

# THE ROLE OF THE LAYMAN IN THE ANCIENT CHURCH\*

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THE AUTHORITY of Kenneth Scott Latourette may be ad-  
duced for the fact that the lay members of the ancient  
churches were not conspicuous for sustained missionary activity  
either at home or as itinerants:

*It would probably be a misconception [he writes] to think  
of every Christian of the first three hundred years after  
Christ as aggressively seeking converts. Such pictures as  
we have of these early communities in the New Testament  
. . . warrant no such conclusion. In none of them does  
any hint occur that the rank and file of Christians regarded  
it as even a minor part of their duty to communicate their  
faith to others.<sup>1</sup>*

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of the World Council of Churches, New Haven, Connecticut, July 21, 1957.  
It is being concurrently published in somewhat reduced form in *The Ecumenical  
Review*, X (1958), 225-248.

<sup>1</sup>*The Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, I (New York/London, 1937), 117.

But if none rose up with the same vocation as the first apostles and evangelists, the fact remains that the expansion of Christianity in the hostile environment of the first three centuries, and its eventual conquest of the seats of political authority has ever since been considered so phenomenal as to be one of the clearest proofs of the divine credentials of this new people, this third race under God, neither Jew nor Barbarian.<sup>2</sup> Despite Latourette's stricture, we instinctively feel, even though the documentation is meagre, that the witness in life and death of unnamed multitudes of lay members contributed as much to the spread of Christianity as the writing and preaching and the valiant martyrdom of their more articulate clerical leaders.<sup>3</sup> For all Christians were aware of being, not only a third race, the peculiar people of God the Lord of Hosts, but also a royal priesthood (I Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6) with a divine commission to bring salvation to the whole world. Hence the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers emerges as a basic concept for the interpretation of the laymen in the ancient Church and their mission.

Significantly, most of the major work in the last score of years on what has been commonly thought of as a basically Protestant emphasis in ecclesiology has been done by Roman Catholic scholars, notably in France and Belgium. It was manifest from the first that irenic, ecumenically minded Catholics could find in a *liturgical* reconception of "Luther's doctrine" the means of establishing a congenial point of contact with Protestantism while at the same time rectifying, as they also openly acknowledged, the disproportionate clerical emphasis which had come in with Tridentine Catholicism. In these numerous and often very moving studies, most of them dogmatico-historical with a good deal of reference to recent papal pronouncements, the great hope expressed is that Catholic laymen

<sup>2</sup>On the missionary significance of this conviction, see Emanuel Kellerhals, "Das dritte Geschlecht," *Evangelisches Missions-Magazin*, XL (1946), 101, 133.

<sup>3</sup>There is considerable incidental material on lay witness and lay evangelism in the very useful and attractive account by John Foster, *After the Apostles: Missionary Preaching of the First Three Centuries* (London: S.P.C.K., 1951).

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will recover their ancient place in the liturgy, in Christian action, and in what is commonly called today the lay apostolate.<sup>4</sup> Yet even here, when the missionary role of the ancient layman comes under scrutiny, the Catholic writer, like the Protestant, is restrained in his deductions because of the paucity of documentation.<sup>5</sup>

All this is to say that we shall therefore examine *all* the functions of the ancient layman, content with an occasional glimpse of specifically missionary lay activity as it may open up for us in the sparse documentation.

Our understanding of the laity will be shaped, not primarily in terms of ordination and the lack thereof, nor of theological education and the relative want thereof, but rather in terms of

<sup>4</sup>See "The Lay Apostolate in the Roman Catholic Church," *Laity*, I (February, 1956). The most comprehensive study is that of Yves M. J. Congar, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat* (Paris, 1954 [American translation, 1957]). A more popular presentation, in part inspired by Congar, is that of Gérard Philips, *The Role of the Laity in the Church*, translated from the French by J. R. Gilbert and J. W. Moudry (Chicago, 1956). Paul Dabin, prematurely taken by death, had prepared the way with two companion collections of documents and commentary in *Le sacerdoce royal des fidèles dans les livres saints* (Paris, 1941) and *Le sacerdoce royal des fidèles dans la tradition ancienne et moderne* (Brussels/Paris, 1950). Earlier, in the midst of widespread disaffection from Rome among Belgian workers and intellectuals, Dabin had inaugurated his life's work with the programmatic *L'Apostolat laïque* (1933). Other Catholic writings, dogmatic and canonistic, and contemporary more than historical in character, may be mentioned: Engelbert Niebecker, *Das allgemeine Priestertum der Gläubigen* (Paderborn, 1936); G. Thils, "De taak van de leek in onze opfatting van de Kerk," *Het christelijk Oosten en Hereniging* (1949); N. Rocholl, *Vom Laienpriestertum* (Paderborn, 1940); P. F. Palmer, "The Laical Priesthood: Real or Metaphysical?" *Theological Studies*, VIII (1947), 574ff.; Ernst Rösser, *Die Stellung der Laien in der Kirche nach dem kanonischen Recht* (Würzburg, 1949); Rudolph Müller-Erb, "Der Laie in der Kirche," *Theologische Quartalschrift*, CXXX (1950), 184-196; O. Kohler, "Der Laie im katholischen Kirchenrecht," *Stimmen der Zeit* (April, 1950); Oswald von Nell-Bruening and H. Keller, *Das Recht der Laien in der Kirche* (Heidelberg, 1950); E. Boularand, "Sacerdoce de l'Eglise, sacerdoce du baptisé," *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, XXXII (1956), 361.

