

THE DECREE *APOSTOLICAM ACTUOSITATEM* HIGHLIGHTS OF VATICAN II'S TEACHING ON LAITY

PHILIP GOYRET

SUMMARY: I. *Introduction*. II. *A Brief History of the Terminology*. III. *The laity before Vatican II*. IV. *Key elements of Apostolicam actuositatem*. V. *Other characteristic elements of the Decree*. VI. *The Decree's Novelty*. VII. *Concluding Remarks*.

I. INTRODUCTION

We often speak of a mutual illumination between history and theology. By that we mean that if historical reality usually precedes theology, theology in turn enriches succeeding historical reality. Indeed, the history of theology and the theology of history are interwoven and mutually reinforce each other.

This interesting connection is particularly highlighted in the topic we are reflecting on today. On the one hand, we can say that the life and ecclesial role of the laity preceded theology, and that the theology of the Council encouraged and developed these later on. On the other hand, however, we see that this connection is neither linear nor absolute. Concretely, the doctrine of the Council has introduced several new features in the life of the laity hardly hinted at in their experience previous to the Council; and the history of the reception of these innovations in the post-conciliar period shows how some elements penetrated deep into the fabric of the Church, yet others remained inoperative or even forgotten.

I was given the task of shedding light on the “novelty” of Vatican II’s teaching on the laity, articulated in the Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*, whose 50th anniversary of publication we are celebrating. I shall do that by looking back to the situation of the laity in the Church prior to the Council, which is the best context in which we can better appreciate these innovative elements. The vicissitudes undergone by the doctrine taught in the Decree in the period after the Council will be dealt with by the succeeding speakers.

The following is the outline of this speech. First, and very briefly, I shall run through the history of the term “lay”. Then, I shall present the situation of the laity in the period prior to Vatican II (starting from the beginning of the last century) from a threefold perspective: the pastoral realities, pronouncements of Magisterium and theological positions current at the time. As regards the analy-

* Translation of the paper held by the author during the Giornata di Studio: Vocazione e missione dei laici. A cinquant’anni dal decreto *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Laity and the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, November 10th, 2015.

sis of the text, I will not dwell on its genesis and development during the Council, especially because that aspect has already been thoroughly studied. Rather, I will focus my analysis on the final text, highlighting its salient, and in a sense innovative, features. By way of ending, I will then make a few concluding remarks.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TERMINOLOGY

Since the term “lay” is absent both in the Greek version of the Septuagint and the New Testament, one will need to look to the Hellenistic world – where the word came from – to begin the task of understanding its meaning more deeply. Its etymology seems obvious: in the pre-Christian Greek language *laikòs* refers to an individual belonging to the *laos*, people, in the same way as a citizen is an individual who lives in the city. Applying this etymology to the Christian context, the lay person would then mean “a member of the People of God”, such that the words “faithful,” “lay”, “Christian”, and “disciple” all become synonymous. All of these terms point to an identical reality whose origin is Baptism and thus distinguish them from the condition of “pagan” peoples. In works with great influence on the theology of the laity before Vatican II, as Yves Congar’s *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat* (Paris 1953), this idea was fully assumed (see. p. 19), as was then usual.¹

However, Ignace de la Potterie, writing as well in the period immediately prior to Vatican II, criticized this thesis with very convincing arguments.² In Greek literature, in fact, the word *laos* did not have the simple meaning of “people in general”, but rather the more nuanced one of “people who belong to the mass as opposed to those in authority”. This latter meaning is, in the etymological sense, the concept more precisely captured by the term *laikòs*. In its first appearance in a Christian context – in the *I Clementis* 40.5,³ towards the end of the first century – the term is used in the context of Old Testament cult, i.e. as opposed to the Priests and Levites. This fact reinforces the view of De la Potterie and suggests a similar usage of the term among Christians at the time, that is, to indicate Christians who were not clerics.

Moreover, in the Christian literature of the early centuries, the word was, in fact, seldom used. At the time, «the crucial distinction was not to be made among the Christian faithful, whether lay or cleric; rather it was drawn between the Church and the pagan world».⁴ Tertullian later adopted the term into Latin, using it to mean the same thing, and in the writings of Origen and those that

¹ Cfr. A. DEL PORTILLO, *Laici e fedeli nella Chiesa. Le basi dei loro statuti giuridici*, Giuffrè, Milano 1999, 10-11.

² Cfr. I. DE LA POTTERIE, *L'origine et le sens primitif du mot laïc*, «Nouvelle Revue Théologique» 80 (1958) 840-853.

³ Cfr. *Sources Chrétiennes* 167, 166.

⁴ M. DE SALIS, s.v. *Laicato*, in G. CALABRESE - P. GOYRET - O.F. PIAZZA (edd.), *Dizionario di ecclesiologia*, Città Nuova, Roma 2010, 785.

came afterwards, that distinction with respect to the clerics was finally stabilized. Gradually, the term took on a more passive meaning.⁵

The beginnings of monasticism added a *tertium genus*, which added to the term “lay” another characteristic that only made it even more ambiguous. By then, sometimes it indicated that the faithful was neither a cleric nor a monk, and at times, especially in the canonical context, it meant simply “non-cleric”. We must realize that the attitude most widespread in the Middle Ages was to think of the mission of the Church as an exclusive task of clerics and religious, so one used the term “lay” only in a rather negative sense, that is, not addressed to indicate the laity’s specific function. This also explains the phenomenon that such conceptual ambivalence at the time did not raise major problems.

