should rather be trained to become men and women who can think independently and act in a Christian way in their own vocations in the world. It seems to me, therefore, meaningful to choose the expression *political theology* for this wider theology of Christianity in the world, for the *res publica* is of concern to all citizens. Man is a *zoon politikon* (political animal). The kingdom

\*Excerpts from Jürgen Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 11-12; cf. Bosch, TM, 467, 473.

of God is to be anticipated in politics, not in a separate sphere, called religion. This new form of theology, namely, the political, will, in my opinion, enable us to bridge two gaps—the one inside the church which divides the clergy from the laity and the one outside which divides the church from the world. In the practical order, this means: first, the integration of church seminaries into universities, wherever this is possible; secondly, the building of our own Christian or free universities, wherever the first practice is not possible; and thirdly, the gathering of theologians in Christian centers for the education of the laity.

### THE CHARISM OF WOMEN FOR MINISTRY

“The present women’s movement is challenging the Church today.”

■ *Some of the most vigorous debate concerning the place of the laity in ministry and mission has taken place in those historic churches with long-standing traditions confining ministerial roles exclusively to men. In 1976, women of both the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox traditions met for the first time at the women’s monastery of Agapia in Greece. Their consultation on “The Role of Orthodox Women in the Church and in Society” was initiated by the WCC’s Unit on Education and Renewal. The lay president of the French Orthodox Community of the Holy Trinity in Paris presented the keynote address on “The Meaning of the Participation of Women in the Orthodox Church.” Dr. Elizabeth Behr-Sigel was at that time professor of philosophy at the Graduate Institute of Ecumenical Studies in Paris and co-editor of Contacts, the French review of Orthodoxy.*

#### *Women Challenging the Church\**

We are living in an age of violence, in many cases violence of the most atrocious kind. The proud, though fragile, facade of our old western humanism has finally crumbled. Paradoxically, however, the violence has brought with it an immense longing for human liberation, respect for human dignity and the right to be different whether in terms of ethnic group, culture, or sex. The movement, or more correctly, the various movements for the liberation of women share both in this violence and in these noble aspirations which have their roots in the Gospel.

There is a tendency among the Orthodox to think that the women’s movement concerns only secular society, “the changing face of this passing world,” and not the Church. There is an element of truth in this attitude of detachment. Yet while

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\*Excerpts from Elizabeth Behr-Sigel, “The Meaning of the Participation of Women in the Life of the Church,” in *Orthodox Women: Their Role and Participation in the Orthodox Church* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1977), 18, 21-22, 26-28; cf. Bosch, TM, 472.

our hope of salvation is rooted in the *eschaton* and our eyes are turned towards the eternal divine mystery, we cannot and must not forget that the Church is also the pilgrim people of God moving towards the Kingdom *through history*, in solidarity with all humanity and bearer of its hopes of fulfillment. The Church is not “an enclave of the Kingdom of God in this world” separated from the world by high protective walls. It is the sacrament of the Kingdom mysteriously present in us and among us. Irritating as it sometimes is, and for all its unattractive, even ridiculous, aspects, the present women’s movement is challenging the Church today....

#### *An Orthodox Perspective*

Like any form of growth, the growth of the Kingdom of Heaven in us is irregular, sometimes sudden, sometimes very gradual. This is particularly true as far as recognition of the moral and existential implications of the Gospel as dogmas of the Church is concerned. Though it is latent in the Church’s consciousness, the clear recognition that men and women are equal before God is only just beginning to pierce the thick layer of prejudice and cultural conditioning....

Questions concerning the cooperation of men and women in the Church and the better utilization of women’s energies and gifts to serve the growth of the Kingdom of God are very much in the minds of many Orthodox women and they must, nonetheless, define them clearly. We shall do so with the boldness of sons and daughters of God, but we shall do it, happily, in an atmosphere of calmness and serenity which sometimes seems to be lacking elsewhere. This serenity seems to be connected with the way in which we Orthodox women feel and experience our membership of the Church. In spite of its hierarchical structure, which we do not call into question, we do not experience the Church as a pyramid of authority; we experience it at the deepest level, linking us in fellowship with Jesus Christ through the spirit, as a community of prayer and love. The mysterious presence of a woman, the Mother of God, shines through the Church’s whole life....

