

THE MANY LAYERS OF THE LAITY: LIBERATING LAY EMPOWERMENT FROM ECCLESIAL ELITISM

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Both the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1991) have emphasized the role of the laity in the life and mission of the Church. But the laity is not homogenous and there are mutated power structures even within and among lay people. Even those who push for lay empowerment are not necessarily representatives of the disempowered broader populace but power brokers and interested power players. Clericalism has metastasized to lay leaders and even lay liturgical ministers who are enjoying and are busy protecting and advancing their own brand of elitism in partnership with the clergy.

Precisely why the goal of this work is to critique a certain notion of lay empowerment that fixates its definition on the participation of the laity that are basically mimetic of the Church hierarchy's structure and function. This fixation is also related to another perspective on lay empowerment that overly focuses on the distribution of powers to either clergy or laity; this view is imprisoned in the binary view of clergy-laity divide. Much has been theologized about 'liberation' in recent years. This work argues that among other important things that must be liberated in the Church's own praxis is lay empowerment; it must be liberated from lay leaders who have become clericalized.

INTRODUCTION

Lay empowerment has become integral in the life of the post-Conciliar Church. Vatican II's Decree on Lay Apostolate provides the theological and pastoral basis for the laity's "indispensable role in the mission of the Church" who derive their "right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the

head.”¹ The Council further speaks of the laity’s incorporation “into Christ’s Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation.”² Also emphasized is the universal priesthood of the laity and their call to universal holiness. Every baptized individual, according to the Council, has a charism to share in the Church’s role and mission.³ This mission and role are special obligations that must be directed at the renewal of the temporal order.⁴

Without question, the Council has provided a theological foundation for the dignity of the laity in the Church, one that has been reverberated by theologians (e.g. Congar, Haring, and McBrien) and post-Conciliar magisterial texts.⁵ However, much has changed in the way lay empowerment has been conceptualized, lived, and operationalized in different pastoral arenas since the end of the Council.⁶ Pope Francis no less warns us of the dangers of

¹ *Apostolican Actuositatem* [AA], 1 and 3.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Lumen Gentium* [LG], 33. Also pars. 9, 10, 14.

⁴ AA, 7.

⁵ Reverberating the Council’s renewed theology of the laity, Bernard Haring explains that the place of laypeople in the Church cannot [just] be explained primarily on a negative basis, that is by describing who or what they are not. The Redemptorist theologian argues that a better way of describing them is as “active members of the people of God” and are “accepted in the mystery of unity by service and by testimony of the apostles and their successors.” See Bernard Haring, *The Johannine Council* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 92. Richard McBrien’s frames the role of the laity in one of Vatican II’s ecclesiological themes that is the Church as the People of God. He clarifies that by virtue of their baptism, laypeople share in the threefold office of Christ and are not to be conceived as delegated participants in the ministry of the hierarchy. Like Haring, McBrien affirms Vatican II’s teachings on laypeople as direct sharers in the mission of the Church through baptism and confirmation and then communicated and nourished by the Eucharist. See Richard McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 166. For the magisterial texts see *Christifideles Laici* [CL] esp. pars. 9-15, 23 (ministries), 24 (charisms), and 25 (participation); also, *Evangelii Gaudium* [EG], 199-121.

⁶ I am aware that there is an abundance of Church documents on the laity but I would like to make it clear that it is not my interest to look into these documents and repeat their claims. This position does not in any way undermine the pastoral or hortatory value of these documents. Rather, it is my position that the documents speak of the ‘normative’ desire/s of the Church – but these dreams or goals of the Church have not been necessarily translated into the very realities they aspire, and neither are the current realities of the Church the ones being described by the documents.

empowerment and representation as sources or causes of exclusivism within the Church. He does not mince words in his admission that “[w]ithout realizing it, we have generated a lay elite, believing that committed lay people are only those who work in the matters “of priests,” and we have forgotten, overlooked, the believers who very often burn out their hope in the daily struggle to live the faith.”⁷

REMARKS ON METHOD

A requisite as we move in the discussion is a relatively brief presentation on method, and for this, we use Pope Francis’ principle that “realities are greater than ideas.”⁸ Due to lack of space, we cannot enter a lengthy philosophical investigation on the ontological and epistemological foundations of his proposition. It should be enough, for now, to quote what he means by what he says:

Ideas – conceptual elaborations – are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis. Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason.⁹

It is in this light that the current endeavor seeks to analyze the current state of lay empowerment not just by using available discourses and texts.