The corresponding Orthodox studies and statements are as follows: N. Afanasev, *Sluzhenie miryan v Tserkvi* [The Lay Authority in the Church] (Paris, 1955); for Greece primarily: I. Kotsōnēs, *Hē Thesis tōn laikōn* (Athens, 1956), which draws heavily on the councils and canon law, and Panagiōtes Trempelas, *Hoi Laikoi en tēi ekklesiāi* (Athens, 1957); for Russian Orthodoxy: L. N. Parijskij, "Die Rolle des Laien im Leben der Russisch-Orthodoxen Kirche," *Kirche in der Zeit*, XII (1957), 12-16; and the same from a Western point of view, Bernhard Schultze, S. J., "Die byzantinisch-slawische Theologie über den Dienst der Laien in der Kirche," *Ostkirchliche Studien*, V (1956), 243ff.

<sup>5</sup>For example, J. Bauer has to make do with inferences from a commentary by Theodoret when he deals specifically with our theme, the only such title I have come across. "Die Missionspflicht des einzelnen nach der Lehre vom mystischen Leib Christi," *Theologische—Praktische Quartalschrift*, CI (1953), 296.

the Church gathered for worship, instruction, and deliberation (*ekklesia*) over against the equally important "church" diffused or scattered or seeded in the work-a-day world (*diaspora*) as leaven in the lump (not as wheat among tares!).<sup>6</sup> On this view even the ordained cleric is, in a sense, in his action as husbandman and citizen a "laic." As it turns out, however, *we* shall not be able to slight the role of the laity in *ekklēsia* as distinguished from the laity in *diaspora*, because our largely clerical sources give us relatively little about laymen outside the meeting!

We shall limit our sketch of the evolution of the layman in *ekklēsia* and in *diaspora* from Pentecost to the end of the persecutions.<sup>7</sup> The recognition of Christianity by Constantine, as for so much else in church history, clearly ends a period in the evolution of the laity as a true order (*taxis*) with its own often distinctive liturgical, constitutional, disciplinary, eleemosynary, and witnessing role; and marks the climax of the gradual differentiation of the *laos tou theou* into laity and clergy, and the accompanying atrophy of lay functions.

At three points is the position of the laity markedly different in the ante- and the post-Nicene epochs. In the very first days of the Church's self-consciousness as a new people set apart, the whole of the Church as the *laos tou theou* was seen over against the people of the old covenant, while the baptismal recruits were understood to have entered into a priestly kingdom, neither Jew nor Gentile, no longer in bondage to the world about them, yet servants of the King to come. Then, with the maturation of subapostolic Christianity, this historico-theological conviction made room for the functional differentiation between the clerical officers of the priestly people of

<sup>6</sup>The contrast *ekklēsia-diaspora* has been suggested by Hans-Ruedi Weber in "The Church in the House," *Laity*, No. 3, April, 1957.

<sup>7</sup>This treatment parallels another study, made by the author, of the evolution of the clergy in the ante-Nicene period. *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives*, H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel Williams, eds. (New York, 1956), ch. ii.

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God and the unordained faithful\* in a process which was completed before the end of the persecutions and which was indeed abetted by them. The bishop had become an awesome monarch. The orders of church discipline expressly call him *basileus* and *rex*. Finally, with the conversion of Constantine and the Christianization of his office, Christianity in the period of the great councils found itself contrasting not clergy and laity as in the ante-Nicene period, but clergy and the chief of the laity, namely, the Christian emperor. The sudden emergence of a layman preeminent above all the rest and overshadowing even the bishops of the great sees of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and presently Constantinople, found the Church in her manuals of discipline, in her liturgy, and in her theology insufficiently prepared to cope with the imperious royal-priestly claims of the Christianized head of state; and thus, while depressing still further the role of ordinary laymen, she for the most part acquiesced in accepting the sacral authority of the Christian emperor. Eusebius styled Constantine *episkopos ton ektos*. The Council of Chalcedon hailed Marcian as at once priest, king, and *didaskalos tēs ekklēsias*.

The first difference, then, between the ante- and the post-Nicene situation in respect to the laity is that, where Christians had once worked out their tensions in terms of priesthood and laity, in the Constantinian era they fought it out in terms of Church and State, that is, specifically, as episcopate over against sacral kingship. The "lay" ascetics, on becoming organized in the fourth century as coenobites, almost alone perpetuated in the age of imperial favor the ethos of the *militia Christi* of the days of persecution. Nevertheless, though monks (in the East, up to modern times) have been, for the most part, laymen on the matter of ordination, they have not been laymen in the sense of participating in the life of the world in *diaspora*, and

\*The differentiation here stressed need not be taken to imply a primitively amorphous or fully "democratic" church. The strict gradations within the "oligarchic-democratic" Dead Sea Community with priests and Levites throw light on the distribution of authority in the constitution of the Primitive Church. On this see Bo Reicke, "The Constitution of the Primitive Church," *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, Krister Stendahl, ed. (New York, 1957), ch. x; translated from *Theologische Zeitschrift*, X (1954), 95-113.

therefore they will not be taken into consideration in what follows.

A second point of difference between the two epochs is the complete clericalization, by the opening of the fourth century, of all the outstanding functions in the Church from doorkeeper to bishop, the assimilation of these several degrees of the clergy to the *cursus honorum* of civil administration, and the concurrent shriveling (at least in the West) of the older feeling that one might serve for life as deacon, lector, or exorcist without aspiring to a higher degree. The professionalizing of all the churchly functions concurrent with the withdrawal of the ascetics into the wilderness left little dignity in the ordinary lay status. With the cessation of persecution the layman was not even called upon to witness to his faith, unless it be in the riots between the various Arian and the orthodox parties.<sup>9</sup> To be reduced to the indignity of receiving lay communion was a common form of punishment meted out to post-Nicene bishops.

