

A New People: Emergence of the Laity

A tale repeated many times during the debate at Vatican II about the role of the laity in the Church appeared first in skeletal form in the *New Yorker*. An Italian bishop is arguing loudly with colleagues. He sums up his position: "The role of the laity is to pray, pay, and shut up."(1)

By contrast a European observer commenting on emerging lay leadership in the Latin American church wrote: "What is happening is a revolution in the Copernican sense of the term, a complete reversal. A switch [is being made] from a church resting on the point of the pyramid, in the person of bishop or priest, to a church resting upon its base."(2) The implications for changes in authority relationships, role definitions, attainment of status -- all core social structures of the church -- are enormous. So too are the consequences for politics and society in Latin America.

As important to the Latin American church as are the theology of liberation and the promotion of human rights, they are not the key problem. The crucial issue has received little attention in the *New York Times* or in church journals -- publications that tend to focus on the controversies of liberation theology or political activism in the church. The main issue is political -- not the worrisome problem of politicization, but internal politics: the emergence of the laity, empowering lay persons for positions of leadership.

The greatest achievement of the Latin American church has been largely ignored: the church is empowering lay persons to a degree and an extent unknown in most other regions of the world. Lay persons are emerging in ways never dreamed possible; they are being empowered for ministry in the church and for secular ministry. They perform functions previously reserved to priests and they are creating new ministries within the church.

They also exercise ministries to society through social service (help to individuals or families) or through social action (activities aimed at making the system more responsive to the needs of "outsiders" or at changing structures). In the case of social action, lay leaders typically begin with a project that addresses an urgent need of the community, such as land distribution, school construction, or water supply. Before long they become aware of the larger realities of national, even transnational, economic and political life. Hence, an internal structural change in the church, empowerment of the laity, has larger social and political implications.

On the basis of reflection on their spiritual and temporal needs, lay persons and their clerical cooperators are creating new lay roles. New roles often match those described in the early Christian communities but present -- day invention bases itself on needs and

structures of new groups, not on imitation of ancient practice.

Lay leadership in the church is a larger and more complex issue than is the creation of basic Christian communities. The empowerment of the laity for leadership in the Latin American church takes place in many environments other than basic Christian communities. By way of example, the assembly of persons who worship at La Mansión in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, numbers about four thousand -- hardly a base community. Lay persons have assumed formally (by invitation) or informally (by initiative) a whole range of roles from liturgical music leadership to teaching groups of several hundred newer members ways to reflect on the Bible and to pray.

Here we focus on the emergence of the laity as it has taken place in base Christian communities only as the most distinct pattern of lay leadership. The chapter examines new authority relationships and their political and social consequences.

Malaise, Threats, and Response

The Catholic Church in Latin America has lacked influence and participation to a degree not often recognized. In most places Latin Americans take part in church worship or social activities to a minor degree. Most Latin Americans receive little formal religious education. Latin American parishes are weak organizationally and in many places they have little impact on the lives of those who live in their neighborhoods. In a word, the Latin American church fails to make contact with the majority of Latin Americans. Exceptions, to be sure, exist -- in central Mexico and sections of Colombia and Central America. True, many Latin Americans are emotionally tied to their church. But in terms of participation, knowledge, and ethics, Catholicism is the religion of a minority.

Lack of Latin American clergymen exacerbates the weakness of the church. The scarcity of priests is due partially to assassinations, laicization of former priests, and return home of expatriate missionaries. In addition, the number of new priests is not keeping up with population increases.

The presence of many clergymen from other countries creates other problems. Their presence brings with it cultural shock for the receiving church and often creates confusion in the minds of many Latin Americans. These confusions add to the flux and insecurity created by Vatican II and to further confusion caused by political upheavals in a number of Latin American societies. (Brazilian and Chilean Catholics, to name only more prominent cases, found themselves reeling from the impact of political and religious insecurities.) In this context, foreign priests could not provide for the personal and organizational needs of Latin American Catholics on a permanent basis.

Further, Protestant sects and naturalistic religious cults have made great inroads in many Latin American countries. Whereas historical Protestant churches have ministered to immigrant German- or English-speaking populations or have attracted some middle-class former Catholics, groups such as the Seventh Day

Adventists, Mormons, and, above all, Evangelicals have attracted large masses of rural and urban poor, especially in Chile, Brazil, and Guatemala. Large numbers of Latin Americans practice spiritism, imported from Africa or native to the region. Many Amerindians of the highland Andes or Guatemala continue the naturalistic religions of their forebears, often with an overlay of Catholicism.

