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**“Educating Towards a Just and Compassionate World:
The Vocation and Mission of the Laity According to Yves Congar, OP ”**

One of the questions posed in the “Call for Papers” for this 2008 Dominican Colloquium was: “In what ways does my discipline awaken in students an awareness of the gifts they have to contribute to make the world better place?” My answer to that is that my discipline is theology, specifically ecclesiology and the theology of the laity in the Church. And when I teach my students about the role or mission of the laity, this inevitably awakens in them a realization of their own duties and responsibilities in the mission of the Church to transform the world for Christ. The topic of our Colloquium is “Educating towards a Just and Compassionate World”. Who better than the laity can fulfill the mission of Christ to be salt, light, and leaven for the world?

My presentation today is focused on the concepts of the vocation and mission of the laity in the theology of the eminent French Dominican, Fr. Yves Congar. My hope is to briefly introduce you to his thought and influence on the Second Vatican Council so that you would be inspired to read more about his ecclesiology and perhaps even incorporate his teachings into your own efforts at forming students in the Dominican tradition. It seems to me that one important way of promoting the Dominican mission on our campuses is to pass on to students the Dominican theological traditions of giants like Yves Congar, OP.

The best way, I think, to learn about Congar's theology of the laity in the time allotted to us for this session today is to look at some of the documentation from Vatican II because his ideas certainly influenced these texts.

The Second Vatican Council presented a renewed theology of the Laity in its documents. In the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, Chapter Four, the Laity have an entire chapter devoted to them. And then the Council Fathers decided to publish a separate Decree entitled - *The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Apostolicam Actuositatem*. And without a doubt, the thought and writings of Yves Congar had a decisive influence on the development of *Lumen Gentium* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*.

Some of the questions taken up in the debates surrounding these documents were: who are the laity? Where do they get their call and authority for mission in the Church and in the world? What is it that makes the mission/apostolate of the laity unique, different from the apostolate or mission of the clergy or religious? Do the laity share in the apostolate or mission of the hierarchy, or do they share in the Church's one saving mission itself? Did Christ entrust his mission on earth only to the hierarchy, and everyone else shares in the hierarchy's apostolate, or is there just one mission of the Church that everyone shares in, regardless of vocation?

These are some of the very same questions posed by Fr. Yves Congar in his work on the eve of the Council. One of the first systematic attempts to articulate a theology of the laity was made by Congar in 1953 in his monumental study *Lay People in the Church*, which is still an indispensable reference work today. This book was really an

ecclesiology with a focus on the laity. Congar says in the *Introduction* that "At bottom there can only be one sound and sufficient theology of the laity, and that is a 'total ecclesiology'".¹ While not claiming to produce such a total ecclesiology, Congar did try to present the role of the laity in the Church in positive and dynamic terms.

Let me highlight for you four aspects of Congar's theology of the laity which helped to shape the discussions at Vatican II. The four aspects are: 1.the vocation of the laity; 2. the biblical model of the People of God; 3.the mission of the laity; and 4.the secular character of the laity.

Vocation

First, the understanding of the vocation of the laity is fundamental to his work. He rejected the medieval notion of the laity as a class over against the clergy, as well as the monastic view which held that the laity existed by virtue of a concession to weakness.²

In fact, he said,

"The whole point of this book is a protest against reducing the lay person's proper quality to being a reference to the world or to temporal things. Still less have we ever admitted the absurdly over-simplified formula 'spiritual things appertain to the priest, temporal things to the layman'."³

Congar moved away from defining the laity as existing only by nature of concession to human weakness (the monastic view, according to Gratian),⁴ or as negative creatures who have no part in the power of jurisdiction and especially of holy order (the canonical

¹Y. Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1957), p.xvi.

²*Ibid.*, pp.17-18.

³*Ibid.*, p.24.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp.10-15.

view).⁵ The laity, like clerics and monks, are ‘ordered to heavenly things’. But the way they pursue this end is different from that of clerics or monks. The laity are called to do God's work in the *world*. Congar admits that this is an anthropological description of the laity, as opposed to a pure canonical definition.

The laity have their *own* vocation in the Church: more exactly, in the work of the Church militant, for it is only in the Church's earthly phase, characterized by the existence of an apostleship and by the distinction between Church and world, that the laity has a particular vocation... The heavenly calling to the glory of the Kingdom is to lay and cleric alike. There is a calling to apostleship that is made to all Christians without distinction, that, namely, which is associated with baptism...⁶

People of God

The second aspect of his theology of the laity is his use of the biblical model of the “People of God”. Congar developed the notion of the laity's participation in the primary, religious mission of the Church. He accomplished this by using the biblical image of the people of God as his point of departure.