Another aspect of the clericalization of most of the big and little functions of the Church was the virtually complete assimilation of teaching and healing in the office of the bishop with delegated catechists under his supervision. Earlier, teaching and healing had been free or charismatic. In the ante-Nicene period the teachers had indeed formed a "choir" (*choros*) alongside the clergy and thus were, in one sense at least, laical.

The third and most important difference between the two epochs and directly connected with the sudden imperial or "ecumenical" assignment laid upon the Church, was the recruitment of a new type of convert and the loss of the pre-Constantinian feeling for a radical distinction between church and world.

During the period of the persecutions when some of the secrets of the faith were guarded by the faithful even from

<sup>9</sup>I have given some attention to the role of the faithful, Christophorous laity in "Christology and Church-State Relations in the Fourth Century," *Church History*, XX (1951), No. 3 and No. 4.

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prospective converts (the *disciplina arcana*), the laity was clearly an order not to be confused with the catechumenate and still less with the "world." With the rapid expansion of Christianity consequent upon imperial favor, however, the laity tended to be assimilated with the turbulent masses<sup>10</sup> of the city population, and the bishop, from being the liturgical representative of the whole royal priesthood, became the quasi-civic spokesman of the largely disfranchised citizenry of the late imperial municipalities. Because secrecy was no longer essential as once to the intensely disciplined *militia Christi* (constituting a veritable *imperium in imperio*), the catechumens, from the homes of both pagans and old Christian families, no longer withdrew at the Mass of the faithful, while even committed pagans might, without drawing attention to themselves, enter the new basilicas that were arising everywhere under imperial patronage and listen to the new oratory of the Christian pulpit. Chrysostom, for example, deplors the consequent recession of a sense of participation and liturgical responsibility which the theater-like character of basilican worship had induced in the laity. He movingly retraces the full meaning of the royal priesthood of God in which cleric and laic are on the same level, alike in the eucharistic offering and the communion, in the prayers for mutual fortification in Christ, and in the disciplinary functions of the church. Thereupon he challenges his congregation:

*Now I have said all this in order that each one of the laity also may keep his attention awake, that we may understand that we are all one body, having such difference amongst ourselves, as members with members; and may not throw the whole upon the priests; but ourselves also so care for the whole church, as for a body common to us.*<sup>11</sup>

To summarize this third point, in the post-Nicene Church, the layman was, despite exhortations and convictions like those

<sup>10</sup>Well illustrated in canon 13 of the council of Laodicea (mid-fourth century) which deprives the *ochlos* of their right of participation in the election of priests exercised by the *laos* in the days of persecution.

<sup>11</sup>In *II Cor. hom.*, xviii, 3.

of Chrysostom, brought down to the level of the catechumen or even the casually interested pagan, whereas in the days of persecution the laity had been clearly set off by baptismal "ordination" from the catechumenate; and even within the company of the baptized and confirmed laity there had been gradations moving imperceptibly from teachers and lay *seniores*<sup>12</sup> on the male side and "enrolled widows" and deaconesses on the female side, through confessors who were often honorary presbyters, up to the not yet fully clericalized so-called "lower orders." Moreover, still other groupings within the laity were keenly felt despite Paul's asseverations about the oneness of the body and the tearing down of the wall of separation; for example, the natural distinctions of male and female, young and old, the cultural distinctions of rural and urban, of slave and free, of propertied and poor, and the moral distinctions of the penitent and the steadfast, of those ignobly and those acceptably employed in the work of the world.

Before going on to discuss further the nature and functions of the pre-Constantinian laity, we must first ascertain the theological conception of the rank of the layman in the Church; and for this purpose we may adduce evidence beyond the confines of the meagre documentation on this head from the first three centuries.

#### LAITY, LAICS, LAYMEN

Henceforth we shall render in English the diverse Greek and Latin nomenclature for laymen as follows: for *laos* (*tou theou*) and *plebs*, "the laity"; for the nominative *laikos* and *laicus*, "laic"; and for the adjectival form, "lay" men or women.

Clement of Rome was the first to use *lay man*, about A.D. 95, concluding his brief reference to the participants in the liturgy with the assertion: "... the lay man is bound by the lay ordinances."<sup>13</sup> Thus a first stage in the Christian specialization of *laos* and its derivatives was connected with the corporate

<sup>12</sup>See below, nn. 48-51.

<sup>13</sup>I Clement, 40, 5.

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thanksgiving of the Church, the eucharist. Laics in their eucharistic role of bringing in the bread, wine, and other offerings were commonly called *prospferontes*. It is significant that the generic term for the non-clerical members of the Church is intimately related, by way of I Peter 2:9, with the eucharist. For in this *locus classicus* of the *doctrine* of the priesthood of all believers the royal priesthood (*basileion hierateuma*), God's own *laos*, is thought of as engaged in the corporate but spiritual sacrifice of the eucharist.<sup>14</sup> Not only are Christians the new Israel, says the preacher of the baptismal sermon, but also the only authorized or effectual priesthood. Corporately they are the successors of the priesthood in old Israel, having been vouchsafed the right of *corporate* but otherwise direct access to God through the unbloody or spiritual or rational sacrifice of thanksgiving made possible through Christ. Justin Martyr restated the principle of the priesthood of all believers when he wrote: ". . . being inflamed by the word of His [Christ's] calling, we are the true high-priestly race of God."<sup>15</sup> The Athenian apologist Aristides asserted that all Christians could trace their genealogy from the High Priest Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> And Irenaeus in Gaul could say: "All who are justified through Christ have the sacerdotal order."<sup>17</sup>

"Ordination" to the laity was effected by the sacrament of baptism and the accompanying unction (later, in part,

<sup>14</sup>Traditional Catholic and critical Protestant scholarship have until recently joined, from diverse impulses, to spiritualize, interiorize, and individualize the meaning of the sacrifice in I Peter 2:5 and 9, minimizing its setting in a baptismal homily, presumably connected with the first communion of neophytes; hence, its *liturgical* significance has been obscured. Edward G. Selwyn, though conservative on the matter of the authorship of the epistle, sees clearly the eucharistic significance of the priesthood of the *laos*. *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London, 1848), 295ff. On the priesthood of all believers, besides works cited in n. 4, the following specifically on the doctrine in antiquity may be mentioned here: J. Lécuyer, "Essai sur le sacerdoce des fidèles chez les Pères," *La Maison Dieu*, XXVII (1951/3), 7-50; *idem*, "Le sacerdoce royale des Chrétiens selon saint Hilaire de Poitiers," *L'Année Théologique*, IV (1949), 302-325.