All in all, as Bruneau points out, for every Catholic actively practicing his or her religion, in many countries an equal or larger number of Latin Americans participate in some other form of religion.⁽³⁾ This occurs especially "at the base" of the population. The poor and the working class were not abandoned by the church; many priests and sisters heroically attended to them. But the lower classes were not given attention proportionate to their numbers, especially in basic evangelization or education. The church perceived increasingly that its potential base was being eroded by Protestant inroads and by the practice of spiritism or other naturalistic religions.

In the middle class, competition for loyalty came from the secular left. The previous challenge of Masonic free thought or liberalism gave way to threats posed by socialism or various forms of communism. Universities, especially large, urban universities, became the battleground for conflicting ideologies. To meet challenges to the loyalties of the middle class, the Latin American church turned to imported -- or in a very few cases self-initiated -- strategies. They proved largely transitory and ineffective.

To meet these external threats the church had to employ lay leaders. Not only were there not enough priests but priests would not be accepted in secular circles in the same way that lay persons are.

In the larger church the issue became known as "the problem of the laity." Intellectuals, primarily articulate lay persons in Europe and the U.S.A. and European theologians, began facing the problem of the legitimation and promotion of the laity. Many lay persons, especially the more educated, wanted a more active role in the church. What place should they have in the church?

Church strategists were also aware of the pastoral challenge represented by largely passive masses of baptized Catholics in Europe. In contemporary life persons belonging to an organization with little intellectual or emotional involvement were likely to drift away from the institution, as many of the working class did in France and Italy. Moreover, serious external threats arose first from Protestants, then from anti -- Catholics in revolutionary governments, and finally from communists and old -- line socialists. Leaders within the church, such as Canon Joseph Cardijn and Father Adolph Kolping, created movements and structures to meet challenges to the loyalties of the middle and working classes as well as to meet demands for more active participation in the church by the laity. Thus a number of lay movements began in Europe.

What became painfully obvious was that there was no ideology sufficient to back up the movements: a theology of the laity (and hence an amplified theology of the church) was

needed. Various factors began influencing the genesis and direction of this ideology. First, the incongruence of masses of inactive Catholics in democratic countries where participation was expected became increasingly evident. Secondly, Protestant churches had already reformed the ideology, if not fully the reality, of lay participation. As Catholics and Protestants increased their interaction, especially in northern Europe and the United States, the Protestant model exerted an influence on Catholics, clerical and lay. Finally, theological, biblical, patristic, and liturgical movements all pointed to the necessity of active involvement of the laity in the church. Historical and systematic scholarship began drawing the main outlines of a theology of the laity. Major theologians such as Congar and Rahner were attracted to the question because of their concern to rethink the nature of the church.(4) And the laity was demanding an adequate intellectual conception of its role. It was no accident that many theologians confronting the problem worked closely with worker -- priests or directly with lay persons.

What place was the laity to occupy in the church? Focus on the term "laity" led nowhere. The laity consisted of nonclerics and nonmembers of religious congregations. They were called the faithful or parishioners, terms without much meaning in the modern era. Instead, theologians focused directly on what it meant to be a Christian in the world: the theology of the laity developed within the context of an evolving theology of the church at the service of the world.

Congar, Rahner, and others focused on and elaborated the central concept of the priesthood of the faithful, based on recent research into biblical and early church sources. Vatican II absorbed and diffused their formulations of the church and the place of the laity within the church. An ideology sufficient for the emergence of the laity had been created; lay persons had gained legitimacy for assuming active roles in the church.

Lay Typologies

As the history of the Latin American church has unfolded, several distinct types of laity have appeared. Because of their differing basic orientations, their relationship with the formal church differs as also the nature and relative strength of demands they can make. As the laity emerge in the church, it wields power and gains status in new ways. It is presumed but not proven that an evolution of the laity through various types is taking place within the church. The description offered here is not meant to be definitive but suggestive of what one finds when viewing the church from the grass roots.

Traditional Catholics

Traditional Catholics are the millions who are members of the church by reason of culture and family. In Latin America the vast majority think of themselves as *católico*, whether or not they participate in church activities and whether or not they earnestly follow Christian mandates. They are born into a society that is Catholic. The distinction between church and world that Catholic Action wished to make was virtually

unintelligible to them. Their world is Catholic; how could it be otherwise?

