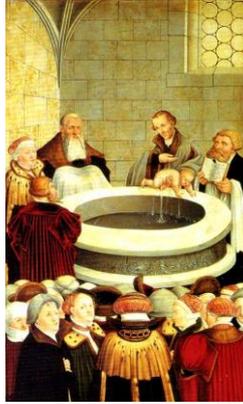


What did the Reformation do for laypeople? Are we still feeling the effects today?

Budapest, 30 January 2015

Daniele Garrone (Rome)



[Reformation altar by L. Cranach, Stadtkirche St. Marien, Wittenberg: Melanchthon baptizes a child]¹

1. The terms “laity” and “clergy” are *not* part of the vocabulary of the New Testament but were introduced into church and theological discourse only after the invention of a priestly Christian office within a hierarchically structured church. “The sacramental dimension [becomes] the preserve of the priesthood”.²

The term “layperson” comes from the word *laikós* (literally “belonging to the people”), though this appears nowhere in the New Testament. While the church is understood as the people of God, its members are never portrayed as “laypeople”.

¹ Augsburg Confession 14: “Of Ecclesiastical Order they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called (*nisi rite vocatus*).” Melanchthon *contra* Melanchthon?

² A. M. Ritter, art. “Laie”, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 20, 1990, 380.

The baptized members of a congregation are called “brothers”, “the holy”, “those who are called” (Heb. 9:15).

The word *klēros* appears eleven times in the New Testament. The original meaning, which matches the usage in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, is “lot”, “share” or “portion of an inheritance”.³

In Peter’s Exhortation to the Elders (1 Pet. 5:2ff) – *presbyteroi*, who are not priests in the New Testament – we read: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

Luther’s translation refers here to “Herren über die Gemeinde” (“lords of the congregation”) for the Greek *katakryrieusontes ton klēron*, literally “rulers of the shares”.

2. Crucial to the Catholic conception of the laity is that the hierarchical priesthood and laypersons differ “in essence and not only in degree” (*Lumen Gentium*, 10).

3. The Reformation, with Luther laying the foundations and leading the way, introduced a fundamentally new approach and finally resolved the alleged problem of the laity by underlining, in accordance with the New Testament, that there can be no priestly ministry within the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was the only legitimate priest, *ephapax*, once and for all time. Through his faith and baptism, every Christian becomes a fully-fledged member of the one people of God and shares in the priesthood of Christ.

³ See J. H. Friedrich, art. “*klēros*”, *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, II, 741.

4. The passage at 1 Peter 2:9 played a key role here.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

5. "All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is among them no difference at all but that of office [...]" and "there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular except for the sake of office and work, but not of status" (M. Luther). This is the "most uncompromising vindication or rehabilitation of the laity that has ever been demanded" (H. Kraemer).

"All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is among them no difference at all but that of office [...] This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people. [...] Therefore, when a bishop consecrates it is nothing else than that **in the place and stead** of the whole community, **all of whom have like power**, he takes a person and charges him to exercise this power on behalf of the others. It is like as ten brothers, all king's sons and equal heirs, choosing one of themselves to rule the inheritance in the interest of all. In one sense they are all be kings and of equal power, and yet one of them is charged with the responsibility of ruling. [...] It follows from this argument that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular except for the sake of office and work, but not of status. **They are all of the spiritual estate**, all are truly priests, bishops and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do [...]"

("An Open Letter to The Christian Nobility", 1520, translation C. M. Jacobs, revised by James Atkinson). See also "That a Christian Assembly or Congregation has the Right and Power to Judge all Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture" (1523) and "De instituendis ministris" (1523: "ius commune christianorum").

6. The ordained ministers within the church are thus laypeople: they are called and put forward by others who enjoy the same authority and the same rights in order to “preach and to teach in the place of and by the command of the others”.

7. This reformatory conception of the laity simultaneously opened up new perspectives on their everyday, worldly lives. If the “layperson” is understood as “free lord of all, and subject to none” and at the same time as “the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one”, then what emerges here is a previously unfamiliar type of subject, a mature individual who acts freely and responsibly, first and foremost within his vocation. “A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and every one by means of his own work or office must benefit and serve every other, that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another.”

8. “Why is it that over the long term Luther’s and Calvin’s new definition of the church, the clergy and the central, pre-eminent place of the community of the faithful as a whole far more often took the form of declared principle than ever-growing reality? Why did the ‘clergy’ regain their prime position in place of the congregation as a whole?” (H. Kraemer).⁴

9. Does the present *zeitgeist* suggest that most people yearn for a vigorous “high church”?

10. Are we capable of realizing the reformatory conception of the laity?

⁴ (1888-1965), missionary and leader of the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey from 1948 to 1956. In 1958 he wrote a ground-breaking book entitled *A Theology of the Laity* that was rapidly translated into other languages: German, 1959, Zwingli Verlag Zürich; Italian, 1960, with the title “The Forgotten Part”, French 1966.