<sup>15</sup>*Dial. c. Tryph.*, cxvi.

<sup>16</sup>*Apol.*, ii (in the Syriac version which is closest to the original Greek text) and xv (in the adapted Greek text).

<sup>17</sup>"Omnes enim iusti sacerdotalem habent ordinem." *Contr. Haer.* iv, 8, 3. The original Greek text has not survived. It is instructive that John of Damascus, when he cites this passage, alters Irenaeus' wording when he writes: "Every righteous king has the sacerdotal order."

differentiated as the sacrament of confirmation). In the baptismal unction catechumens were enrolled in the royal (and prophetic) priesthood, for it was likewise by anointment that Israel's kings and priests had been consecrated. Tertullian stresses the priestly character of baptismal unction when he writes:

*Thereupon as we come forth from the laver, we are anointed with the holy unction, just as in the Old Dispensation priests were anointed with oil from the horn of the altar. Whence the term Christus, from the chrism which is the anointing, a name that is now appropriated to the Lord.*<sup>18</sup>

Tertullian held that baptismal "ordination" qualified the recipient of grace to baptize in his turn, for "what is equally received can be equally given."<sup>19</sup> At the same time, before joining the Montanists, he argued for the sake of order that what was lawful might not be expedient, that lay *men* only should perform the sacrament and only in the absence of a cleric and that lay women should never presume to baptize in any circumstance.

Although the indelibility of baptism was long in dispute in the ante-Nicene Church in connection with the admission of heretics and schismatics, the theological ideal of an indelible character came firmly to undergird the three sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and ordination. Jerome states this view precisely in our terms in connection with the return of a penitent to the bosom of the Church. He places his understanding of it on the lips of an orthodox arguing with a follower of Lucifer of Cagliari who has insisted that repentant Arian bishops must be reordained, whereupon the orthodox asks, knowing there can by this time be only one answer:

<sup>18</sup>*De baptismo*, 7.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

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*Does the penitent lay aside the priesthood of the laic (sacerdotium laici), that is, of baptism, and only then do I pardon him? For it is written [Rev. 1:6]: "He has made us a kingdom and priests to God His Father," and again [I Peter 2:9]: "a holy nation, royal priesthood, a purchased people."<sup>20</sup>*

Many other post-Nicene writers may be adduced for the later patristic formulation of both the moral (royal) priesthood of all believers and more specifically the "cultural power of the baptized." The monk Hesychius, presbyter in Jerusalem (d. c. 450), in his gloss on Isaiah 61:6: "... but you shall be called priests of the Lord," amplified as follows: "All the faithful, because the baptized are anointed with sacerdotal chrism."<sup>21</sup> Isidore of Pelusium (d. c. 435) wrote in commenting on Rom. 12:1 that "every [Christian] is ordained (*kecheirotonetai*) priest of his own body."<sup>22</sup> Nestorian Narsai (head of the school of Edessa, 437) movingly declared that "To this end He [Christ] gave the priesthood to the new priests ["the new people"] that [all] might be made priests to forgive iniquity on earth."<sup>23</sup> Particularly influential in the West have been the statements of Augustine and Leo I of Rome. And Augustine, quoting Rev. 1:6, goes on: "... as we call all believers Christians on account of the mystical chrism, so we call all believers priests because they are members of the one Priest."<sup>24</sup> Leo, in his Sermon IV in commemoration of his elevation to the episcopate, cited I Peter 2:5,9 in support of his conviction that the whole of the Christian *plebs* are identified with the action of Christ in the priestly action at the altar.

On the *prophetic* role as well as on the royalty and the priesthood of every baptismally anointed laic, coheir of Christ,

<sup>20</sup>*Dial. contr. Lucif.*, 4. On indelibility, see also Pseudo-Maximus of Turin, *De baptismo*, tract. iii, P.L., 57, 777ff.

<sup>21</sup>M. Faulhaber, ed. (Freiburg, 1900), 191.

<sup>22</sup>*Ep.*, lib. iii, 75.

<sup>23</sup>*Liturgical Homilies*, R. A. Connolly, ed., Texts and Studies, VIII, No. 1 (Cambridge, 1909), 63.

<sup>24</sup>*De civ.* xx, 10.

the divinely anointed Priest, Prophet, and King two other post-Nicene Fathers are particularly precise. Says Chrysostom:

*So also art thou thyself made king and priest and prophet in the laver [of baptism]: a king, having dashed to earth all the deeds of wickedness and slain thy sin; a priest, in that thou offerest thyself to God, and in having sacrificed thy body, and in being thyself slain also, for if we died with Him, saith he [Paul, II Tim. 2:11], we shall also live with Him; finally a prophet, knowing what shall be, and being inspired of God (enthous) and sealed. For as upon soldiers a seal, so is also the Spirit put upon the faithful. And if thou desert, thou art manifest by it to all. For the Jews had circumcision for a seal, but we, the earnest of the Spirit. Knowing then all this, and considering our high estate, let us exhibit a life worthy of grace.<sup>25</sup>*

And Aphrahat the Sage of Persia (c. 280-345), after discussing the vision of the grape and vine in Isaiah 65:8 and the tree of knowledge, refers to the healing of the olive trees and suggests that sacramental unction reopens the doors of paradise to the newly baptized:

*But to those seeking peace the door is opened and confusion flees from the mind of many; the light of the mind has begun to shine; the splendid olive trees have produced their fruits in which is the sign of the sacrament of life whereby Christians are made priests, kings, and prophets.<sup>26</sup>*

Besides his ordination as royal priest, the laic in some quarters, notably in the Alexandrian tradition, could aspire to the status of the ideal gnostic, whose gradual, post-baptismal illumination and growth in inner discipline and grace enabled him to go through the *spiritual* grades of deacon, presbyter,

<sup>25</sup>In II Cor. hom., iii, 7.