Also, in the Middle Ages, there began to appear the use of the term *saeculares*, which referred to non-ordained Christians and non-religious. It was mostly used in the context of the tension between the Empire and the Pontificate, between the Kingdom and Priesthood: secular princes with claims of governance on the Church, who often managed to get it. However, when one wanted to talk about ordinary Christians without a role of power, it was more common to use the word “lay” in a basically negative sense. There is a famous passage from the Decree of Gratian in which, after praising the clergy, he speaks of the laity, saying: «*His concessus est uxorem ducere, terram colere, inter virum et virum iudicare, causas agere, oblationes super altaria ponere, decimas reddere, et ita salvare poterunt, si vicia tamen benefaciendo evitarint*».⁶

The evolution of the term (and concept) reached another stage in the modern era. In reaction to the emphasis given by the Reformation to the common priesthood of the faithful and to the detriment of the ministerial priesthood, the Counter-Reformation accorded a unilateral emphasis on the ordained ministry, concentrating on it the mission of the Church even more, and causing, as a side effect, a more passive role for the laity in the Church. In the period of the Enlightenment, the Church was estranged from politics, science, and secular activities in general, and secularism gained momentum. In this context, it was even more difficult to identify the ecclesial role of the laity. In many languages, indeed, the terms “lay”, “laity”, and “laicism” referred to people, ideas and activities which were not ecclesial, independent from the Church and its authority, or even hostile to it. Finally, the revolutions, the liberal states, and the end of the Papal States brought ecclesiology to affirm the notion of *Ecclesia societas perfecta inaequalium*: confronted by the aggression of ideological liberalism and of anti-Catholic civil governments, it became, in fact, necessary to reaffirm the visible and corpo-

⁵ Cfr. *ibidem*.

⁶ C. 12, q. 1, c. 7. (The laymen are allowed to marry, to cultivate the land, to judge between one man and another, to try legal cases, to give offerings for the cult, to pay tithes, and thus they could be spared, if by doing good they avoid vices.)

rate authority of the Church. The affirmation of itself as a perfect society aimed to preserve its independence.

The upshot of all this was that the Church and its relationship with the world came to be understood as a reality that hardly integrated within it the role of the laity. It has been recently reiterated that «it is understandable that a Church considered as a *societas inaequalis hierarchica* – that consisted, therefore, of two categories: the shepherds and the flock of the faithful, subject to the first – tends to reduce the Church to its hierarchy and pastoral activities of the clergy, while the identity and mission of the laity continue to be understood according to the negative paradigm of not being a cleric and not acting as a cleric».⁷

III. THE LAITY BEFORE VATICAN II

History, therefore, attests to a considerable polysemy of the term “lay”, as well as a tendency for it to be defined “in the negative”, largely because the perception of laity’s role was itself a “negative” (or at least a passive) one.

A case in point is the life of Blessed John Henry Newman. In his Catholic period, he clashed with Card. Wiseman – ironically the one who had encouraged him to conversion – and, later, with Card. Manning because of his pastoral approach. Newman wanted, in fact, to form the laity so that they could also play an active role in the life of the Church, but Wiseman and the Bishop of Birmingham, who were strong supporters of clerical principles, thought such an idea was ill-advised.

Newman’s ideas concerning the role of the laity manifested its full potential during his short stint in Ireland, and for a while its development looked promising. In 1851, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Dublin, Paul Cullen, the English Oratorian was chosen Rector of the newly formed Catholic University of Dublin, an office which he exercised from 1854 to 1858. However, Newman’s model of the university soon encountered obstacles: primarily from the very same Archbishop Cullen who had called him to head the Catholic University. The prelate believed that participation of lay people in the management of a university founded by the will of the bishops was nothing less than “scandalous”. Amidst the hostility of the Irish episcopal hierarchy, Newman left the post of rector in 1858.⁸

The change in the way of thinking about the mission of the Church came with the renewal of ecclesiology begun in the late nineteenth century. “Mission” was by now seen as something internal to her very essence, inserted within the very dynamic of her history, and therefore characteristic of all her activities and car-

⁷ P. Río, *Los fieles laicos, Iglesia en la entraña del mundo*, Palabra, Madrid 2015, 215.

⁸ Cfr. J. McCLOSKEY, *Newman: laicado, sacerdocio y santidad*, «Scripta Theologica» 28 (1996) 147-159.

ried out by all its members.⁹ It is, thus, not reduced to those activities done by “missionaries” in “mission lands”.