Thus a married man might have "affairs" with various women and almost never attend church but continue to consider himself *católico*, although not *muy católico*. God is merciful, and upon proper repentance and reform one could return to the full sense of being Catholic. He would cease being Catholic only by a deliberate act of renunciation. Even joining a fundamentalist evangelical sect is not always seen as a repudiation of Catholic identity.

Traditional Catholics are noted for their passivity. The laity for the most part watches in silence as ceremonies are performed for it by a priest with some minimal lay assistance in the form of altar servers, sacristans, ushers, or choir members. Decisions about building or financing are taken unilaterally by pastors, sometimes in consultation with monied elites. Catholic education is largely a passive experience and reaches only a minority of Catholics, usually, but not exclusively, from the middle and upper classes.

In the traditional church, preaching, preparation for sacraments, visiting the sick and elderly, and deciding what political positions the church should take are all in the hands of priests and bishops. Parish life is organizationally weak, as is its hold over the emotional involvement of the laity. The vastness of parishes, many embracing tens of thousands of members, accounts in part for the psychological distance between laity and clergy. Lay persons lament their inability to find a community spirit in the large groupings of parishioners from different neighborhoods and often from differing class backgrounds. Nor can they find comfortable solidarity with their social superiors -- much less with their oppressors.

Moreover, the Latin American laity identifies its church more closely with the bishop than with the pastor. Lay persons may not know their pastor's name; they are more likely to know the name of their bishop and express more interest in him and his welfare. This identification derives from the weakness of parish structures, from the social status of the bishop (estimated as roughly equivalent to that of mayor or provincial governor), and from the Latin American cultural emphasis on the role of *patrones*, especially regional *patrones*. Finally, power, real power, resides in the bishops. They can "make or break" pastors and they represent the church before civil power to a degree that priests do not. In brief, in the traditional church, decentralized and organizationally weak, the episcopacy is the primary seat of power. Such empowerment derives from a traditionally understood biblical precedent for the role of the bishop, reinforced by a medieval variant that made the bishop parallel to a regional prince or lord.

Transitional Types

New lay movements began to emerge in the church in the 1920s and '30s. This development gradually gained momentum and strength by the time of Vatican II. With the ideology of a renewed church that included an active role for the laity, Vatican II opened new doors. Two years after the council, in an unpublished study, Vallier identified three types of new lay leaders in Chile. Roughly the same types were emerging

in other Latin American countries.

One of the distinctive lay leadership types is that of the technicians and professionals directly working for the church or for one of its loosely affiliated organizations. These men and women work in institutes such as the Centro Bellarmino, or in relief agencies such as Caritas/Catholic Relief, or in a variety of new church programs such as radio schools, cooperatives, or human rights organizations. Salaries come directly from bishops or from overseas funding. These persons are employed in an organizational system that is Christian, increasingly ecumenical, enterprising, and managerial. They are hired to provide technical knowledge in some specialized area.

Final authority resides typically in the hands of the priests who act as directors or implicitly as "chairmen of the board." Although lay persons wish autonomy by reason of their expertise, they find goals, workloads, and use of technical data constrained from above.

A second and much more common type of lay leaders is that of the men and women who help manage, lead, and develop the church's apostolic movements and lay organizations. They include groups such as Catholic Action and the *Cursillos de Cristiandad*, which had national impact, as well as the Jesuit Sodality and the Legion of Mary, whose influence was local and low-keyed. Almost all leaders in these organizations work on a volunteer basis. Members contribute a large part of the money and time needed for programs, with additional funds coming from bishops or more frequently from overseas (including the CIA and German bishops, interested in combating communism). A few salaried leaders can be found at the diocesan or national level.

Lay leaders in these organizations concentrate their programs on building and renewing motivational commitments of lay Catholics and then giving these energies some focus in terms of "good works" or useful projects. They are joiners and they want other lay persons to recognize the importance of their groups and to be involved in them. These lay leaders come from middle-class backgrounds with a few members from the working class or the upper class. Their occupations vary from professional (lawyers, engineers, teachers) to middle-management, small business owners, and housewives. Older members (those in their fifties or beyond) tend to have as their institutional frame of reference the local or diocesan level. By contrast many student members and young professionals focus on the provincial and national levels. Many have taken the next logical step and helped found national political parties, such as Popular Action in Brazil or Christian Democracy in Chile, Bolivia, and elsewhere.

The main point of contact with the clergy is not so much with pastors of local parishes as with chaplains of these movements and organizations. Their work gives them recognition, social status, and close affiliation with the clergy. Many leaders have been deeply involved for a long time in lay organizations: youth movements, educational programs, apostolic movements, or diocesan councils.