#### *Ministry and the Priesthood*

Surely the fundamental ontological unity through communion in the crucified and risen Christ as created by baptism is the foundation of the royal priesthood of all the baptized in which the ministry has its origins as a special, personal vocation, according to the sovereign liberty of God. Moreover, the Church is a body made up of many limbs, with a hierarchy of functions to which corresponds the diversity of the gifts of the Spirit granted to each person (1 Cor. 12: Eph. 4:1-7). So the question that arises is this: as a human being called by the Creator to fulfill herself according to the particular modes of her feminine being, can a woman not, therefore, aspire to the charism of the priesthood? In giving a negative answer to this, are we not in fact subordinating grace to a biological determinism, to nature which it can and will transform as the fire blazes in the burning bush yet does not consume it?

## WOMEN'S DISCIPLESHIP

"Recapture the early egalitarian model of *ecclesia*."

■ *Doing theology from the perspective of Asian women is a relatively new phenomenon. Following a series of regional consultations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, EATWOT—under the leadership of Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella—held its Fifth International Conference in New Delhi, India, in 1981. There EATWOT agreed for the first time to examine "the feminist claim that 'the male-dominated patterns of culture and social organization' oppress women in society and manifest themselves in the life and theology of the church."*<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, EATWOT created a Women's Commission as "a sisterhood of resistance to all forms of oppression, seeking creative partnership with men of the Association."<sup>9</sup> From her bases as Asia coordinator for EATWOT and academic dean of the Sister Formation Institute in Manila, Fabella became the spokesperson for many as she redefined the mission of women in the church in Asia.

### *Our Common Mission as Disciples\**

I believe that all Christians have the same basic mission, whether they be lay, cleric or religious, whether they be male or female—and that is to continue the mission of Jesus Christ on earth. The mission of Jesus is summarized succinctly in John 10:10: "I have come that all may have life and have it to the full." This is God's plan for all humanity, which St. Irenaeus expressed in his famous phrase: "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." . . .

### *Mary, the Exemplary Disciple*

The gospel writers are in agreement that a true disciple of Jesus is one who hears the word of God and acts upon it. For St. Luke, the first and exemplary disciple is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Luke portrays Mary as a young maiden who accepts the challenge of the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation, as one who ponders God's word in her heart and responds with courage and determination, as one who is ever ready to be of service to her neighbour, as one who, while persevering in prayer, is filled with the Spirit of prophecy and justice together with the other disciples at Pentecost.

For too long, Mary has been depicted for us principally as "virgin" and "mother"—rarely as "disciple." Yet for Jesus himself, physical motherhood, important as it is, is not the basis of his own mother's greatness. For Jesus, discipleship

\*Excerpts from Virginia Fabella, M.M., "Mission of Women in the Church in Asia: Role and Position," in *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*, ed. John S. Pobee and Barbel von Wartenberg-Potter (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 82-84, 89; cf. Bosch, TM, 472-73.

has priority over family ties. Pointing to his disciples, he said: "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt. 12:49-50). Mary's special claim is not her having given birth to Jesus, but that she qualified and formed part of Jesus' family of disciples through her obedient response to God's word. Mary then remains a model for all Christians, not so much of motherhood as of faith and discipleship.

The community of disciples Jesus brought into existence definitely included a number of women. We gather this even from the sparse references to women in the New Testament. Given the male-oriented and androcentric bias of the New Testament authors, we can deduce that what is available to us in scriptures is only a fraction of the information which was available to the writers then. What was de-emphasized by the writers is the fact that women were part of the discipleship of equals that existed for a period in early Christianity. A non-androcentric reconstruction of early church history reveals that during the early church, women were full-fledged disciples, and equally missionaries, prophets, church leaders, and apostles in the broad sense of the term. . . .

### *Recapture the Egalitarian Church*

How can we as disciples who seek a full life for all be content with a relationship of inequality and dominance within the very church committed to God's kingdom and God's justice? Clearly there must be a concerted effort to recapture the early egalitarian model of *ecclesia*, which was based on the equality of all Christians, male and female alike.