This “missiology”, which became a field of scientific study in the early twentieth century, created a setting in which the function of the laity in the Church was gradually able to find space. The Catholic theological thought on the laity of those years followed two lines. The first was more action-oriented and directed to society. This flourished in France and Belgium, especially among youth workers. The second, which developed in Germany, was focused more on the liturgical participation of the laity. Each of these sought to ground its own view of lay action or participation in theology.¹⁰

The various pastoral initiatives that arose in the twentieth century, many of which were trying to respond to the need of finding new and more effective forms of mission in an increasingly secularized Western society, should also be noted. Among these, the efforts done by the Catholic Action, promoted with particular enthusiasm both by Pius XI and Pius XII, and which reached the height of its vitality in the 50s, deserve special mention. It was originally intended by Pius XI as the «participation of the laity in the hierarchical apostolate»,¹¹ but later, in his writings, Pope Pius XII would prefer the phrase «collaboration in the apostolate of the hierarchy», in order to keep exclusive to the hierarchy its own function.

In any case, if one carefully dissected the exact meaning of these expressions, one would then see clearly that, in the mentality of the time, the role of the laity in the Catholic Church «was not designed as an activity of lay Catholics as such, but was inextricably linked to the hierarchy». One reads this in the writings of Fr. Dabin on the nature of the apostolate of Catholic Action¹². Clearly, this approach stemmed «from the concept of the Church as a perfect juridical society of its own kind and organized internally as a teaching and learning Church».¹³ Moreover, these ideas perfectly dovetailed with the concept of the Church’s “indirect power” over temporal affairs, exercised through her control over several aspects in the life of the laity: morals, doctrinal principles governing some facets of social mores, and spiritual formation. With the passage of time, however, we notice a certain evolution, and we begin to perceive a mutual collaboration between the

⁹ Cfr. A. CATTANEO, *Il decreto Apostolicam actuositatem. La sua attualità nella prospettiva della nuova evangelizzazione*, «Annuario Historiae Conciliorum» 43 (2011) 369-394.

¹⁰ DE SALIS, s.v. *Laicato*, 787.

¹¹ Cfr. PIO XI, Letter of 13.11.1928, in AAS 20 (1928) 384-385. The expression is also used in the Encyclical *Non abbiamo bisogno*, del 29.6.1931.

¹² P. DABIN, *L'Action Catholique (essai di synthèse)*, Bloud & Gay, Paris 1929, 36.

¹³ M.T. FATTORI, *Il tema dei laici dagli anni trenta al Concilio Vaticano II*, «Cristianesimo nella Storia» 20 (1999) 332. Recently a clear and concise article was published on this issue: J.L. ILLANES, «Participación en el apostolado jerárquico». *Origen y ocaso de una fórmula teológico-canónica*, in R. DÍAZ DORONSORO – M. VANZINI (edd.), *Egli manifestò la sua gloria. Saggi teologici offerti al prof. José Antonio Riestra in occasione del suo 70° genetliaco*, Edusc, Rome 2015, 491-502.

laity and the hierarchy in the mission of the whole Church, in which both parties fulfilled the role that corresponded to each.¹⁴

It was in this period that St. Josemaría Escrivá emerged, a figure in whom we find both an intellectual's acute theological-canonical mind and a pastor's great capacity for getting things done. With Opus Dei, he gave life to an apostolic phenomenon, which – in the words of St. John Paul II – «from its beginning has anticipated the theology of the laity, which characterized the Church of the Council and of the post-conciliar period».¹⁵ In the vision of the founder of Opus Dei, «the Lord had assumed ordinary and normal things, indeed all of creation, and turned them into an instrument and object of his mission. On a pastoral level, this light led him to open to the laity paths of holiness in the midst of the world, preaching the sanctification of ordinary work and of family and social duties as a way to bring all creation to God. He thus opened to the laity an enormous field of sanctification and apostolate in one's ordinary occupations, in a context of legitimate pluralism and freedom in the ordering of the world to God».¹⁶

After World War II, theological and pastoral literature began to study the direct and precise role of the laity in the Church, rather than being a means to other ends. Two books that treated this topic in depth were particularly important in this time prior to the Second Vatican Council: Yves Congar's *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat* (Cerf, Paris 1953) and G. Philips's *Le rôle du laïcat dans l'Église* (Casterman, Tournai 1954). For both, the layman, by the very fact of being baptized, had a mission to carry out in the Church and in the world. Congar takes the credit for having brought the theology of the laity to a very important stage: that of the People of God, that is, to a "total ecclesiology", where life counts as much as the structure.¹⁷

His vision, however, tends to juxtapose two parallel missions of the laity: one within the Church and another in the world.¹⁸ Moreover, in Congar's view, the different ecclesial conditions were characterized by their different ends: the religious were to live, as far as possible, for heavenly realities, while lay people ought to be focused on earthly ones. The famous Dominican, in my opinion, underestimated, to a certain extent, the "spirituality of secular realities" and did not sufficiently appreciate the full extent of the role of the laity in the world.

For Philips, on the contrary, everyone serves the same purpose and the same mission in the Church, and what distinguish the lay persons from the religious

¹⁴ DE SALIS, *Laicato*, 788.

¹⁵ GIOVANNI PAOLO II, *Gesù vivo e presente nel nostro quotidiano cammino, Homily*, 19.8.1979, «Insegnamenti» II/2 (1979) 142.