A third type of lay leader is that of independent Catholics who are also prominent members of society. They are doctors, corporation executives, political and governmental officials, university professors, and prosperous lawyers. They gained their positions in secular society on the basis of professional performance, inherited wealth, or political popularity. They are not linked to the church in terms of their professional skills; they are occupationally independent. But they are highly committed Catholics, closely attuned to the policies and activities of church leadership groups. Their main contacts with the church are through liturgical and sacramental services.

These lay leaders often have priests as close friends. They are the integrators of Catholic and secular culture; they are daily involved in the financial and power centers of society and they experience the pressures and pulls that these involvements generate. They vary in their political propensities, from the highly liberal or progressive professional, to the conservative business type who, often enough, has ties with the landed groups in the country.

These men and women do not work routinely under clerical supervision nor do they work as collaborators with priests in specialized fields, nor do they rely heavily on their services as chaplains. Removed from the work-a-day world of the institutional church and relatively uninvolved in conventional lay organizations, they naturally view the clergy in terms of different frameworks and make different kinds of demands on the clergy. Their principal referents are bishops, not priests, and they express their opinions in ways that indicate their capacities to see the "larger picture."

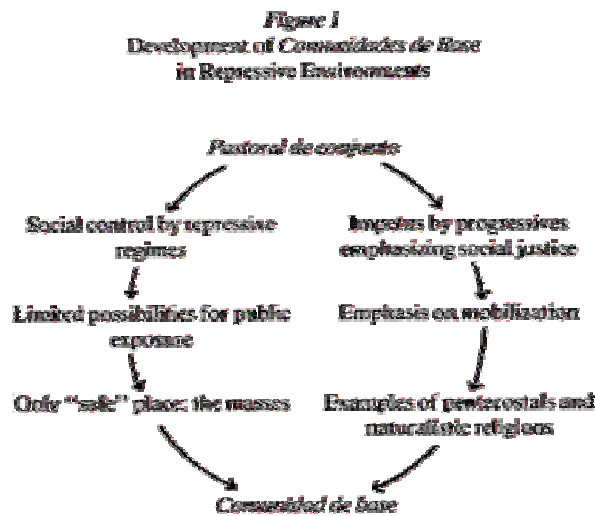
Postconciliar Laity in Base Communities

Emphasis shifted in the Latin American church from joining traditional lay organizations to focusing energies and resources on grassroots Christian communities. These efforts are by no means universal but they are spurred by the new ideology and pastoral strategy enunciated by the church at the Medellín and Puebla conferences. Base Christian communities became the preferred but not exclusive pastoral strategy of the progressive leadership groups in the church.

An evolution has taken place in the efforts of the church to empower the laity. As Vatican II unfolded a new theology of the church in the world and a new ideology of inclusion and empowerment of the laity, Latin American pastoral leaders began a continentwide discussion of how this inclusion and empowerment might take place. Initial efforts were uncertain in detail and unclear in definition. In a general way inclusion of the laity in church activities and its empowerment for certain roles was described as *pastoral de conjunto* (joint pastoral ministry). This term remained plastic, applicable to myriad structures and roles. In short, *pastoral de conjunto* stood for "somehow let's involve the laity."

Pastoral de conjunto began evolving into *comunidades de base* in a number of distinct locations: Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, and Central America.

Several factors were responsible for their creation and expansion (some have already been alluded to above); not all factors were operative in every location. The single most universal factor within the church was the driving force of progressives who wished to emphasize social justice. This, as we have seen, meant siding with the poor and working directly and extensively with them. Moreover there was a recognition throughout Latin America that no institution, whether political, social, or religious, would succeed without involvement at the base. Finally, the pentecostal sects and naturalistic religions set an example of how to work successfully at the grassroots. Most base communities have emerged in repressive political environments. The social control exercised by these regimes -- restriction on speaking in the public forum -- meant that the only "safe" place was with the people, relatively out of sight. These factors are diagrammed in Figure 1.



Base Christian communities have become a revitalization movement for laity and clergy alike. For individual members the community has brought about a religious experience. The community also fostered consecration, commitment. Life in the community brought with it a whole new perception of what it meant to be a Christian. Ultimately commitment to a base community meant fulfillment of Christian life for community members.

Association, Status, and Power

From a sociological perspective the base community experience brings with it a new relationship to the church. Church members shift from a parochial to an associational relationship to the church. They make a deliberate choice to be a Catholic. This commitment is often missing in simply belonging to a Catholic society, but it is inherent in membership in a base community. That someone would continue to commit grave injustices while still belonging to a base community is repugnant to community members; sooner or later the offender will drop out of the base community.