<sup>26</sup>*Demonstratio*, xxiii, *De acino*, 3; *Patrologia Syrica*, pars prima, Vol. II, col. 10.

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and bishop, some day “to sit down on the four-and-twenty thrones, judging the people,” even perhaps the less spiritual clergy (Clement, *Stromata*, vi, 13)!

To sum up, the laic in the ancient Church had an indelible “ordination” as priest, prophet, and king, no longer in bondage to the world, but freed through Christ to know the truth in the illumination of the Spirit, to exercise sovereignty over the inner temple of self, to join in the corporate thanksgiving of the redeemed, and to forgive the brethren in Christ’s name.

It will now be our task to ascertain what exactly were the laic’s rights and duties, liturgical, constitutional, disciplinary, eleemosynary, and evangelical, in the period before Constantine.

### THE LITURGICAL FUNCTIONS OF LAICS

Clement of Rome, already cited as the first to employ the term *laikos*, made specific what he meant by the “lay ordinances” when he wrote in the next paragraph:

*Let each of us brethren, in his own order make eucharist (eucharisteitō) to God, keeping a good conscience and not transgressing the appointed rule of his liturgy.<sup>27</sup>*

We have two subsequent glimpses of laics at worship in Rome, enabling us to fill out the picture into the third century.

Justin Martyr, in his *Apology* for pagan eyes, remains intentionally general in his account of the eucharist but describes both a baptismal and an ordinary Sunday eucharist, remarking that after the prayers of the liturgical president (the bishop), “all the laity present shouts assent, saying ‘Amen’”; and he proceeds to explain the affirmative meaning of the Hebrew.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup>*Op. cit.*, 41.

<sup>28</sup>*Apol.*, I, 65. Cf. I Cor. xiv:16 and Theodoret of Cyrus, *Comm. in II Cor. i*, 20. See P. Rouget, *Amen, Acclamation du peuple sacerdotale* (Paris, 1947).

In talking with Trypho the Jew he can be somewhat more specific about the eucharist and about the rôle of the laic therein:

*... we are now the true high priestly race of God, as God Himself bears witness [Mal. 1:11], saying that in every place among the Gentiles there are those bringing [prospherontes: almost a technical term for the laics] pure sacrifices acceptable to Him.*

*God therefore has long since borne witness that all sacrifices offered by His name, which Jesus the Christ enjoyed, namely, at the eucharistia of the bread and the cup which are presented in every place on earth by the Christians, are well pleasing to Him. But those that are made by you and by means of those priests of yours He utterly rejects . . . .<sup>29</sup>*

It is clear from this passage that Justin has in mind the liturgy of the whole priestly people and not merely that of the more specialized celebrants.

The later Fathers and theologians following them speak freely of the specialized priesthood of the ordained as derivative from or participant in that of the heavenly High Priest; but with equal propriety one may go on to say that it is both theologically valid and historically sound to see the functional priesthood of bishops and presbyters as derived from the priestly *laos*, since clerics but concentrated in their persons an action that continued to belong to the whole baptismal community of the reborn in Christ.

<sup>29</sup>*Dial. cum Tryph.*, 116f. In language which suggests familiarity with this passage, Origen a century later asks:

Or do you not recognize that the priesthood has been given to you also, that is to the whole Church of God and the nation of believers? . . . You have therefore a priesthood, being a priestly nation, I Pet. ii, 9. Therefore you ought to offer to God a sacrifice of praise, of prayers, of pity, of purity, of righteousness, of holiness. To offer this aright you have need of clean garments, of vestments kept apart from the common clothing of the rest of mankind; and you must have the divine fire, God's own fire which he gives to men, of which the Son of God says, Luke xii:49: 'I have come to send fire on earth.'—*In Levit., hom. x, 1.*

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Hippolytus, the rigoristic rival of Bishop Callistus of Rome, provides us in his *Apostolic Tradition*, about a half-century after Justin, with another glimpse into the liturgical action of laics. Here we see them as *prosp̄herontes*, offering at the eucharist not only the bread and the wine, but also occasionally oil, cheese, and olives for eventual distribution. The instructions to the bishop on receiving the oil can be quoted to evoke the whole liturgical scene in Rome c. 200:

*If any one offers oil, he [the bishop] shall make eucharist as at the oblation of bread and wine. But he shall not say word for word [the same prayer] but with similar effect, saying:*

*O God who sanctifiest this oil, as Thou dost grant unto all who are anointed and receive of it the hallowing wherewith Thou didst anoint kings and priests and prophets, so grant that it may give strength to all that taste of it and health to all that use it.<sup>30</sup>*

Another manual, *The Testament of Our Lord* of much later recension, preserves or elaborates important formularies chanted by the laity in the canon of the Mass. For example, after the bishop, it bids the laity say likewise:

*Remembering therefore Thy death and resurrection, we offer to Thee bread and the cup, giving thanks to Thee who alone art God for ever and our Saviour, since Thou hast promised to us to stand before Thee and to serve Thee in priesthood. Therefore we render thanks to Thee, we Thy servants, O Lord.*

At communion each lay recipient chants:

*Holy, Holy, Holy, Trinity ineffable, grant me to receive*

<sup>30</sup>*Op. cit.*, G. Dix, ed., v, 1 and 2.