¹⁶ DE SALIS, *Laicato*, 788.

¹⁷ Cfr. G. MAGNANI, *La llamada teología del laicado ¿tiene un estatuto teológico?*, in R. LATOURELLE, *Vaticano II: balance y perspectivas. Veinticinco años después* (1962-1987), Sígueme, Salamanca 1989, 384.

¹⁸ Cfr. R. PELLITERO, *La secularidad laical en nuestro tiempo. Presupuestos, condiciones, consecuencias*, in L. NAVARRO – F. PUIG (edd.), *Il fedele laico. Realtà e prospettive*, Giuffrè, Milano 2012, 42,9.

are the environments in which they live and situations in which they find themselves. As has been affirmed by historians, «in the mystery of the Church, Philips distinguished, in the first place, a general vocation, shared by all the baptized People of God, to be a witness to a single and fully integrated Christian life. Only in the second plane was it possible to determine the specific lay vocation».¹⁹

Remarkably numerous publications were produced on this subject in this period. However, the in-depth study of the Belgian Gustave Thils on the theology of earthly affairs is particularly notable. In it he developed the concept of “earthly affairs” as an indispensable prerequisite for the existence of secularity as ecclesiological category.²⁰ With his “optimistic incarnationism,” in fact, the theologian from Louvain «highlights not only the work of creation as the beginning of salvation history, and the positive fact of the incarnation as the cosmic reality that transformed all worldly realities, but also the ineluctable capacity of the mysteries of Easter and of Pentecost to renew the cosmos, eschatological events that anticipate the Kingdom here on earth, and the definitive fulfillment of the integral salvation of humanity and even of the cosmos in heaven».²¹

Another significant figure rose in that period, Karl Rahner²², whose position, though it didn't affect too much the real life of the Church as such, did have a considerable influence on theological debate. Distancing himself from the idea of “participation in the apostolate of the hierarchy” *sic et simpliciter*, the German Jesuit saw the apostolate of the laity as a species of a sharing of intentions and objectives with the hierarchical apostolate, but only through a “hierarchical mandate” would some tasks, which originally belonged to the hierarchy, be entrusted to the laity. This idea was met with opposition in the French-speaking world, especially among those involved in the evangelization of workers.²³

The thought of Pius XII runs somewhat parallel to the theology of those years regarding the status of the Catholic Action. This fact is relevant to our reflection, if we consider that in the Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* there are no less than 31 references to his teachings, and if we remember that Pope Pacelli canonized three lay people – the Swiss farmer and ascetic Nicholas of Flue (1947), Maria Goretti (1950), and Dominic Savio (1954).²⁴

While the previous Pope Pius XI had defined Catholic Action as «the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy», Pius XII, in his first encyclical *Summi pontificatus* (1939), no longer spoke of “participation” but rather of

¹⁹ FATTORI, *Il tema dei laici*, 374.

²⁰ *Théologie des réalités terrestres: I, Préludes*, Bruges/Paris 1947; *Théologie des réalités terrestres: II, Théologie de l'histoire*, Bruges/Paris 1949.

²¹ J. CASTELLANO CERVERA, *Teologia spirituale*, in G. CANOBBIO - P. CODA (ed.), *La teologia del XX secolo. Un bilancio*, III: *Prospettive pratiche*, Città Nuova, Rome 2003, 227.

²² Cfr. K. RAHNER, *L'apostolat des laïcs*, «Nouvelle Revue Théologique» 78 (1956) 5-52.

²³ Cfr. FATTORI, *Il tema dei laici*, 365.

²⁴ Cfr. F. DE PALMA, *Pio XII e la proposizione di una santità di laici*, «Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa» 33 (1997) 643-715.

“collaboration” of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy, as we have already said. Moreover, he also used these terms in the 1943 encyclical, *Mystici corporis*.²⁵ Later, addressing the members of the First International Congress on the Lay Apostolate in Rome in October 1951, he affirmed that the laity, while being full members of the Body of Christ, must, nevertheless, be subject to the hierarchy in their apostolate. However, compared to the previous magisterium, the speech had a significant novelty: an affirmation that the said dependence could admit of degrees.²⁶

In the Second International Congress on the Lay Apostolate in October 1957, also held in Rome, Pius XII underlined again that the laity should always be subordinated to the hierarchy, but defined the nature of their task with a new concept: that of the *consecratio mundi*.²⁷ There was considerable debate on the true meaning of this last idea: some thought it too close to sacralizing secular structures and thus to be rejected; others understood it as the transformation of the world according to God’s plan.²⁸ However, the concept did not last long and was explicitly rejected in Vatican II.²⁹ Pius XII also made a suggestion to put all national and international lay movements under the term “Catholic Action”. This position was interpreted by many as a regression of the idea to times past and a falling back to traditional positions.³⁰

This overview, necessarily brief, in the period immediately prior to Vatican II reveals, above all, a situation in which there was a confusion of ideas, despite all the good intentions of strengthening the lay apostolate. In essence, the attempt to veer away from the tendency to think only of the laity in negative terms, i.e., in contradistinction to the cleric and religious, failed. As a consequence, the attitude of simply tolerating, instead of promoting, the laity went on as before, and the distinction between laity and faithful continued to be rather obscure. Achille Glorieux pointed this out in connection with the names of one of the conciliar commissions: the one that presented the first draft of the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity in the Council Hall was called «Commission for the Apostolate of the Faithful».³¹

²⁵ Cfr. P. CHENAUX, *Dall’apostolato alla missione: il ruolo dei laici nella Chiesa e nel mondo*, in P. CHENAUX (ed.), *L’eredità del magistero di Pio XII*, LUP-GBP, Città del Vaticano 2010, 5-6.