The goal of this work is to critique a certain notion of lay empowerment that fixates its definition on the participation of the laity that is basically mimetic of the Church hierarchy’s structure and function. This fixation is also related to another perspective on lay empowerment that overly focuses on the distribution of powers to either clergy or laity; this view is imprisoned in the binary view

⁷ See his Letter to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160319_pont-comm-america-latina.html

⁸ EG, 231-232.

⁹ Ibid., 232.

of the clergy-laity divide. True to the very notion of critique, the subjects of our analysis are not only ideas (texts, discourses, and theologies) but also of realities, that is how [lay] empowerment itself is lived or practiced in the Church.

THE MANY LAYERS OF THE LAITY

Some ecclesialogists have emphasized and cautioned not to reduce the laity to a homogenous body or group of governed individuals.¹⁰ The perspective that laypeople are those who are subjects or participants of Church governance is no less a fixation on the dualist model of clergy-laity divide.¹¹

A critique of this model is a necessary step towards our desired analysis of the many layers of the laity concrete in their various levels of participation, different degrees of proximity to the hierarchy, and the multiplicity of their shades of influence in ecclesial decision-making. The succeeding discussion explores these complexities in two main areas: first, at the parish level where the rather common forms of lay ministries and involvements are found, and second, in the field of public participation. Wrapping up the analysis is a critique of what this paper would call ecclesial elitism among laypeople, part of which is the clericalism of the laity.

AT THE PARISH LEVEL

Arguably, the parish is the locus of lay empowerment.¹² It is where some if not most lay people interact frequently with the clergy through the various ministries and apostolates. Precisely PCP II considers the parish as a means and venue of renewal.¹³

¹⁰ Stephen Pope, "Introduction: The Laity and the Governance of the Church Today," *A Common Calling: The Laity and Governance of the Catholic Church* (Washington DC: Georgetown, 2004), 12.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, "Filipino Catholic Laity: Called to Be Saints... Sent Forth as Heroes!" in *CBCP Online*, <https://cbconline.net/filipino-catholic-laity-called-to-be-saints-sent-forth-as-heroes/>.

¹³ Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (Pasay: St. Paul, 1994), 598. Henceforth PCP II.

Ironically, it is also where one discovers the truth that though the people of God are equal in dignity and calling, they are nonetheless classified and categorized by the mediating structures and power relations that operate within Church bureaucracy.¹⁴

The Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) for example may appear to be a symbol of representation and thus lay empowerment. On the contrary, it may also be viewed by other laypeople as an exclusive club of individuals who are closer or more influential to the hierarchy. In an interview with one pastoral worker in a certain Archdiocese, this observation was given: “most pastoral council officers only have regular personal interactions with members of Church organizations.”¹⁵ In terms of the pastoral council’s involvement in the diocesan socio-pastoral thrusts, the worker remarks:

The initiative to form the Parish Caritas in parishes very often comes from them [PPC]. But the decisive factor remains to be the parish priest, whose disapproval or even lukewarm support can prevent the establishment of the Parish Caritas or even cause those that were supposedly officially established to become dormant. This happens despite a decree from Archbishop [...] mandating every parish to establish a Parish Caritas and even includes measures to ensure their sustainability and autonomy such as providing that they have a separate bank account. Many parishes do not have a separate bank account for their Parish Caritas because the parish priest did not allow it or has not acted upon it.¹⁶

¹⁴ John Paul II’s CL, pars. 26-29, underscores the importance of the parish in the life and vocation of the lay faithful. However, I find it rather limited if we just theologize such a vocation without a critique of the realities of parish life. Theology cannot just speak about the parish in its notional manner devoid of pastoral realities.

¹⁵ Interview with a Pastoral Worker [name withheld]. Response to the author, 17 January 2023.

¹⁶ Interview with a Caritas Worker [name withheld]. Response to the author, 17 January 2023.