The recent phenomenon of basic ecclesial communities or BECs is closer to this egalitarian model of *ecclesia* than the hierarchical model still persisting in the universal church today; therefore BECs should be encouraged especially in rural and depressed areas and become the locus of new and creative ministries for both men and women in the church today.

### *The Aim of Women's Liberation*

The aim of women's liberation and struggle for equality in the church and in society is not to get even with men or to replace them as oppressors. The true end of our struggles is a more just and human society for all, a society that reflects God's kingdom of love, truth, justice and peace. But liberation will come only if we first admit we need it, only if we truly want it, only if we are willing to struggle for it with all the other women—together.

Once again I am looking at an Asian woman:  
She has a round face, a small nose.  
She has short legs.  
She is short in height.  
She is elegant and graceful.

She hears a voice assuring her: Woman, you are set free from your infirmities (Lk. 13:12). And immediately she stands up and praises God.

## A NEW EXPERIENCE OF CHURCH

"The base church communities...as salvific events."

■ *Leonardo Boff was born in Concórdia, Santa Catarina, Brazil, in 1938. His father was a schoolteacher who identified himself with the cause of the poor, including the blacks in Concórdia. From his youth, Leonardo was helped to see the world from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. Ordained a Franciscan priest, he discovered while working in a Petrópolis slum that Christian base communities, as they enable persons to find hope and a sense of self-worth, can be for them the real church of Jesus Christ. Following graduate studies in Brazil and Germany in philosophy and theology, he became professor of systematic theology in Petrópolis (since 1970) and an advisor both to the Brazilian Conference of Bishops and the Latin American Confederation of Religious.*<sup>10</sup>

### *The Basic Church Community\**

Through the latter centuries, the church has acquired an organizational form with a heavily hierarchical framework and a juridical understanding of relationships among Christians, thus producing mechanical, reified inequalities and inequities. As Yves Congar has written: "Think of the church as a huge organization, controlled by a hierarchy, with subordinates whose only task it is to keep the rules and follow the practices. Would this be a caricature? Scarcely!"<sup>11</sup>

In reaction, the basic church communities have sprung up. They represent a new experience of church, of community, of communion of persons within the more legitimate (in the strict sense of the word) ancient tradition. It would be simplistic and would betray the lack of a sense of history to conceive of the basic church communities as a purely contingent, transitory phenomenon. They represent "a specific response to a prevailing historical conjuncture."<sup>12</sup> Theologically they signify a new ecclesiological experience, a renaissance of very church, and hence an action of the Spirit on the horizon of the matters urgent for our time.<sup>13</sup> Seen in this way, the basic church communities deserve to be contemplated, welcomed, and respected as salvific events....

### *A Leaven of Renewal*

The basic church communities are helping the whole church in the process of clericalization, by restoring to the People of God, the faithful, the rights of which

\*Excerpts from Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 1, 32-33; cf. Bosch, TM, 473.

they have been deprived in the linear structure. On the level of theory, theology itself has already gone beyond the old pyramid. *But it is not enough to know. A new praxis must be implemented.* This is what the basic communities are saying. They are helping the whole church to "reinvent itself," right in its foundations. Experiment is gradually confirming theory, and inspiring in the church-as-institution a confidence in the viability of a new way of being church in the world today.

## MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH AS A WHOLE

"The ministry of the church as a whole...helps to equip it for mission in the world."

■ *Professor John de Gruchy, a South African by birth, was ordained a Congregational minister in 1961. A graduate of Rhodes University in South Africa, Chicago Theological Seminary, and the University of South Africa, he is known in southern Africa as a prophetic church leader and scholar. From 1968 to 1973, he was director of studies and communications for the South African Council of Churches. Author of many books, including The Church Struggle in South Africa and Bonhoeffer and South Africa, he is also founder and editor of the Journal of Theology for Southern Africa. Since 1973, he has taught theology at the University of Cape Town and is currently its professor of Christian studies. In the following selection from Theology and Ministry in Context and Crisis, de Gruchy calls for the church to recapture the New Testament vision of participation in ministry by the whole people of God.*

### *Ministry within the Community of Faith\**

There are traditions within the Christian church which reject the need for an ordained ministry. This protest by communities stemming from the Radical Reformation, such as the Quakers, is a salutary warning against a narrow and false understanding of the Christian ministry....