²⁶ Cfr. *ibidem*, 12.

²⁷ Cfr. *La Civiltà Cattolica* 108/4 (1957) 185.

²⁸ Cfr. FATTORI, *Il tema dei laici dagli anni trenta al Concilio Vaticano II*, 369-371.

²⁹ Cfr. S. QUADRI, *I fini dell’apostolato*, in L. BOGLIOLO (ed.), *Il decreto sull’apostolato dei laici. Genesi storico dottrinale; testo latino e traduzione italiana; esposizione e commento*, Elle Di Ci, Torino-Leumann 1966, 203-206. It must be kept in mind that when *Lumen gentium* 34 says that the laity are *ipsum mundum Deo consacrant*, it affirms it in the context of the cultic *munus*, rather than the royal *munus*.

³⁰ Cfr. CHENAUX, *Dall’apostolato alla missione*, 15; A. GLORIEUX, *Introduzione generale*, in V. JOANNES (ed.), *L’apostolato dei laici. Il Decreto Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Queriniana, Brescia 1966, 31.

³¹ Cfr. A. GLORIEUX, *Introduzione generale*, 24.

IV. KEY ELEMENTS OF APOSTOLICAM ACTUOSITATEM

As mentioned earlier, the history of the debate and the genesis of the text in the course of the Council's work is already quite well known and will not be repeated here.³² As well, other authors have analyzed the reception of the Decree in the period after the Council. Thus, in this discussion I will instead focus on the key ideas of *Apostolicam actuositatem* (AA) and the new elements it offers with respect to the previous situation of the laity.

Rightly has it been said that «the introduction to the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity is the whole Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*».³³ Conversely, for the Council Fathers *Apostolicam actuositatem* is «almost like its natural development and continuation».³⁴ Specifically the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity is notably drawn from Chapters II and IV of *Lumen gentium* (LG).

Chapter II, "On the People of God", is, according to Congar, «the most innovative ecclesiological acquisition of the Council»³⁵, with its affirmation of the radical equality of all the faithful – the laity, sacred ministers, and religious – in terms of dignity; responsibility in their Christian, missionary, and ecclesial life; and participation in the three offices of Christ: prophetic, priestly, and kingly. This involves considering the apostolic activity of the laity always in an ecclesial perspective.

Chapter IV, "The Laity", frames and significantly shapes the doctrine of the Decree we are studying. The strong influence of LG 31 is unmistakable, as one reads about the «secular character» as «proper and peculiar» of the laity. This concept is especially crucial because, although the apostolic zeal, which drives the faithful to share with others the love of God present in their hearts, and which they share with other Christians, stems from their condition derived from Baptism (and Confirmation), it is from their secularity that one understands the characteristic aspect of their particular way of participating in the mission of the Church.

Having affirmed the strong link between the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in this section we will focus

³² Those interested can consult the following works: M.T. FATTORI, *La commissione de fidelium apostolatu del concilio Vaticano II e la redazione del decreto sull'apostolato dei laici: (settembre 1962-maggio 1963)*, «Rivista di storia della Chiesa in Italia» 53 (1999) 447-484; M.T. FATTORI, *La commissione de fidelium apostolatu del concilio Vaticano II e lo schema sull'apostolato dei laici: (maggio 1963-maggio 1964)*, in M.T. FATTORI – A. MELLONI (ed.), *Experience, organisations and bodies at Vatican II*, Bibliothek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid, Louvain 1999, 299-328; F. KLOSTERMANN, *Dekret über das Apostolat der Laien. Zur Textgeschichte*, in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche. Das zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, II, Freiburg – Basel – Vienna 1967, 585-601; L. BOGLIOLO, *Genesi storico-dottrinale del decreto Apostolicam actuositatem*, in L. BOGLIOLO (ed.), *Il decreto sull'apostolato dei laici*, 15-46.

³³ BOGLIOLO, *Genesi storico-dottrinale del decreto Apostolicam actuositatem*, 36.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ Y.M. CONGAR, *A mis hermanos*, Sigüeme, Salamanca 1969, 191.

on the key elements of the Decree, leaving for the next section the discussion of its other distinctive features whose importance demands a separate treatment.