In terms of status another major shift occurs for base community members. Status as a

Catholic is no longer "inherited"; it is achieved. Inherited status comes from one's family, is beyond one's control or influence, unless deliberately renounced, and is therefore neither merited nor especially rewarded. By contrast achieved status results from one's own efforts, can be lost if these efforts are not continued, and is merited and rewarded in special ways.

With new status attainment as base community members, lay persons can make new types of demands on the system. Other increases in status are achieved by fulfilling new roles in the church; and fulfilling new roles also allows for increased demands on the church. In a word, enhanced status has brought new power to the laity in the church.

Newspaper and magazine accounts of the church often reflect assumptions commonly made about power in the church as a formal organization. The church is portrayed as similar to a transnational corporation or some other type of tightly-knit bureaucracy -- less tightly organized than an army but more than a hospital bureaucracy. Power is assumed to reside at the top, filtering down from pope, Vatican inner circles, and local bishops to local pastors. By the time power reaches the grassroots, it is insignificant or more symbolic than factual: reading liturgical texts or presenting liturgical offerings.

Such a conception overlooks the associational aspect of the church evolving in Latin America. The base Christian community is an association "owned" by its members, each of whom possesses a portion of power. Many members of base communities have extensive and direct power. They can support or oppose the person or policies of bishop or pastor. They can attend or stay away from meetings. They can volunteer or refuse to serve. They can contribute or withhold financial resources. They exercise ultimate power by withdrawing their personal involvement.

Church officials act as power brokers as well as authorities. Pastors and bishops collect power from individuals and channel it into programs and functions that lay persons will not withdraw their power from. The fact that power also arises from the base considerably modifies the assumptions of those who have pictured the church as roughly equivalent to Exxon. The bottom-up view also helps to explain the power dynamics of the grassroots communities and new roles fashioned for and by lay men and women.

Some measure of bureaucracy will always be maintained in the church. A transnational agency in the contemporary world could not exist or function effectively without some formal authority, control, and lines of communication. Moreover church superiors have sources of power not typically available to leaders of wholly voluntary associations. By office, bishops are guardians of long-standing traditions -- that is, established ways to believe, worship, and practice. In part, they control the symbols and myths of the organization.

But the bishops control only in part. Not only do they need volunteers but typically they themselves are not professional scholars in the areas of belief, worship, or practice. Another group completes the triangle. Biblical exegetes, patristic scholars, systematic

theologians, liturgical experts, and moral theologians are needed to examine symbols, myths, and ideology systematically. These three groups -- superiors, experts, and laity -- have been in interaction for centuries. Wielding of influence and making of policy is thus a multifaceted enterprise, with influence in the church being exercised at one time or another by each of the three groups. Interchange is usually cooperative but conflicts arise periodically on a variety of issues, such as the Hans Küng controversy or the widespread nonacceptance of birth-control restrictions. Potential for tension and conflict between the three groups is an ever-present factor in the life of the church.

Structural Changes in the Local Church

Structural changes refer here to the way the local church is organized, the way power is exercised, and the availability and type of rewards for participants. The traditional local church was noted, first, for a pastor who held centralized, diffuse power that is, he made decisions over many areas (finances, administration, education, and worship) without necessarily having expertise in each area. Secondly, parishes, and the church generally in Latin America, lacked accountability structures. In many places the church was so loosely organized and decentralized that pastors did pretty much as they wished and seldom had to make an account to parish members or superiors. This was true, too, of priests working in educational, relief, or social action agencies. Bishops typically stepped in to ask for accountability only under pressure from outside sources. Thirdly, the traditional church, by and large, lacked meaningful rewards for grassroots members. Achieved status (by reason of belonging to a respected lay organization) or positional status (by reason of a role played) was available to the middle class. But for those at the grassroots, the rural and urban poor, such rewards were unavailable in most places.