In some cases, the PPC is not a model of inclusivity and consultation but a locus of Church politics that breeds or strengthens exclusivity. This issue is not only true with the PPC but even of Church organizations that are within the inner circle of parish politics. These groups may be a Church-mandated organization, those involved in the liturgical ministry (choir, lectors, cantors, etc.) or simply those who sit in ad hoc committees. Another pastoral worker was asked to give his observation on this matter, and this is what he has to say:

There are some parishes that [the] lay are being invited and even consulted in the formulation of the pastoral thrust of the parish. But as I see it, these lay people who are being consulted are those who have power or even wealth and are influential in the community. Ordinary lay people are considered only as recipients of these programs and services. The implication of this is that the programs and services of the parish failed to address the needs of the people living in the community.¹⁷

A significant insight at this point needs to be highlighted: there are other layers of the laity in the Church. Lay people whose social location is closer to the interests of the Church's center are not necessarily representatives of empowerment. Members of these communities are loyal platoons of the hierarchy; they are captured warm bodies for a pro-life rally or a clergy concert. In the words of one Filipino theologian, the creation of these groups was "framed according to the theory of spiritual warfare" and, most of the time,

¹⁷ Interview with a Pastoral Worker [name withheld]. Response to the author, 17 January 2023. When asked to comment on his views on the role of the Council of the Laity, the interviewee adds: "I can say that the council does not really represent the people especially those who are on the margins. There is a wide gap between the council and the people that even makes the entire membership of the council so detached from what is really the [pastoral] needs of the people in the different parishes."

they are dependable “workhorse[s] for the pastoral administration of bishops and priests.”¹⁸

Given the multi-layered reality of lay participation (e.g. PPC, donors and benefactors, liturgical-transparochial communities, ordinary churchgoers, etc.) it is unarguable that the number of ministries and lay groups is not an assurance of genuine lay empowerment. Vatican II’s notion of the People God must mean something greater than the innovations that are happening in the Church.

IN THE FIELD OF PUBLIC INTERVENTION

Aloysius Cartagenas’ typologies of lay groups in the Philippines and their intervention in the public sphere deepens the foregoing discussion.¹⁹ His analysis of how lay groups intervene in the life of the nation reinforces the argument that power circulates within the Church and it is played or dispensed in different methods and strategies depending on interests, perceived dis/advantages, allies and alignments, and their changing contexts. He mentions four (4) types of lay groups at play in the Philippine socio-political landscape, These are: (a) long-arm type, (b) populist, (c) charismatic, and (d) faith-inspired. Their differences and differing perspectives are seen in their location within the Church and their proximity to the hierarchy as well as their working relations with the ordained.

¹⁸ Aloysius Cartagenas, *Becoming a Leaven of Society, the Catholic Church and Philippine Politics in the Light of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), 81.

¹⁹ Church teaching is clear that a significant area where lay people have an important vocation and mission by virtue of their baptism is in the field of politics. The evangelization of politics through active participation based on the Gospel values is constitutive of the laity’s share in the threefold office of Christ. See AA, 20a and 24. Also see CL 15. For the Philippine context, see PCP II, title X, art. 42.

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Typology	Description	Example
Long-arm ²⁰	The dominant type that belongs to the Church's traditional organizations and movements. They are generally Church (parish) based, and work closely with the clergy. Members of these groups are like the militant arm of the clergy but may also have their own internal power structure and power-play built on the shared influence with the clergy.	Legion of Mary Knights of Columbus Catholic Women's League
Populist	Does not draw authority from the Catholic hierarchy; in a way, it is not Church-mandated. Unlike the long-arm	El Shaddai ²¹

²⁰ To these groups mentioned by Cartagenas in his book, we may add those that have been listed in the *Sangguniang Laiko ng Pilipinas* which is under the Episcopal Commission on the Laity: *Adoracion Nocturna*, Apostelship of Prayer, Catholic Youth Organization, Christian Life Community of the Philippines, etc. See Directory of Lay Organizations and Councils of the Laity, <https://www.cbcplaiko.org/members> classified and categorized by the mediating structures and power-relations that operate within Church bureaucracy-directory/affiliate-national-lay-organizations-2/

²¹ To date, two well-researched materials on the El Shaddai may be used as a reference for an in-depth exploration and/or treatment of the group's background, role, and influence in Philippine politics: Christl Kessler and Jurgen Ruland, *Give Jesus a Hand: Charismatic Christians: Populist Religion and Politics in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008), and Katharine Wiegale, *Investing in Miracles: El Shaddai and the Transformation of Popular Catholicism in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007).