*unto life this Body, and not unto condemnation. And grant me to bring forth the fruits that are pleasing to Thee . . . .*<sup>31</sup>

The degree of participation in the Syriac tradition represented by the *Testament* is extraordinary. But during the pontificate of Bishop Damasus (366-84), we learn, the Christian *populus* of Rome, fearing God rather than the emperor and their pontiff, "author of wickedness and a murderer," felt free to congregate in the cemeteries of the martyrs and celebrated "stationes *sine clericis*." Whether these "stations" were penitential or eucharistic gatherings is uncertain.<sup>32</sup> In the Graeco-Roman world it was ordinarily only among heretics that laics could, in the absence of the clergy, proceed to the enactment of the eucharist on their own. Tertullian, after he had become a Montanist, asks the question:

*Are not even we laics priests? It is written [Rev. 1:6]: "A kingdom also and priests to His God and Father, hath He made us." It is the authority of the Church and the honor through the sessions (consessus) of the ordo sanctified to God which has established the difference between the ordo and the plebs. Accordingly, where there is no session of the ecclesiastical ordo, thou offerest the eucharist, and baptizest (tingues) and art a sacerdos for thyself; for where three are, there is the church, albeit they be laics.*<sup>33</sup>

Besides the eucharistic liturgy there was the love-feast, sometimes accompanying it, sometimes observed separately in the homes of the more affluent members. The bishop would be invited to break the bread. Tertullian describes such an *agape* and, by good fortune, mentions the role of the laics:

<sup>31</sup>*Op. cit.*, i, 23; transl. James Cooper and Arthur Maclean (Edinburgh, 1902), 73; see another long formulary, 83f.

<sup>32</sup>See Christine Mohrmann, "Satio," *Vigiliae Christianae*, VII (1953), 224. At the same period in the East, Basil of Caesarea countenanced laymen, during persecution, in keeping the communion at home and partaking of it with their own hands at appropriate intervals. He cites the current usage of the laity in Egypt and the practice of hermits in the wilderness where there is no priest. *Ep.* xciii.

<sup>33</sup>*De exhort. cast.*, 7.

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*After washing of hands and the lighting of lamps members are invited to stand out and sing to the best of their ability either from sacred scriptures or something of their own composing; which gives a test of how much they have drunk.*<sup>34</sup>

He is here defending the assembly from pagan charges of license! He goes on to say that “the feast ends, as it began, with prayer.”

We have already quoted Tertullian even while still orthodox on the lawfulness of the lay performance of baptism in the absence of a cleric. Long before him the oldest church manual of discipline, the *Didache*, assumed that any Christian, including a laic, might baptize provided he fasted, like the one to be christened, “for one or two days beforehand.”<sup>35</sup> The fourth-century Ambrosiaster, looking back on the early days, says, “everyone baptized;”<sup>36</sup> and his contemporary Jerome remarked that, “if necessity so be, even laics may and frequently do baptize.”<sup>37</sup> The Iberian council of Elvira (c. 306) in canon 38 makes rather specific the meaning of such necessity:

*During a sea voyage, or in general, if no church is near, a laic who has not soiled his baptismal robe and is not a digamist [twice-married as a result either of widowerhood or religiously prompted divorce from an unbelieving spouse], may baptize a catechumen who is at the point of death.*

It should be added for completeness that in the baptism and unction of female catechumens widows and deaconesses who were essentially *lay* persons had, from the beginning, taken an active part in helping the bishop or presbyter in all but the anointment of the head.

<sup>34</sup>*Apol.*, 39.

<sup>35</sup>*Op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>36</sup>*Comm. in Eph.* iv:11.

<sup>37</sup>*Dial. contra Lucifer.*, 9.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL ROLE OF THE LAITY<sup>38</sup>

The choosing in Acts 1:15 of a successor of Judas in the presence of precisely *one hundred and twenty* of the "multitude" (this same number requisite in a Jewish community in order to elect members to the Sanhedrin) and in Acts 6:5 the choosing of the deacons, also by the whole multitude, served as a pattern and apostolic sanction for the lay election of clerics throughout the ante-Nicene period. The *Didache*, after dealing with inspired prophets and teachers visiting as itinerants, goes on quite simply:

*Elect therefore for yourselves bishops and deacons of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, and truthful, and approved; for they too minister to you the ministry of the prophets and teachers.*<sup>39</sup>

But elsewhere, and especially later, the procedure was not nearly so direct and simple. Distinctions came to be made between the divine vocation, the lay recognition of the call or election, the liturgical sacring, and the installation. Nevertheless, to the end of our period and well into the Constantinian age, the laity played an important part in the elevation of their bishop. Hippolytus in the *Apostolic Tradition* records the aforementioned refinements; but the bishop is still "elected by all the laity."<sup>40</sup>

Origen observes that the chief must be ordained "in the presence of the whole laity in order that all may know for certain that the man elected to the priesthood is of the whole people the most eminent . . . and . . . to avoid any subsequent change of mind or lingering doubt."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup>The most recent specialized study is that of P. Trempelas, "Hē summetochē tou laou en tēi eklogēi tōn episkopōn," *Epistēmonikē Epetēris* of the Theological School of the University of Athens (1954-1955), 1-27. See also C. Jenkins, "The Position of Clergy and Laity in the Early Church in Relation to the Episcopate," *Episcopacy, Ancient and Modern*, Claude Jenkins, ed. (London, 1930).