The new church, as exemplified by the base communities, has made crucial structural changes that affect the life of the laity:

1. *Scale of community.* The virtual impossibility of developing full organizational life and a sense of identity among thousands of persons in an urban or rural parish is avoided by the size of the base communities. The reduction in size to, say, twelve to twenty couples allows participants to "own" the group by sharing power and helping to make decisions, by speaking up and being heard, and by being held accountable.
2. *Homogeneous groups.* As a rule those who belong to base communities come from the same small village or urban subneighborhood. Not only are the members neighbors but they usually have the same economic background and subculture, typically *campesino* or working class. Base communities are groupings of neighbors who become involved with one another and become committed to the biblical Christ and the larger church. (Considerable difficulties loom for the larger church as a result of the homogeneity and encapsulation of some base communities, engendering, ironically, "parochial" views.)
3. *Diffusion of power and division of labor.* In the new church the priest shares power

with the laity. Lay persons preside over or participate actively in worship, they teach new members, they make decisions about their lives (no longer dichotomized into spiritual and temporal spheres), and they minister to the sick or foster projects such as the digging of a well, the construction of a road, or the obtaining of land titles.

4. *Accountability structures.* The lack of accountability structures that marks the traditional Latin American church is not generally to be found in the new communities. Members are held accountable to other members for conduct inside and outside the group. Group membership entails acceptance of group norms; in this case members are presumed to be attempting to live up to a general understanding of the Ten Commandments. Grave or continued deviance is met by challenge, ostracization, or expulsion.

Base community members make demands on the services of the pastor or bishop through group presidents or coordinators. Likewise the priest or bishop can challenge the group to new growth or activities or, through lay moderators, can hold it accountable for dubious activities. Accountability of the small groups is not sought typically for authoritarian ends but rather to harness the resources of the laity toward the corporate goals of the larger church.

5. *Meaningful status rewards.* The church, traditional or revitalized, offers members considerable rewards, such as the promise of ultimate deliverance (if they are faithful) and certitude of basic religious beliefs. These rewards may suffice for some self-motivated individuals but most grassroots members need rewards of higher status to become more actively involved in the life of the institution. Providing such rewards is a central concern for any organization that must enlist volunteers. (Voluntary organizations in the U.S.A., such as candy-strippers in hospitals or Boy Scouts, are especially adept at attracting participants through symbols and activities such as costumes, titles, and functions that are perceived to be worthwhile.) The base community bestows achieved status on members upon entrance into the group and adherence to its norms. They gain further status through acceptance and performance of roles within the group.

6. *Legitimation and formalization of lay roles.* Although the group decides or helps to decide who will exercise certain functions within it, the pastor or bishop typically installs new office holders in a formal ceremony. As lay leadership emerged, legitimation became a key issue. Despite the bishop's or priest's acceptance of lay persons for roles within the church, reaction occurred in some places against accepting what were believed to be priestly functions from persons who were not priests. Accordingly bishops and priests composed ceremonies of lay ministerial legitimation that were like ordinations. In some cases it was necessary for lay ministers sent to other communities to have papers signed and sealed by the bishop, stating that they were empowered as minister of baptism, of communion, or whatever new function they were to perform. New ceremonies of office conferral tend to be simple; they usually take place in a group prayer meeting or during the parish liturgy. In some places, such as Santiago de los

Caballeros (Dominican Republic), assumption of the role of *presidente* of a community is treated as a weighty responsibility: bestowal of full title is very formal and is granted only after an apprenticeship.

7. *Training and socialization.* From an organizational perspective the weakest aspect of the new communities has been the lack of training for some of the new roles. Some functions are simple in scope and require no special training. Some leadership roles can be performed by persons who already know how to animate a group toward some goal. The communities also enlist those with previous training, such as school teachers. Nonetheless, school teachers and other community members have only a sketchy awareness of the history and content of the Bible and derived theological formulations. This vulnerability has been recognized in many places; dioceses have established permanent centers for training leaders.

The efforts of the church to select and train lay leaders have resulted in a massive shift in church personnel away from the middle and upper classes. A major force in the Latin American church, the Latin American Conference of Religious (priests, brothers, and sisters who are members of religious congregations), estimates that about 60 percent of its members are working with urban or rural poor, in many instances as teachers or catalysts of self-help programs.(5)

Lay Persons and Ministers

Military and other security forces closely monitored the progress and activities of lay persons who were members of base communities. The Vatican and CELAM, too, sensed dangers and problems. Questions were raised at times about the teachings proposed by one or another base community. However, the main concern of higher officials was not doctrinal but organizational. From this point of view the base Christian communities offered many potential headaches, seemingly more than the Latin American church could bear. Could an already organizationally weak institution absorb more decentralization? Would diffusion of power from the center to the peripheries -- the sharing of the power of priest and bishop -- mean potential disintegration? What would happen to the unity essential to any organization?