	<p>type, the members' obedience is practically directed to the leader and the loyalty he commands. Although guided by a bishop or a spiritual director, its teachings (doctrine and morals) are not entirely or exactly aligned with the official teaching/s of the Church. It has its own sphere of influence in politics, and may even be sought for endorsement by politicians.</p>	
Charismatic-renewing ²²	<p>Unlike the long-arm and populist types, these groups do not rely on the hierarchy or on populism. Their bond revolves around the belief in the role of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They have their own (internal) ministries and systems (in a way resembling the Church hierarchy). Groups of this type do not shy</p>	CFC or Couples for Christ

²² Not mentioned by Cartagenas but Bo Sanchez and Light of Jesus Ministry that is associated with him may be identified as one.

	away from political involvement.	
Faith-inspired	Avoids undue dependence on the hierarchy. Although they remain integral in the Body of Christ, their identity and historical projects take precedence over their Roman Catholic affiliation.	Gawad Kalinga C-CIMPEL (Cebu Citizens Movement for People Empowerment and Liberation) ²³

Table 1. Typology of Lay Groups. Based on A. Cartagenas' *Leaven of Society*

Cartagenas remarks that the typologies “appear to confirm the data that although we [the Philippines] are a Catholic country in population, Filipino Catholicism does not seem homogenous.”²⁴ His generic observation of the Philippine Church is basically applicable to the laity in a particular way. Just as the involvement of lay people in the parish is classified and even differentiated by the mediating structures and power relations that operate within Church bureaucracy, so too is their involvement and interest articulation on socio-political matters.

It is important to note though that Cartagenas' observation on the heterogeneity of the laity basically refers to Church-based groups whose membership or composition in terms of economic class may be quasi-homogenous.

²³ I may not be in full agreement with Cartagenas' classification of C-CIMPEL as faith-inspired although I understand that in its beginnings, it may really have a certain extent of independence from the hierarchy. However, much study has to be made insofar as the current status of the group especially in terms of the sustainability and the impact of their efforts. At the time of this writing, the Archdiocese of Cebu is consolidating all groups in its jurisdiction that are into social action, and thus classifiable under the supervision of the Archdiocese's Commission on Service. It would be interesting to know or investigate whether under this set-up, C-CIMPEL would still maintain or enjoy the same degree of autonomy from the clergy.

²⁴ Cartagenas, *Becoming a Leaven of Society*, 89.

Here we agree with Emmanuel de Guzman who made the same observation on the transparochial community.²⁵ Our reading, therefore, is such that although the interests, levels of participation, and degrees of engagement with the hierarchy by lay groups are varied, one may see at a closer examination that the groups in each typology are composed of people who may be within the same economic class. This means that there are outer circles of the laity who are either not interested in the activities of those who are within the inner sphere that is closer to the central Church bureaucracy or are just not interested in the activities of the Church because they feel that they are not counted.

The foregoing view sheds light on why the Council of the Laity, for example, does not have much impact in their public discourses. They may represent their own interests or that of the hierarchy but certainly not the sentiments and views of the much larger percentage of the Church that includes practically those who are not associated or affiliated with any organization or community. In the 2022 elections, for example, a number of regional Councils of the Laity endorsed presidential candidate Leni Robredo, nevertheless, it is no secret that such an endorsement did not have much impact on the ordinary people. Another sad reality is the personality or issue-based approach of lay groups to political involvement. Lay groups, especially the long-arm, and populists are reactive rather than proactive in their social engagement. In the words of one Redemptorist moral theologian: “[t]here are many lay movements in the church but they are simply pious organizations lacking in social engagement. The majority of our Basic Ecclesial Communities are still Gospel sharing groups or liturgical assemblies that are incapable of inspiring personal conversion and mobilizing for social transformation.”²⁶

²⁵ Emmanuel de Guzman, “Philippine Transparochial Communities: Forces of Renewal or Blocs of Resistance in the Church of the Poor,” in E. Genilo et al, *The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Quo Vadis?* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), 77.

²⁶ Amado Picardal, “A ‘powerless’ church in the Philippines” in UCANews <https://www.ucanews.com/news/a-powerless-church-in-the-philippines/79222>.

ECCLESIAL ELITISM AMONG LAYPEOPLE

In recent years Church observers and commentators have been talking about clericalism which is associated with abuse in its many forms: sexual, financial, spiritual, etc. However broader than this is no less the Church's elitism, that self-recognition that it has a special mission that serves as a basis of its special identity. The Church's belief that its corporate identity is a branding that gives the feeling of privilege and thus power. Ecclesial elitism shapes the notion that within a privileged body of believers is a more privileged group of individuals who are not only tasked with a special mission but also special powers to accomplish them.²⁷

Clericalism is a problematic phenomenon in the Catholic Church only because the Church itself has many fertile spaces for the development of a clericalist culture.²⁸ However, this elitist ideology that promotes and sustains exclusivism among the ordained is a cancer that has metastasized to some laypeople. Among the non-ordained, there has developed a subculture that pedestalizes Church servers, pastoral council officers, donors, and benefactors. More is there a feeling of special membership among those who are in the Council of the Laity.

