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ON THE ROYAL ROAD

CONSIDERATIONS ON LAY SPIRITAN IDENTITY AND MISSION

Ann-Marie and
Peter Fell

Ann-Marie and Peter Fell are two Lay Spiritans of the Province of England. Graduates of Manchester University, they both taught for many years prior to founding REVIVE, an agency that provides advocacy and support services for asylum seekers and refugees in the Greater Manchester area. Ann-Marie, a qualified counselor, and Peter, a trained social worker, have been married for 34 years; they have three children and one grandchild. Peter co-authored the recent book *What are they doing here? A Critical Guide to Asylum and Immigration* (Birmingham: Venture Press, 2007)

Role of Laity in the Church

It seems to have been Clement of Rome who first used the Greek adjective *laikos* when referring to the participation of non-deacons or non-presbyters in the liturgy (Williams, 1963). The same author notes that the term was commonly used in Greek to distinguish the mass of the people from their leaders. Although, as Congar (1957) asserts, it is rather *laos*, “people,” which is the common Biblical term, there is evidence, by the very use of differentiated terminology, of an incipient division of ecclesial labors and responsibilities between the priestly and the non-priestly in primitive liturgical practices. At a much later period, the rise of monasticism embodies the distinction between the sacred and the secular with a physical enclosure and the separation of prayerful communities from the “world.” There is, however, the proviso that lay men could become members of monastic orders and exercise their lay state in a role, which although consecrated, was auxiliary to that of their ordained brethren.

In 1859 J.H. Newman offered a fluid and inclusive view of the sources of Catholic tradition as emanating “variously at various times” from the episcopacy, the doctors of the Church, the *people* and other “events, disputes and movements...which are comprised under the name of history.” (Newman, 1961, my emphasis).

Doohan (1984) views the Second Vatican Council as the moment when “communication, incarnation and ministry” were embodied as a theology of Catholic lay participation in the mission of the Church, with the people of God “called to be sacrament of the world in the circumstances of their own lives.” (p. 44)

Vatican II’s “Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People” depicts the action of lay people as being “so necessary that without it, the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect” (Chapter 3 [10]), a formulation which perhaps evokes the unfortunate analogy of a dog needing a tail in order to wag in the most dog-like way and be acknowledged for what it truly is. However, the recognition that there existed a theology of the Catholic laity, and that the laity, through their very life in the world, are thus consecrated into holiness through the sacredness

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of the world as the very work of God, must have come as a startling revelation to the person in the pew and one that, in the twenty-first century, perhaps remains somewhat removed from the consciousness of many lay Catholics.

Henry Koren, the Spiritan academic and historian of the Congregation, follows and develops the insights of Vatican II:

*...we can now assert that the laity's role is not just limited to helping priests and bishops in **their** mission, but demands that the lay-people put into effect their **own** royal mission. Because bishops and priests also belong to God's laity – the people – there is no inherent conflict between the ordained priest mission and the non-priest mission.* (Koren, 1990).

Koren seems to imply a re-orientation of the meaning of the “sacred” away from a preoccupation with what is done at the altar – the sacerdotal actions of the Eucharistic celebrant, for example – towards an inclusive theology of intentionality, in which the life and witness of all, whether ordained or not, are of equal existential importance within the community of believers.

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If this is so, then a burning question must be: to what extent does formal participation in the lay apostolate of a religious congregation imply an attentiveness to and an expression of the sacredness of everyday life? Or is it merely a misguided attempt to reproduce or imitate the obligations of ordained ministry in an inauthentic context? Does the act – recognized through public assent, although not by the taking of binding vows – of lay associate membership of a religious order impose an obligation to undertake works which are in accordance with and further the missionary aims of the congregation in a concrete form, or does one understand the lay apostolate as a kind of “business as usual” in the affairs of daily life whilst wearing a spiritual identity tag?

Lay Spiritans and Mission

Where groups of lay Spiritans exist there is a danger that a quest for identity, and the desire to formulate it in a kind of user's manual, can consume all of its energies and deflect attention away from more pressing matters. It can be an excuse, in other words, for inward-looking, hand-wringing procrastination during which any notions of missionary *purpose* become lost.

At the meeting of European lay Spiritans held in Gemert, the Netherlands, in 2007, we listened to a story told by one of the delegates:

A newly formed lay group affiliated to a religious congregation decided that it must first of all decide its defining characteristics and then set these down in the form of a document which would describe what this group was about. So, in the first year of its existence, it devoted its monthly meetings to doing precisely that; each point was carefully elaborated and typed up after discussion and a manual was produced comprising over a hundred numbered paragraphs, some with sub-sections and even sub-sub-sections. This was printed and its appearance was marked by a joyous celebration. It duly took its place in the library of the religious house where the lay people held their meeting. At the next monthly meeting, the group gathered in a self-congratulatory mood and wondered what they should do next.