Among the former, the Decree refers early on to “apostolate” as a key term and concept. «The Church was founded for the purpose of spreading the kingdom of Christ throughout the earth for the glory of God the Father, to enable all men to share in His saving redemption, and that through them the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ. All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of this goal is called the apostolate, which the Church carries on in various ways through all her members» (AA 2). The “apostolate”, therefore, is not an exclusive activity of the hierarchy; and even if today this may be obvious to many, it should be noted that for a long time the apostolic function of the Twelve was considered by most as continued only by their successors in the episcopate, assisted by priests and deacons. It is enough to recall the words that Pius XI addressed to a group of young Catholic women in the first half of last century to drive home this point: the task of Catholic Action was «to cooperate in the apostolate of the true and authentic apostles, that is, priests and bishops».³⁶ Thus, before renewal of ecclesiology, the distinction was often made between apostolate in the strict sense and that in the broad sense, sometimes also using the terms “direct” or “indirect” apostolate.

In this perspective it is easier to understand how eventually apostolate of the laity was seen as mere participation in the hierarchical apostolate, because, if the mentioned terms were to be taken seriously in their strict sense, the latter (i.e. hierarchical) was the only proper apostolate. The apostolicity of the whole Church, even if established in the early centuries of Christianity in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, had long been forgotten, partly in reaction to the Lutheran position, diametrically opposed to the Catholic doctrine on apostolic succession.

Therefore, the achievement accomplished by the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, very closely tied to the doctrine explicitly proclaimed in the Decree *Ad gentes divinitus* (AG 5/1): «the Apostles were both the seeds of the New Israel, and the beginning of the sacred hierarchy»), is to conceive of the legacy of the apostolic mission as the heritage of the whole Church, even if it is exercised in different ways by different agents. Thus, the apostolate of all the faithful, including lay people, is seen as an extension and a continuation of the apostolate of the Twelve which does not require necessary the mediation of the hierarchy.

This development is not only a matter of lexicon, but also of concept, linked directly to the affirmation made by the Decree: «the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate» (AA 2/1). All Christians, as a result of their Baptism, and later strengthened by Confirmation, have been called to and destined for the apostolate, without the need for a mandate from the hierarchy,

³⁶ Pius XI, *Discorso alla Gioventù Cattolica Femminile*, 19.3.1927, in D. BERTETTO (ed.), *Discorsi di Pio XI*, Sei, Torino 1960, 684.

or their inclusion in an ecclesiastical structure. After all, in the context of an ecclesiology of communion, things could not be otherwise, because the Christian condition arising from one's Baptism is at the same time an ecclesial condition. This means that the new Christian is then inserted into the ecclesial communion, a communion in charity that is in itself diffusive, i.e., the Christian and ecclesial communion is intrinsically dynamic and expansive, because it is communion in love.

The considerations discussed so far are based on what is common to the whole *communio fidelium*. Following the footprints of the first part of the Decree we now move on to another point. The document states that the Church was born «to enable all men to share in His saving redemption» and «that through them the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ». This is to say that the Church's mission is not just about the *salus animarum*, but also the salvation of their bodies, of human relations, and even of the cosmos. A few pages onwards, the Decree mentions that «the mission of the Church is not only to bring the message and grace of Christ to men and women but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel» (AA 5/1). The expression "temporal order", borrowed from LG, has a multifaceted meaning that includes ideas such as the transformation of the cosmos through work, the evangelization of human relationships, the sanctification of the different situations and activities in which the Christian finds himself or herself, respect for creation, care for their own bodies, and so on.

Through this affirmation, the Church reveals an aspect of the mission that should be accomplished in places that are «in great part accessible only to them» (the laity), as stated in no. 1 of the Decree we are studying. The conclusion is immediate and comes very soon after a few lines: «Since the laity, in accordance with their state of life, live in the midst of the world and its concerns, they are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven». This brings us to the core of the matter: seeing the position and ecclesial function of the laity in the world not as the *longa manus* of the hierarchy, or as their secondary or subordinate role. As again explicitly mentioned later in the Decree, «the laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation» (AA 7).

The establishment of the temporal order, of which human work is like the backbone, has been described by one commentator of the Decree as «the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God over all creation. According to the plan and the will of God, nature would reflect God and would pull upwards to the Creator. The sin of man has violently subjected it to the state of vanity and corruption and has forced it to become many times for human beings an occasion of sin and estrangement from God. Now it is eagerly looking forward to be freed from this state of impairment and falsehood, and is awaiting the revealing of the children of God (cf. Rom 8:19). The lay person must be a docile instrument in the hands of Christ to free Creation from this bondage and return it to the purpose for which

it had been made».³⁷ This is a task that should be understood within the theology of creation and recapitulation. This means not just “cleaning up” what sin has destroyed, but also fulfilling the original task entrusted to man when he was created and placed in paradise *ut operaretur et custodiret illum* (Gen 2:15).