The ordained ministry, or, ministry of the Word and Sacraments, is only one form of ministry within the community of faith. Schillebeeckx, in reflecting on the ministry in the early Christian communities, reminds us that this diversity of ministry was, however, soon lost in the process of institutionalisation. He writes:

The development of ministry in the early Christian churches was not so much, as is sometimes claimed, a historical shift from charisma to institution but a shift from the charisma of many to a specialized charisma of just a few.<sup>14</sup>

\*Excerpts from John de Gruchy, *Theology and Ministry in Context and Crisis: A South African Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 25-28, 29-30; cf. Bosch, TM, 468, 474.

Thus, for example, the diaconate, instead of being a ministry in its own right, became a stepping-stone to the priesthood and remained such within the Catholic tradition until Vatican II.

In seeking the reformation of the church in the sixteenth century, some of the Protestant Reformers, especially Calvin, recognized the need for such diversity and restructured the church accordingly. Lay people, for example, were brought into the centre of the ministry of the church in the office of elder and deacon. Distinctions were also made in some Reformed churches between teaching elders and ruling elders, so that the work of preaching and teaching was separated from that of governing the church. In the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), which has been formative for the Reformed tradition, we are told that the ordained ministry "is not to be despised" (chapter 18). But in the very next paragraph we are warned not to "attribute too much to ministers and the ministry." Yet the diversity of ministry often became more a matter of form and order rather than a dynamic ministry in its own right, and the caution of the Second Helvetic Confession was not always borne in mind. Protestant pastors became *the* ministry in the church, princes of the pulpit, managers of the congregation and executives of the denomination, even if not Cardinals within a medieval Curia.

### *Recapture the New Testament Vision*

The ministry of the church is that of Jesus Christ through the Spirit. This ministry is given to the whole church and to a variety of people within it. The need to recapture this New Testament vision and practice of ministry has been strongly emphasized in our century by the independent churches in Africa, the Charismatic renewal movement within the mainline churches, the base communities within Latin America, some Vatican II decrees, World Council of Churches studies on ministry and the laity, and is affirmed by theologians of many different traditions in their studies on ministry. Any other view is contrary to the New Testament and the best in Christian tradition; it results in a truncated, inadequate and impoverished ministry. The ministry of the church as a whole builds up the church in faith and love, and helps to equip it for mission in the world.

### NOTES

1. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 274.

2. Report of Sect. 6, "The Laity: The Christian in His Vocation," in *The Evanston Report: The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1954* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1955), pp. 160-70.

3. Cf. Pius XI, encyclical "Quadragesimo anno," May 15, 1931, AAS 23 (1931), pp. 221f.; and the allocution of Pius XII, "De quelle consolation," October 14, 1951, AAS 43 (1951), pp. 790f.

4. Cf. Pius XII, allocution "Six ans se sont écoulés," October 5, 1957, AAS 49 (1957), p. 927.

5. Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, Art. 31; AAS 57 (1965), p. 37.

6. Cf. Pius XI, encyclical "Ubi Arcano," December 23, 1922, AAS 14 (1922), p. 659; Pius XII, encyclical "Summi Pontificatus," October 20, 1939, AAS 31 (1939), pp. 442-443.

7. Cf. Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*: AAS 23 (1890-1891), p. 647; Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno*: AAS 23 (1931), p. 190; Pius XII, *Nuntius Radiophonicus*, June 1, 1941: AAS 33 (1941), p. 207.

8. *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 250.

9. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Introduction," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Fabella and Oduyoye (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), p. x.

10. Cf. Ferm, *Profiles in Liberation*, p. 124-28.

11. Yves M.-J. Congar, "Os Grupos informais na Igreja," in Alfonso Gregory, ed., *Comunidades eclesiais de base: utopia ou realidade?* (Petrópolis, Brazil: Vozes, 1973), pp. 144-45.

12. Pedro Demo and Elizeu F. Calsing, "Relatório da pesquisa sobre as comunidades eclesiais de base," in Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB), *Comunidades: Igreja na base* (São Paulo: Edições Paulinas, 1977), pp. 18-19.

13. Pope Paul VI, in statement appearing in *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 34 (1974): 945.

14. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 121.