The problem was this: no-one had the faintest idea what the group should do – how their meticulously formulated “identity” was to be transformed into the apostolic and missionary praxis which had been stated as its main objective.

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To borrow the terms of Jean-Paul Sartre, the group had attempted to define its *essence* before examining the conditions of its *existence*. The formulation of the group’s identity did not flow from its actions in the world but was expressed only at the level of discourse - a set of propositions which idealized the group’s perceptions of itself and which only served to mystify and perpetuate a narcissistic ritual of revisiting and admiring the reflection that it had created.

By contrast, the documents of Torre d’Aguilha reflect positively the experience of the lay delegates whose testimony was heard at that Chapter:

The personal story of each lay Spiritan shows us that there are three essential elements in their desire to drink from the richness of our charism: spiritual experience, specific mission and life in community. In general, the decisive factors are basic contact with one or more confreres or a community, knowledge of the evangelising impact of some of our older missionaries, direct contact with our founders and sources. We listened to these lay people spontaneously telling us how their spiritual life, lived according to their own lay vocation, is marked by the importance given to prayer, the action of the Spirit in daily life, ‘practical union’ with God, an attitude of availability, and the confident waiting for the ‘moment of God.’ (Torre d’Aguilha 11.1)

Many lay Spiritans will recognize themselves in these accounts. But we must be aware of the dangers which I have described above - the temptation to hide behind a label and be unable to proclaim who we are *on the basis of our actions in furthering the missionary aims of the Congregation*.

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Let us be open to identifying spheres of action amongst those whom we recognize as the poor and marginalized in our midst, remembering that those whom we identify thus do not exist as some kind of convenient backdrop against which we can undertake noble or “preferential” actions. The “poor” exist by contrast with the rich; the “marginalized” exist in opposition to those who participate in the fullness of a society’s bounties. It is insufficient to speak in such generalized terms, which, with repetition, become meaningless and only serve to perpetuate the mystifying discourses of comfortable containment that I have already mentioned.

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names...*

We are talking about structural and personal inequalities and injustices and we need to put faces to names: homeless men and women; prisoners; people seeking asylum; refugees; abused men, women, and children; disenchanting young people; sex offenders. We are also talking about the global scope of so many contemporary problems, but without ascribing such problems to distant anonymous forces and ignoring human agency and responsibility. (Hornsby-Smith, 2006, p. 279).

In the inaugural issue of *Spiritun Horizons*, Fr Anthony Gittins wrote:

“The poor” and “the most abandoned” are abstractions, categories; but there really is no such thing as “the poor” in the abstract. God does not make abstractions, or generic creatures: God’s creation is always specific, and every human person is individuated and identifiable by name. In order, therefore, to be really committed to the poor and most abandoned people, we must endeavor to know them by name, to identify and relate to them in a personal way. (Gittins, 2006, p. 34 – emphasis in original).

Our Personal Journey

Both of us had been high school teachers until health-related reasons forced us to abandon our careers in the early 1990’s. We already had two teenage children and our youngest son, Nicholas, was born in 1990, just around the time when our previous professional identities had begun to crumble. We spent

our newfound free time in childcare, but with the suspicion that there was still something unknown around the corner which might engage our skills and other attributes.

In the mid-nineties, Ann-Marie became involved in the small group of volunteers who visited people detained by the UK immigration service at Manchester Airport. Dermot McNulty, who coordinated the group, was a lay Spiritan and it was he who introduced us to the Salford community. We started to attend meetings and made our commitment to the lay Spiritans of the English Province in 1998. We then spent a period of discernment as to the direction in which our commitment could be worked out in a concrete form.

In 1999, Peter explored the possibility of undertaking a Masters degree in social work, inspired largely by the example of our eldest son, Ben, who is now a lecturer in social work at the University of Hull. Around this time, the British government, concerned about the increasing numbers of people arriving in the UK to seek asylum, enacted legislation which would forcibly disperse newly-arrived asylum seekers from London and south-east England – where most of them first set foot and tended to cluster around pre-existing ethnic communities – to the several large conurbations around the rest of the UK. It was calculated that doing so would ease the fiscal burden on local authorities who, at that time, were responsible for the housing and support of asylum seekers.

Ann-Marie had already begun to see the need for some kind of service to welcome, support, and accompany the asylum seekers who would soon be arriving in the Greater Manchester area where we live. Coupled with her experience of work at Manchester Airport, she started to work as a volunteer for the Diocese of Salford in outreach work with this group of people.