The first chapter of the Decree we are studying ends with an entire section devoted to the spirituality of the laity, a topic that was not present in the initial drafts during the discussions in the Council. It is an important element for two reasons that may seem obvious now, but then they were not. First, the fact of placing spirituality at the beginning of the document underscores the idea that apostolic activity cannot be conceived as just “an activity” or even worse, as activism or mere religious sociology: it should be seen, rather, as a superabundance of life in the spirit. Said in a negative way, if the laity do not pray, they will not do apostolate, or at least will not do it well, and may even lose their Christian spirit. During an interview with Card. Marty about the need for lay people to commit themselves to Christianize temporal reality, Saint Josemaría Escrivá said: Christians will be able to infuse a Christian spirit to structures of the temporal order if they have a contemplative soul; otherwise «instead of Christianizing the world, Christians will become worldly».³⁸

The second element, necessarily brief, is the presentation of a genuinely lay spirituality, articulated for the first time in a document of solemn Magisterium. It is not an adaptation of the clerical or monastic spirituality, but a way of developing life in the spirit «by spiritual aids which are common to all the faithful» (AA 4). This spirituality is lived in the midst of the world, so that «neither family concerns nor other secular affairs should be irrelevant to their spiritual life», and so, «free from enslavement to wealth, they aspire to those riches which remain forever and generously dedicate themselves wholly to the advancement of the kingdom of God and to the reform and improvement of the temporal order in a Christian spirit» (AA 4).

V. OTHER CHARACTERISTIC ELEMENTS OF THE DECREE

In describing the purposes and aspects of the lay apostolate in chapter II, the Decree does not follow so closely LG’s characteristic tripartite pattern of the *tria munera*, i.e. the prophetic, priestly and royal. Here, we are not as concerned about the reason for why this is so³⁹, but rather the substance of the choice made: the different facets of apostolic activity examined by the Decree are those, in my opinion, which are highlighted as the most specific characteristic of the lay apo-

³⁷ S. LENTINI, *La vocazione all’apostolato*, in BOGLIOLO (ed.), *Il decreto sull’apostolato dei laici*, 139.

³⁸ Words quoted in J. HERRANZ, *Los laicos testigos de Dios en el mundo*, in ATENEO DE TEOLOGÍA DE MADRID, CATEDRAL DE MADRID CABILDO, CENTRO DE CULTURA TEOLÓGICA DE MADRID (ed.), *Secularidad, laicado y teología de la cruz*, Ateneo de Teología, Madrid 1987, 44-45.

³⁹ Cfr. BOGLIOLO, *Genesi storico-dottrinale del decreto Apostolicam actuositatem*, 43.

stolate. So, after speaking of the “apostolate of evangelization and sanctification”, it gives ample space to “inspiring the temporal order with a Christian spirit”, and ends with an entire section devoted to the works of charity.

Chapter III analyzes the various fields of apostolate – ecclesial communities, the family, youth, society, the national and international orders –, bringing thus to a practical level what in *Lumen gentium* and in the first chapters of this Decree were formulated only at the level of principles. Thus we find for the first time, in the solemn conciliar Magisterium, the dynamic description of lay apostolic activity in these different areas.

Chapter IV explores first various ways that apostolic activity of the laity can assume, and then considers the individual apostolate, followed by the organized type. The latter matter was already in the air in the period immediate before the Council: relations with the hierarchy, presented as a gradual reality. However, one should take note of the bold affirmation that is clear right at the beginning of this chapter: «The individual apostolate, flowing generously from its source in a truly Christian life (cf. Jn 4:14), is the origin and condition of the whole lay apostolate, even of the organized type, and it admits of no substitute» (AA 16/1). The text of the Decree then examines more deeply the different reasons that validate this assertion. What I want to emphasize here is how courageous a stance it was to consider as the most important aspect of the apostolate proper to the laity something which involves the hierarchy only in a general way.

Regarding the organized apostolate, as well as providing the reasons for its convenience, the Decree describes its multiple facets and its various links with the hierarchy. It moves from the associations born from the spontaneous initiative of the faithful, to those promoted by the hierarchy all the way to Catholic Action, a topic with its own section that affirms that the laity «function under the higher direction of the hierarchy itself» (AA 20/4).

The relationship with the hierarchy is, in any case, the subject of the entire chapter V, in which there is a gradual development of the submission of the organized apostolate to hierarchical authority. Of course, this submission is total in the particular case of lay people involved in tasks originally under hierarchical jurisdiction: «Finally, the hierarchy entrusts to the laity certain functions which are more closely connected with pastoral duties, such as the teaching of Christian doctrine, certain liturgical actions, and the care of souls. By virtue of this mission, the laity are fully subject to higher ecclesiastical control in the performance of this work» (AA 24). The graduality of the hierarchy-laity relationship affects not just the role of priests within these associations.

Lastly, one cannot ignore the importance of the training needed for the apostolate, and the entire last chapter is dedicated to this topic. Of course, the points of connection with spirituality are many, but the text is focused on other aspects of formation: human, theological, and pastoral. Though it is said at the beginning that «the laity share in their own way in the mission of the Church», so «their ap-

ostolic formation is specially characterized by the distinctively secular and particular quality of the lay state and by its own form of the spiritual life» (AA 29), it's not possible to avoid certain parallelisms with priestly formation, especially on the practical level, and specifically in the pastoral aspect.