A specific example that would show how cancerous is clericalism even among the lay is the use or desire for 'spiritual' titles. The use of the term 'brother', 'tatay' (father), and 'sister' is a good subject of power analysis. Although there may be a genuine theological and even scriptural meaning of the term, however, it is undeniable that those who carry the title, especially among the lay, have been enjoying an elevated status, prestige, or privilege within their ranks. What were originally fraternal titles used by Institutes of Consecrated Life have now become nomenclatures of privilege. It is not without basis to speak of an observation that the mediation

²⁷ Rhoderick John Abellanosa, "Abuse, Elitism and Accountability: Challenges to the Philippine Church," *Asian Horizons* 14 no. 20: 368.

²⁸ Ramon Echica, "The Philippine Church: Beyond Clericalism in her Relations with the State," eds. Günter Prüller-Jagenteufel et al, *Towards Just Gender Relations: Rethinking the Role of Women in Church and Society* (Vienna: V&R Unipress, 2019), 103.

of the clergy between Christ and his people has now been extended in and by another form of mediation by lay leaders.²⁹

The same is true with leaders of so-called private associations of lay faithful or charismatic groups and renewal movements. A closer examination would show that in their set-up is a kind of hierarchical structure with its own style of spiritual elitism. On surface these groups are a testament of lay empowerment. Sometimes, it is even believed that their presence in the Church strikes the needed balance that would minimize clericalism. The sad reality however is that some lay leaders, like some members of the clergy, have issues involving financial transparency and even the manipulation of their own members. Just as there are issues with power struggle among the ordained so is it among some laypeople who are actively involved in the Church. This is to some extent explainable by the fact that the mechanisms of power used by lay groups and their leaders are similar if not the same with that of the clergy: initiation, reconciliation, preaching, confession, etc.

When laypeople produce the truths that resemble the control apparatus of the clergy, they are strengthening not communion within the Church but their own enterprises. This is clear in the way lay leaders or charismatic founders make decisions and impose disciplines that are often more unreasonable and harsher than those of some members of the hierarchy. There are lay leaders who instead of reaching out to the wider circles of the faithful would instead create a quasi-religious group of their own. When this happens what we see is not genuine lay empowerment but merely the mutation of clergy-centered structures or systems. These lay leaders become their own discourse producers and knowledge/truth-guardians. In effect, they create a pseudo-hierarchy that imposes disciplinary techniques on other lay people.

²⁹ One may check the directory of the *Sangguniang Laiko ng Pilipinas* which is under the Episcopal Commission on the Laity: *Adoracion Nocturna*, Apostelship of Prayer, Catholic Youth Organization, Christian Life Community of the Philippines, etc. See Directory of Lay Organizations and Councils of the Laity, available online: <https://www.cbcplaiko.org/members-directory/affiliate-national-lay-organizations-2/>

Decades ago, the Dominican ecclesialogist Yves Congar expressed the need for the Church (and by this, he primarily and mainly referred to the clergy) to give up certain forms of prestige, titles and insignia, protocols, and even way of life and dress, including pompous vocabulary and all structures that isolate the hierarchy from their people.³⁰ Today, this may have to be a reminder that should also be given to some laypeople.

We may synthesize this part by emphasizing that like those in the ordained hierarchy, privilege, entitlement, and even the claim of ontological difference, are shared by lay persons especially those who are within the ecclesiastical circle. Consequently, we have some parishes or dioceses that “encourage[s] a caste system, closed in upon itself and bonded to insist upon its own preference and privilege.”³¹

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, two major points need to be underscored:

1. Vatican II's notion of the laity which is basically theological remains valid however it needs to be read and re-read based on the changing realities of the Church, its pastoral activities, and its internal struggles among others. We cannot just equate the laity to the so-called Church-mandated groups, charismatic renewal movements, nor the PPC or the Council of the Laity. While they are developments in the post-Conciliar Church, they cannot exhaust the much larger and deeper meaning of the People of God. Among those who actively serve in the Church and those who have been given the privilege to work with the clergy are also layers of privilege and degrees

³⁰ See Yves Congar, *Power and Poverty in the Church* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1964), 139.