<sup>39</sup>*Op. cit.*, 15.

<sup>40</sup>*Op. cit.*, ii, 1.

<sup>41</sup>In *Levit.*, *hom.* 3. The text survives only in Latin, and the key terms are *sacerdos* and *populus*.

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Cyprian makes a similar point: "The bishop should be chosen in the presence of the laity who have most fully known the life of each one of several possible choices, and have looked into the doings of each one as respects his habitual conduct."<sup>42</sup> Cyprian also insists that just as the laity has the power of recognition, they have also the power of withdrawing from the jurisdiction of an unworthy cleric:

*... the laity, obedient to the dominical precepts and fearing God, ought to separate themselves from a sinful prelate (praepositus) and not associate themselves with the sacrifices of a sacrilegious priest (sacerdos), especially since they themselves have the power either of choosing (eligere) worthy priests or of rejecting (recusare) unworthy ones.<sup>43</sup>*

So well known was the power of Christian laics to approve or disapprove their leaders that even the Emperor Alexander Severus (222-235), who was sufficiently well informed to know about their golden rule and who desired to erect a temple to Christ as one of the gods, adopted from the Christians the practice of posting the names of his nominees to public office for the sake of securing public testimony as to their character, saying "it was unjust that, when Christians and Jews observed this custom in announcing the names of those to be ordained," it would be "monstrous that such a precaution should be omitted in the case of provincial governors to whom were committed the lives and fortunes of men."<sup>44</sup>

### THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH

Admission to the communion of the saints was effected by baptism. Excommunication of the faithless and the wayward members, an originally unforeseen disciplinary action,

<sup>42</sup>*Ep.* lxvii, 5. In *Ep.* x, 8, he speaks of Cornelius of Rome as made bishop by the judgment of God and Christ, by the testimony of the clerics, and by the vote (*suffragio*) of both the priests and the *plebs*.

<sup>43</sup>*Ep.*, lxvii, 3.

<sup>44</sup>*Vita Alex.*, 45, 7.

developed its forms more slowly and therewith also still other constitutional procedures for the readmittance of the penitent. Paul commanded by letter (I Cor. 5) that the Corinthian church assembled, with his spirit present, excommunicate a particularly diseased member, consigning him to Satan. In Matthew 16 the prince of the apostles was expressly given the power of the keys, the power to bind and loose. Over against both this dominical authorization and the notable apostolic action, which would subsequently serve as a model for every bishop, was the "competing" authorization of communal action in Matthew 18:15-20, which undoubtedly transcribed the usage of the community at an early date and then served as another authoritative pattern for assembling the whole church for a final act of corporate excommunication of an unworthy member thrice warned. But eventually the apostolic-episcopal pattern came to prevail over that of communal action. Through the sacrament of penance the pastor (bishop or sacerdotal presbyter) assumed responsibility for the excommunication and readmission of the subordinate members of the church, lay and clerical, while the bishops corporately in council determined on the terms of excommunication and reinstatement of their episcopal colleagues.

But this process was completed only in the Constantinian age. In the first three centuries, the struggle over the authority respectively of the apostolic bishop, the college of presbyters, the confessors, and the laity, especially in the problem of dealing with members who had lapsed during persecution, was vigorously fought out. Ante-Nicene Church history is the story of innumerable small and large, regional, "national," and class schisms over the issue of rigorism and laxism. It is significant that in the numerous manuals of church law, which were commonly ascribed to the apostles but which, of course, reflected the usage and experience of the growing Church, the

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communal disciplinary session portrayed and authorized in Matthew 18 was gradually converted into the pattern for the lay acclamation of a bishop-elect who before the whole church was thrice declared to be faultless and hence worthy of the headship of the church.<sup>45</sup>

Although the clerical control of disciplinary action comes to prevail in the old Catholic Church, as distinguished from the rigoristic schisms and some of the heretical sects, we must sample the evidence of the strong persistence of the communal voice in the disciplinary action of the ante-Nicene Church.

Clement of Rome, who (c. 95 A.D.) deplors the constitutional revolution in Corinth, does not so much contest the right of the laity to eject their liturgical leaders as chastize them for having presumed to do so when their leaders had in fact "offered the sacrifices *with innocence and holiness*."<sup>46</sup> Although this is more of a constitutional than a disciplinary matter, we have in another Apostolic Father, Polycarp of Smyrna, a clear indication that the whole church and more specifically the laity with their presbyters have the right to depose and excommunicate one of their presbyters, Valens by name and his wife, who had fallen into error apparently in connection with defalcation of the communal funds. Polycarp urges the whole church to restore the couple if theirs proves to be a "true repentance."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Cf., for example, the wording of the electoral procedure in the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, viii, 4. There is a clear echo of the participation of laics (*tēs synodou kai tou plethous*) in disciplinary action in Chrysostom, *Hom. in Act.*, XXXVII. As late as the middle of the ninth century in the Syriac tradition I find that the corporate disciplinary action of the Church is remembered and perhaps practiced. Bishop Ishōdad of Merv (c. 850) in his commentary on Matthew declares: "By means of the person of Simon He promised [the keys] also to all congregations of believers, those that share in His confession; for His power is one with that of all priests and orthodox persons."—Margaret Gibson, ed., *Horae Semiticae*, No. V, Vol. I (Cambridge, 1911), 66. On the episcopal monopolization of the prerogative of all spiritual men to judge all things (I Cor. 2:15), see Albert Koeniger, ed., "Prima sedes a nemine judicatur," *Festgabe Albert Ehrhard* (Bonn, 1922), 273-300.

<sup>46</sup>*Op. cit.*, 44.

<sup>47</sup>*Op. cit.*, 11.