VI. THE DECREE'S NOVELTY

Achille Glorieux, who was Secretary of the Preparatory – later Conciliar – Commission on the Apostolate of the Laity, and the first Secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, begins his comment on the Decree by comparing the preparatory outlines of Vatican II with those of Vatican I, to highlight the difference between the two. «In the First Vatican Council, less than a hundred years ago, in the outlines prepared for the doctrinal Constitutions and disciplinary Decrees, the layman was in fact considered as a mere object of apostolate, entrusted to the zeal of the shepherds. There were eighteen outlines that concerned the religious and twenty-eight on ecclesiastical discipline, of which only the twenty-second explicitly took note of the laity, and moreover, under a title with a negative connotation: “the correction of public morality and, in particular, indifference, blasphemy, drunkenness, fornication, theater, dance, luxury, dissemination of books and evil images, raising children, workers, domestic servants, Sabbath observance, dueling, suicide, magnetism, spiritism, secret societies”»⁴⁰. Of course, at the time of Vatican II a different wind was already blowing; certainly, there was much to be desired, but it was clear that in the century that coursed the two councils the evolution of ideas ran at a rather good pace.

It is important to note that the ideas that we have identified as “key elements” of the Decree are also the “novelty” that have developed since the beginning of the twentieth century. Specifically, these are the following: the concept of apostolate (which now sees the whole Church as its agent and includes the temporal order as its object), the vocation to the apostolate as a consequence of one's baptism, the establishment of the temporal order as the area in which lay people find their specific role within the mission of Church, and a genuinely lay spirituality that comes with their apostolic commitment.

On the one hand, we can and must say that «the active participation of the laity in the mission of the Church and the recognition of the necessity and the urgency of their contribution certainly constitute as principal ecclesiological developments of the Council».⁴¹ But if we want to identify the specific novelty that *Apostolicam actuositatem* itself gave rise to, it would have to be the establishment of the temporal order as the specific role of the lay apostolate. It is true that LG speaks of the “secular character”, and the Decree draws from there. However, while the Constitution points to it as the distinguishing mark of the laity, the

⁴⁰ A. GLORIEUX, *Introduzione generale*, 8.

⁴¹ CATTANEO, *Il decreto Apostolicam actuositatem*, 379.

Decree develops its dynamic side within the mission of the Church, of which it explicitly mentions, more than once, «the establishment of the temporal order» as an internal matter. Indeed nothing could be more direct than AA 5: «Christ's redemptive work, while essentially concerned with the salvation of men, includes also the renewal of the whole temporal order. Hence the mission of the Church is not only to bring the message and grace of Christ to men but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel» (see also AA 7/1). This explicit broadening of the mission of the Church is perhaps the product of a last-minute harmonization with *Gaudium et spes*, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World⁴², which says that «pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church does not only communicate divine life to men but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth, most of all by its healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which it strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of men with a deeper meaning and importance» (GS 40/3).

In this perspective, the focus of the cleric and the religious is the apostolic mission within the Church, while it is up to the laity to evangelize the world in the sense that the ecclesial mission of the lay person is «to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and establishing them according to God's plan». Thus, the authentic hermeneutics of the phrase – “imported” from LG and mentioned four times in the Decree (in numbers 2, 3, 5, and 9) – that the apostolate is to be exercised “in the Church and in the world”, is not primarily disjunctive, as if one were speaking of two different areas, but integrative: the laity “do Church” when they do apostolate in the world.⁴³

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The conclusion of these reflections may seem a bit paradoxical. The main body of the Decree, toward which the other chapters point, is made up of chapters IV and V, on the various forms of the apostolate and, as regards the organized apostolate, the guidelines to be observed. However, it does not seem that it is for these chapters that the Decree can be considered to have offered something new with respect to the previous situation of the lay apostolate. Rather, it is in the “background” contents of Chapters I and II in which ideas that can be considered genuine steps forward are present: whether seen as a heritage of the doctrinal progress of the Council as a whole, or as a legacy of *Apostolicam actuositatem* itself.

⁴² In this regard, cfr. R. RÉMOND, *Introduction a L'Apostolat des Laïcs*, in *Concile Oecuménique Vatican II*, Centurion, Paris 1966, 258.

⁴³ Cfr. F. OCÁRIZ, *La participación del laico en la misión de la Iglesia*, en R. PELLITERO (ed.), *Los laicos en la eclesiología del Concilio Vaticano II*, Rialp, Madrid 2006, 49-50.

The apostolate considered as patrimony of the whole Church; the vocation of the individual Christian to the apostolate stemming from one's very Baptism; the specific lay and ecclesial function to imbue temporal realities with the Gospel; and an authentically lay spirituality that harmoniously connects vocation and mission: all these ideas formed a promising overview, though perhaps later developments have yet to fully explore the possibilities of this path. History, as we took note at the beginning of this discussion, often acts as *locus theologicus*; it could also now suggest that it may be time to return to this background.

ABSTRACT

In context of the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Apostolicam actuositatem*, the article focuses on the innovative elements of this Decree. At first, the author reviews, briefly, the history of the term "laity" and the situation of the laity in the period immediately prior to Vatican II. Skipping the genesis of the Decree during the conciliar assembly, the article goes directly to the analysis of the final text, emphasizing its dependence on *Lumen Gentium*, and its new way of understanding the apostolate, the Church's mission and lay spirituality. A particular underlining receives, later, the consideration of the lay person as subject of apostolic action, and the establishment of the temporal order as its specific field.