The starting point now is the idea of the People of God, the whole of it active, the whole of it consecrated, the whole a witness and sign of the purpose of God's grace for the imparting of that purpose to the world. The whole living People has a structure...thus the hierarchical fact is set within this whole People of God, living and sent, but without dividing its mission into specialized parts. There are particular forms of exercise of the Church's mission, but there is no particular mission differentiating the faithful and the ministerial priesthood.⁷

This context of the biblical model of the People of God enabled Congar to outline the participation of the laity in the mission of the Church. He said in the quote above that this “People of God” has both a structure and a life. Distinguishing sharply between the structure of the Church (institution of salvation), and the life of the Church (community

⁵*Ibid.*, pp.15-18.

⁶*Ibid.*, p.389.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.25.

of salvation), Congar considered the laity in terms of their participation in the life of the Church through her priestly, prophetic, and kingly offices. The laity's participation in this three-fold function of the Church as priest, prophet, and king is grounded in their baptismal identity. The hierarchy pertains to the structure of the Church, in which it has a ruling voice. But the laity pertain to the life of the Church and in that sense are central.⁸

Secularity

The third aspect is the understanding of the laity's relationship to secularity or their secular character. Congar saw the secularity of the laity as a very positive thing. He affirmed this secular nature as an unequivocal contribution to the life and mission of the Church. The laity are those Christians who take the secular structures and the inner nature of things seriously and whose contribution to the kingdom of God is made in and through their commitment to the temporal, secular order. The laity keep the world oriented toward God's ultimate purpose which is symbolized as the kingdom of God. Therefore, the world, the Church, and the kingdom are all related. The laity's unique contribution is to affirm the world and keep it related to the kingdom.⁹

The laity are those "who have their own proper calling to serve God and to fulfill the Church's mission in and through engagement in temporal tasks". The distinctive element in both the vocation and the mission of the laity, for Congar, is the laity's secular nature. Since part of the Church's mission is 'influence upon temporal civilization', then this

⁸*Ibid.*, Chapter III, "Position of the Laity", pp.59-120.

⁹*Ibid.*, Chapter IX, "In the World and Not of the World", pp.400-451.

mission is ‘fully exercised only through the lay people doing their own part in it: they are irreplaceably the Church for a whole order of ecclesial activities’.¹⁰

Mission

The fourth aspect of Congar’s theology of the laity is his understanding that the mission of the laity is grounded in their sacramental identity. According to Congar, the apostolate of the laity is grounded in the sacramental characters derived from baptism and from confirmation. It is this sacramental identity that equips the laity for mission in the Church and in the world. This understanding is not something new; it is founded on the teaching of Aquinas concerning sacramental character.¹¹ The sacramental character of baptism and of confirmation incorporate the recipient, in different measures, into the priesthood of Christ, according to Aquinas. The Church itself is, in fact, constituted by the sacramental character deriving from baptism, confirmation, and holy orders. Baptism and confirmation are the structural sacraments that give the laity their permanent status in the life and mission of the Church.

In a particular way, Congar found support for the idea of confirmation as a mission sacrament in St. Thomas (*Summa Theologica*, III, Q.72, Articles 2,4,5,and 9). The sacrament of confirmation, according to St. Thomas, makes the individual a ‘perfected Christian’ and an ‘active member of the Church’. The confirmed Christian receives a social mission to witness and defend the faith.

St. Thomas sees in confirmation both a sacrament which completes the *fidelis* as a Christian and as one of the consecrations which settle and arrange the various ‘offices’ in

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p.391.

¹¹*Summa Theologica*, III, q.63.

the church...St. Thomas goes so far as to show the confirmed person as being constituted a defender and witness of the faith 'quasi ex officio'; so that the Christian is qualified for general Christian life pure and simple by baptism, and for certain activities of the Church by other sacraments, which constitute him in offices or ministries: by confirmation for the Church's militant life...¹²

Conclusion

In summary, we can say that Congar's pre-Conciliar description of the laity highlights the elements of vocation, membership in the People of God, secular character, and mission.

In 1953, Congar called for an end to "hierarchology", and the development of a "total ecclesiology" in which the theology of the laity could be placed. Eleven years later, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council published *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. This renewed ecclesiology of Vatican II was not formulated in a vacuum; it was the result of decades of grappling with the emerging theology of the laity, (despite the toils and snares he went through) as I hope this brief survey of Fr. Yves Congar's theology demonstrates.

Our challenge today is how to communicate this rich theology of the laity to our students and thereby enable them to understand their roles and responsibilities in the mission of the Church. How can we help our students to claim their identity and role in the Church which comes through their baptism and confirmation? How can we foster an awareness of their own personal charisms, given to them by God to build up the Body of Christ and transform the world in the power of the Gospel? I think that teaching them the theology of the laity from the great Dominican theologian Yves Congar is a fruitful place to start.

¹²*Ibid.*, p.367.

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