Vatican officials, perceiving the threats, flocked to the Puebla meeting. Pope John Paul's central message at Puebla was a plea for unity, seeking a base from which to begin his potentially long-term papacy.(6) As chief executive of an extensive transnational organization, he saw some ominous implications in the emergence of grassroots communities and of subsequent structural changes in the Latin American church. No president of General Motors would have acceded to a corresponding decentralization of functions and power within his corporation. Similarly no army general views extensive decentralization as the pattern for modern armies. Nonetheless John Paul and the Vatican approved the Latin American mandate for base communities and the emergence of the laity that it implied.

A major reason why the community movement was approved and in many places is

actively encouraged is that the demands of the laity in these communities are basically religious. For the most part community members are seeking enlightenment, spiritual growth, and the improvement of their human condition. Few lay persons in Latin America are demanding "citizen's rights," such as "one person, one vote." Moreover, where lay persons are emerging in the church they do so typically in an atmosphere of mutual trust between laity and clergy. Further, lay persons in these communities want to remain Roman Catholics; they are not seeking some other kind of church.

Finally, fifteen years of experience with base communities have shown researchers that the communities almost always continue to exist only where priests or religious sisters actively promote them.(7) Similar to the Protestant experience in the U.S.A., the pastor is largely responsible for creating the kind of climate in which volunteer workers flourish.(8) Without the pastor's blessing and active encouragement, lay groups tend to fade away.

The potential organizational threats posed by the base communities thus have failed to materialize. Moreover, from a positive point of view, the grassroots communities and the emergence of the laity correspond to a basic change in outlook in the worldwide church expressed at Vatican II. Finally lay emergence and base communities reflect the global hierarchy's growing appreciation of the needs and aspirations of the rank and file.

Unresolved Issues

The emergence of the laity unlocks a whole series of questions, too complex and inchoate to discuss here beyond merely outlining major questions. First, an active place for the laity means an adjustment in the role of the priest. Indeed a "new" priest is emerging along with the new laity.(9) He devotes more of his time to religious functions and less time to administrative and financial work. He needs time to keep up with the new religious ideology of the church and to follow research in biblical and theological fields. He concentrates more on his own spiritual development as well as that of his lay collaborators. Homilies are much more demanding now that his listeners are reading the Bible and seeking to make their own interpretations of what they read and what they experience in life. Some outlines of the new priesthood are thus being drawn. Whether that kind of priest can be fashioned in a traditional seminary setting is still another question.

Given the heightened activity of lay men and women in the Latin American church, observers from the U.S.A. and Europe invariably raise the question of the ordination of women or at least of the bestowal of greater status. The Latin American church will probably work out those questions differently from the churches in the United States and Europe, given the cultural differences. Not only are women "starting from further back" in some ways, but the ways in which cultural and political conflicts are resolved in Latin America differ from Anglo-Saxon ways.

A great lacuna in the first formulations of liberation theology was that of the role of

women in Latin American culture and in the church. Theologians soon found themselves challenged on this point, especially in international conferences and in confrontations with women activists in Latin America. Latin American bishops also have been challenged on the issue. The result has been an increasing sensitivity to the problem. Archbishop Marcos McGrath, chairman of the central steering committee at Puebla, observed that the church had only recently opened its consciousness to the problem, that advances had been made (as witnessed by the presence of women delegates and observers at that very conference), and that further progress would be made.(10) Clearly changes at the hierarchical level would proceed at an evolutionary -- not a precipitous -- pace.

At the local level, something of a revolution has already taken place in practice, if not in ideology. The Latin American church has been less fussy about distinctions of lay -- clerical status and functions than has the church in the U.S.A. In Brazil and elsewhere women are performing many functions (preaching, baptizing, giving communion) previously reserved to priests. Priests and bishops in Latin America have had the opportunity to note the effective work of women in such capacities. In a sense, then, some women in Latin America have made greater inroads than have most women in U.S. churches, Catholic or Protestant. The power of women in the Latin American church grows from practice.

The place of women in Latin American culture and in the church evidences some further subtleties, none more important than the question of how decisions are made.(11) To allow macho cultural stereotypes to suggest that Latin American women are relegated to the margins of effective participation in society and in the church is to overlook the residual power of women in Latin America. A glimpse of this extensive phenomenon is provided by considering what takes place in a base community: decisions are made with the active contribution of women, many of whom act as leaders in the group; often women are the chief decision-makers.

The ordination of women is not a high priority among Latin American bishops. But many of them have spoken in favor of a married priesthood. Latin American bishops have been leaders in bringing forward this question during various synods in Rome after Vatican II and many bishops discuss the issue directly with Pope John Paul in their official *ad limina* (quinquennial) visits to Rome.