³¹ T. Groome, “Good Governance, the Domestic Church, and Religious Education,” in S. Pope, *A Common Calling: The Laity and Governance of the Catholic Church* (Washington DC: Georgetown, 2004), 197-198.

of influence. Thus, lay empowerment cannot be merely reduced to the notion of “power sharing” as it is currently practiced between the hierarchy and their trusted lay partners or collaborators.

2. Genuine lay empowerment needs to be liberated from the reductionist view that is fixated on the binary power relations/struggle between the hierarchy and the laity. This is possible if the term “laity” is renewed and refreshed time and again to include those who are not within the inner layers of the Church, and if empowerment is understood in two senses:
 - a. strengthening of the communal relationship between the active laypeople (those within the internal layers of the Church) and those who are on the fringes of the ecclesial landscape³²
 - b. members of the hierarchy themselves institute internal reforms that would close or at least minimize those spaces that breed elitism in the Church which is a significant factor of elitism and lay clericalism³³

It is not the number of groups or associations said to be representing the lay that would serve as the indication of lay empowerment. On the other hand, it must be the extent to which their presence has expanded the Church’s sense of communion and inclusion even to those who do not go to Church or are repelled by its internal problems and non-inclusive views.³⁴

³² It is worth noting that PCP II as early as 1991 emphasized the role of the laity in social transformation in their specific station in life. However, the statement of the Council is, I would say, more prescriptive rather than descriptive of a pastoral reality. PCP II, 437.

³³ Again, F. Claver’s point on this is an apt reflection: “Hence, in using the phrase ‘empowering the laity’... we always had to point out that it meant enabling the laity to do what they ought to be doing in our common vocation to discipleship in Christ.” See F. Claver, *The Making of a Local Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications and Jesuit Communications, 2009), 201.

³⁴ It is again, important to highlight that this paper is not merely a critique of the clergy and their clericalism or elitism understood in one-directional terms. This paper also critiques the contribution of the laity especially those who have become

In its statement on the start of the Synodal Process, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) invites Filipino Catholics to consider two landscapes for reflection: (1) the Church within, and (2) the Church in relation to its human family. The document adds that in reflecting deeper on the invitation of the synod, three biblical images may serve as our inspiration: (1) Jesus, (2) the apostles, and (3) the crowd. The letter aptly explains the inseparable relationship of these three actors: "Without Jesus, the crowd and the apostles just pursue a political plot. Without the apostles to guard the Lord's place, Jesus will just be a myth or ideology. Without the crowd, Jesus and the apostles will just be an exclusive self-absorbed sect."³⁵

But precisely we must ask, to what extent has the Church engaged lay people outside of the internal layers in this synodal process? If, apparently, laypeople are referred to by the document as the "crowd" – are the apostles doing something in order to draw them closer to the Good News: Jesus? We may have to ask how the consultation among the laity is done? Or is the Philippine Church again recycling its participants from the diocesan councils of the laity and other mandated groups?

sharers in the Church's authority, thereby making their own truth regimes. Let's take Ogden's words to support this contention: "In the Church, for example, a leader has a ministry of oversight over the discursive practices of faith communities. In this context, the leader's authority is reinforced by non-discursive practices like ordination or a commissioning. Moreover, at least implicitly, church leaders believe they have been granted a God's eye view, by virtue of their calling . . . As a consequence, knowledge is at risk of being appropriated 'marking out a territory in thought and inscribing it in the real, topographizing it, investing it with powers, bounding it by exclusions, defining who or what can rightfully enter' . . . In this context, the guardian of tradition takes custody of truth (cf. "the sovereignty of knowledge"). The problem, however, is not so much the errant behaviour of a handful of leaders, but rather, the subject formation of leaders and followers, and the dynamic between them. In other words, under sovereign power, this is an ecclesial culture where leaders are formed to believe they are the final, even sole, arbiters of truth. In other words, the subject, freedom, and power-knowledge with the blessing of the faithful, the leaders have become the "privileged readers" of Scriptures, tradition, and doctrine. See Ogden, *The Church, Authority, and Foucault*, 41 – 42 (emphasis supplied).