In 2001, Peter finished his social work training and we both envisaged a project which would provide a professional service of support and advocacy for asylum seekers and also for those people given refugee status and allowed to remain in the UK. We approached the then Provincial Superior of the English Province, Fr. John McFadden, with our plans. Both he and Fr. Mark Connolly, at that time Provincial Bursar, were enthusiastic about our plans and agreed to fund the project - which we called REVIVE - for two years initially. We were fortunate to be given two rooms in the presbytery of St. Boniface's parish in Salford, by

the parish priest, Fr. Peter Kinsella, where we remain today and attempt to squeeze our expanding activities into the same space.

REVIVE

From the beginnings of REVIVE, we have had arrangements with local universities to offer placements to social work students who are interested in our work. This serves both the training needs of the universities and the needs of REVIVE for trained workers who can offer professional social advocacy to those who increasingly use our services. Additionally, this brings funds to REVIVE from our partner teaching institutions.

In 2004 we started working with the British Red Cross in a project to relieve hardship amongst those asylum seekers whose claims had been refused and whose support had been terminated by the Home Office, the government department responsible for deciding asylum applications. This is a growing area of concern for all agencies working with asylum seekers in the UK and is leading to an increasing number of truly marginalized people who have no income, no housing, no right to employment, and no stable sense of identity within our community.

In 2005, we received funding from the Tudor Trust, a charity which lends support to projects working to lessen the effects of social deprivation and exclusion. This has enabled us to appoint a part-time caseworker whose remit is to work specifically with destitute former asylum seekers, Britain's *sans papiers* (without documents). The continuing commitment of the English Province to our work means that we will shortly be able to appoint another full-time caseworker who will be able to share our workload.

Many of the referrals for our support services come increasingly from the Manchester branch of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. They see REVIVE as ideally placed to offer frequent-contact social support for those clients who may also be receiving counseling from the Medical Foundation or those for whom direct therapeutic services may be judged inappropriate.

In a typical week's work we may see between fifty and sixty people, comprising those who are part of our outreach casework and whom we visit regularly in their home or accompany on appointments to lawyers and hospitals, for example. Perhaps our work might be taking someone to see a movie or going for a coffee, or any other activity that will reduce social isolation and

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the sense of uncertainty that is part of everyday life for people seeking asylum.

We also work with people given permission to remain in the UK, assisting with obtaining social housing, employment, education, and access to social security payments. Awareness raising amongst local faith groups is also an important part of our work and, as a result of talks given by Ann-Marie, we enjoy the support of several local parishes, both Catholic and Anglican, who are regular donors of both money and food for our drop-in program. As part of this awareness raising, Peter has recently jointly authored a critical guide to asylum and immigration issues in the UK. His co-author, Debra Hayes, was Peter's social work tutor at Manchester Metropolitan University and a member of REVIVE's management committee since the inception of the project. (Fell and Hayes, 2007).

A Reciprocal Process

We believe strongly that the "helping" relationship can be highly complex in practice and hope that our working methods embody a recognition that our brothers and sisters are not merely the passive recipients of our actions, but join with us in a reciprocal process of accompaniment and empowerment. We too are "poor" by comparison with the qualities of resistance, resilience, and hope which they demonstrate and teach to us continuously.

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However, this does not mean that we adopt an uncritical and romanticized attitude to those we meet. We have to express honestly the scope, possibilities, and limitations of our work. In the words of Paolo Freire,

there is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. To speak a true word is to transform the world. (Freire, 1996, p.68).

That "world," we would suggest, may simply be the consciousness of the individual that he or she is not alone in a time of difficulty and struggle.

"Who do you say that I am?" (Mt 16:15)

Undertaking a commitment to lay Spiritan membership and involvement in the life of a Spiritan community; making a significant change in professional career orientation; a major development in legislation affecting people seeking asylum in Britain: it would be tempting to dismiss this conjunction of events as merely co-incidental, an accident of time and place. Whether these events were a sign of the call of the Spirit is not

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for us to judge, but there is no doubt in our minds that, as lay Spiritans, we would be required to be open to the workings of the Spirit, to be available to act upon our analysis of the signs of the times, and to respond to our observations.

This has brought us to believe that lay Spiritan commitment must mean an engagement with both reflection *and* action. Lay people can and should participate fully in the missionary charism of the founders and walk alongside our professed confreres on the “Royal Road” that we both share, sustained by prayer and community, and informed by analysis of the needs of the world.

Let the willingness to undertake such work be a condition of our identity and commitment as lay Spiritans. Let it *be* our identity.

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