Biblical scholars and theologians agree generally that there is no compelling theological argument against a married priesthood. Many Latin American bishops find compelling organizational reasons for married priests. Five hundred years of a celibate priesthood have left a greatly reduced priest-to-population ratio. Nor can a national church continue indefinitely to import foreign clergymen. Even more critical, among some cultures, such as that of Andean Amerindians, the concept of unmarried, childless priests is not well understood or accepted. How soon a married clergy will be allowed in the church remains to be seen, but when it happens it will probably occur first in Latin America -- a further indication of the leadership of the Latin American church.

When celibacy becomes optional, the first step will probably be the reincorporation of many who left the priesthood and got married. Many of these men would like to function as priests and have so petitioned the bishops. Furthermore, large numbers of lay men are already prepared to assume the priesthood. They have been catechists for periods of ten to twenty years, have a solid commitment to the church, and could assume the full role of the priesthood with little additional training. Many of these men are recognized as leaders within their communities and could more easily and effectively exercise the priestly office than can missionaries who remain outsiders by reason of culture or nationality.

In sum, influential leaders in the Latin American church have moved the institution on a progressive course. These leaders have relied on experts to provide new ideology and directions for the church. The new ideology brought the laity much greater prominence. It was an evolutionary process: the church did not immediately or completely empower lay men and women but it opened the door to new role definitions and conferred new status and power on the laity. The social background of the newest lay leaders represents another change. The men and women standing center stage in the 1980s are rural and urban poor. They have upstaged the educated and middle class.

The emergence of the laity represents the greatest achievement of the Latin American church. The movement is not complete but it is underway in the base communities. The result has been a release of resources and energy only hinted at in the days before Vatican II. Structural changes in the local church have taken place as a result of the movement. Power is now shared, accountability structures have appeared, and status rewards are offered the rank and file. "We are," remarked a leading Latin American bishop, "setting free the people of God to serve him."⁽¹²⁾ A Copernican revolution is taking place in the Latin American church.

Notes

1. See Xavier Rynne, *The Third Session* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965), p. 50.
2. *Pro Mundi Vita Boletín*, 62 (Sept./Oct. 1979) 3-4.
3. See Thomas C. Bruneau, "The Catholic Church and Development in Latin America," p. 537, and the LASA Session on Conflict of Loyalty, Bloomington, Ind., 1980.
4. Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1965) and *Priest and Laymen* (London: Chapman, 1966); Karl Rahner, "Notes on the Lay Apostolate," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963), pp. 319-52, and *Christians in the Market Place* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966).
5. Interview with Sister Hermengarda Alves, deputy secretary, *Confederación*

Latinoamericana de Religiosos (CLAR), March 10, 1981.

6. Opening Address at the Puebla Conference, John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, eds., *Puebla and Beyond* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979), pp. 57-71.

7. See Clodovis Boff, *Comunidade eclesial, comunidade política* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1978); P. Demo, *Comunidade: Igreja na Base* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 1974); and SEDOC (Petrópolis: Vozes), nos. 81, 95, 115, and 118.

8. See Alvin Lingran and Norman Shawchuck, *Let My People Go: Empowering the Laity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).

9. See Gottfried Deelen, "La Iglesia al encuentro del pueblo en América Latina," *Pro Mundi Vita Boletín*, 81 (April/June 1980) 18-19, and Bishop Tiago Cloin, "The BCC Will Produce a New Kind of Priest," LADOC, *Basic Christian Communities*, pp. 41-44.

10. Press conference, Puebla, Feb. 8, 1979.

11. Studies on women in Latin America have multiplied rapidly in recent years. Some noteworthy collections of articles or books include: June D. Hahner, ed., *Women in Latin America: Their Lives and Views* (Los Angeles: University of California, Latin American Center, 1981, rev. ed.); Christine A. Loveland and Franklin O. Loveland, eds., *Sex Roles and Social Change in Native Lower Central American Societies* (Urbana: Illinois University of Press, 1981); June Nash and Helen Icken Safa, eds., *Sex Roles and Class in Latin America: Women's Perspectives on Politics, Economics, and the Family in the Third World* (Brooklyn: Bergin, 1980); Dinah Silveira de Queiroz, *Women of Brazil* (New York: Vintage, 1981); and Margaret Randall, *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later* (Brooklyn: Smyrna, 1981).

12. Interview, Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider, Jan. 29, 1979.