³⁵ CBCP, "CBCP message on start of synodal process: Jesus walked with them (Luke 24:15)," *LiCas News Philippines*, <https://philippines.licas.news/2021/10/11/cbcp-message-on-start-of-synodal-process-jesus-walked-with-them-luke-2415/>

Both the clergy and their active lay collaborators need to acknowledge some missing links in the so-called post-Vatican II lay empowerment such as the opportunities and spaces of inclusion for Catholics who are not within the immediate network of the Church. This will happen if there is a sustained critique of lay empowerment as not being able to include those who are baptized but do not have connections with the Church and more so those who are not at home with their own bishops and priests. Beyond the limitations of well-drawn ecclesiastical jurisdictions, those who are actively serving the Church must dialogue with those who are in the secular realms of modern society including the academe and the industry. Another layer of the laity that deserves attention are those who do not want to serve and pray with the Church because they were victims of abuse or simply repelled by scandals.³⁶

It is said that the only politics that there should be in the Church is the “politics of communion.”³⁷ This is where a theology of the laity whose objective is to liberate the laity and lay empowerment from an elitist and clericalist view would need a theology of power. After all, we also need to say something on power itself if we are to truthfully review the very notion of empowerment. Power is neither good nor bad. Ultimately, *real power is salvific* because it comes from above; it is a Divine attribute.³⁸

³⁶ A good reading or reference for this is T. Nichols’ “Participatory Hierarchy”, in S. Pope, *A Common Calling: The Laity and Governance of the Catholic Church* (Washington DC: Georgetown, 2004), 111-126. To cite a line from the author: “Other such structural changes also need to be considered, including more effective lay participation in decisions at the diocesan level. Participatory hierarchy, however, is not just a matter of structure. It is also a matter of style. Even within present structures, a bishop or priest who is willing to listen, consult, and accept advice can be a very effective pastor” (p. 123). Applying Nichols’ contention, it is no guarantee that the Church will be more participatory if laypeople will become part of its governance, for even if they are, participatory won’t be possible if their mindset or ‘style’ is essentially clericalist and thus elitist (and we have seen many of this in the Philippines).

³⁷ Just to acknowledge the use of the phrase or expression elsewhere, *Politics of Communion* is also a title of a book written by Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). Although Luis Antonio Tagle mentioned this in a talk given in KUL Belgium during LEST X (October 2015).

³⁸ Can the Church run away from power? Are we to disempower the clergy in order to empower the laity? These are not the right questions to ask. Like any given human reality within the Church, power however must be subject to

Precisely, lay empowerment cannot just end with a discussion about power-relations and organizational or jurisdictional restructurings; these are necessary but not sufficient. Even with laypeople present within the Church's bureaucracy there is no guarantee that communion would flourish. There is only enough that a devolution of some clerical roles can do for a Church to reform. As N. King notes on the ambivalent nature of power in relation to God, it may be an embodiment of sin, rebellion, and egoism but on the contrary, it may also exist as the effort of faith in obedient response to a task from God.³⁹

After five hundred years of Christian presence in this country and with the providential opening of the Synod, the matter now stands as an imperative before all those who are concerned, clergy and laity alike. Our calling, to borrow the words of Christoph Schonborn is "to discern what God tells us today, personally, in our community, in our country, in our Church, and even on the universal level."⁴⁰

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reflection and discernment. In the end, we can only do so much in our systemic arrangements and in our theologizing of power-relations. Ultimately, we have to subject even our management and theology of power to discernment; God himself is the source of all power – his Spirit alone can guide us into the truth of what it means to live, pray, and serve in the context of our power-relations. Here I find Francisco Claver's words so insightful (even though he may not have thought of his ecclesiological reflections in Foucauldian terms): "The only thing that is clear to me is that we have to move from discernment to discernment on the subject of power and its exercise in the church – openly confront it but in a discerning, prayerful mode. There will be, I am confident, a growth of consciousness in that process as to how far the exercise of power on the part of power-holders will go and what the laity's role in the same exercise of that same power will be." See F. Claver, *The Making of a Local Church*, 201.

³⁹ N. King, "Theology and Power: A Biblical Perspective," eds., Stephen Bullivant et al *Theology and Power* (New York, Paulist, 2016), 4.

⁴⁰ F. Merlo, "Cardinal Schonborn: the synodal process asks us to listen, to share, to discern," *Vatican News* <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-10/cardinal-schonborn-interview-vatican-news-synod-synodality.html>.