For North Africa we have evidence that primitive usage persisted vigorously and even developed new constitutional forms of lay authority in the realms of discipline and temporal administration. North African writers from Tertullian to Augustine mention besides the *presbyteri (seniores ecclesiastici)* an apparently collegiate group of *seniores laici*.<sup>48</sup> They may have been elected by the whole body of the faithful,<sup>49</sup> but were, more likely, simply the most respected of the laity, having, one might add, sufficient leisure and sufficient means to serve with the bishop. There seems also to have been a distinction felt among the lay *seniores* between the weightier elders *ex plebe* or *locorum seu urbium* (who are listed after the clerical presbyters and before the deacons), and the elders of the church (*seniores ecclesiae*, who are listed after the deacons). The latter may have been limited to the caretaking tasks of fabric and furniture, but the *seniores* "from the laity," possibly nominated by and surely responsible to them, clearly had important administrative and judicial functions. In his *Apology*, Tertullian says that "*probati seniores* who have received the honor not by payment but by public testimony preside" at the church sessions, which he likens to a *curia*.<sup>50</sup> But this lawyer-theologian may, at this point, be adapting his speech to the pagan audience; he has preferred the general term *seniores* to the more esoteric (clerical) *presbyteri*.<sup>51</sup>

Tertullian vividly describes the humiliating public confession of grievous sin and points up for us the individual and collective action of the bishop, the presbyters (here there is no mention of lay elders as a distinct group), and the faithful laity:

*Exomologesis is a discipline consisting in prostration and humiliation, imposing on the offender such a demeanor as*

<sup>48</sup>See most recently Pier G. Caron, "Les *seniores laici* de l'Église africaine," *Revue internationale des Droits de l'Antiquité*, VI (1951), 77, 2; also his basic study, *I Poteri giuridici del laicato nella Chiesa primitiva* (Milan, 1948).

<sup>49</sup>So. Caron on the basis of an epitaph, but one would need more evidence.

<sup>50</sup>*Op. cit.*, 39.

<sup>51</sup>Caron holds that they are *seniores ex plebe*.

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*to attract mercy . . . to exchange his sins for harsh treatment of himself; . . . in general, to nourish prayers with fasting, to groan, to weep and moan day and night to the Lord his God, to prostrate himself before the presbyters (presbyteri), and to kneel before God's dear ones [cari, possibly the confessors]; to invoke all the brethren (fratres) as sponsors of his prayer for mercy.<sup>52</sup>*

Cyprian makes even more specific the rigoristic and perhaps even vindictive motivation of the laity in testing the penitent and also his own episcopal role in the readmission of schismatics, writing to the bishop of Rome, Cornelius:

*Oh, if you could, dearest brother, be with us here when those evil and perverse men return from schism, you would see what effort is mine to persuade patience to our brethren that they should calm their grief of mind and consent to receive and heal the wicked. At the return of the submissive they are filled with joy, but great is the outcry at the reception of the incorrigible . . . . Scarcely do I persuade the laity; nay, I extort it from them that they should suffer such to be admitted. And the just indignation of the brotherhood is vindicated perhaps in the fact that one or another who, notwithstanding the opposition and gainsaying of the laity, having been admitted through my indulgence (facultas), have proved worse than they were before . . . .<sup>53</sup>*

Many times the penitent schismatics and the lapsed, held back from readmission by the laity more severe than their bishop, sought out the prayers and specifically the certificates sometimes granted by confessors who, having themselves been more than meritorious during persecutions, exercised a moral authority in the community or, in some cases, arrogated to

<sup>52</sup>*De poenit.*, 7.

<sup>53</sup>*Ep. lix (liv)*, 15.

themselves the privilege of forgiving less steadfast fellow Christians. In Cyprian's time they constituted a threat to the more orderly procedures of the church in session. Confessors were, of course, a class that transcended the distinction between clerics and laics; but laics, being in any event more numerous than clerics, naturally predominated among the confessors. Tertullian, with characteristic irony, excoriates the grievous sinners: "most eager to gain access to the prison who have lost the right of entrance to the church."<sup>54</sup>

After the age of the persecutions it was the laity or the faithful as a whole, and not the clergy, who usually determined the valid confessors and martyrs and who led in elaborating in the fourth century the cultus of the saintly martyrs.<sup>55</sup>

Cyprian's contemporary in Rome, Cornelius, gives us a picture similar to that of North Africa as to the role of the laity in the disciplinary action of the church. Certain named confessors who had defected with Novatus returned.

*... they made known in the presence both of a number of bishops [not just the bishop of Rome, perhaps not including], and also of very many presbyters and lay men, bewailing and repenting of the fact that for a brief space they had left the church under the persuasion of this treacherous and malicious wild beast.*<sup>56</sup>

One of the three simple and rural bishops whom Novatus had brought in to ordain him repented. With him Cornelius thereupon had communion, however, "as a laic, all the laity present interceding for him." At an earlier date, under bishop Zephyrinus, Natalius, another confessor, was lured into being ordained a heretical bishop, attracted by a salary of 150 *denarii* a month. Visited by Christ in visions, he finally desired to return to the orthodox community:

<sup>54</sup>*Ad martyres*, 1.

<sup>55</sup>On the communal voice in the canonization of the saints, see E. E. Kemp, *Canonization in the Western Church* (Oxford, 1948), ch. i. Eventually, of course, canonization, from being a popular and then an episcopal prerogative, fell, in the West, within the sole authority of the bishop of Rome.

<sup>56</sup>Cornelius *apud* Eusebius, *H.E.*, vi, 43, 6.

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... he arose at dawn, put on sackcloth, covered himself with ashes, and with all haste prostrated himself in tears before Zephyrinus the bishop; and, rolling at the feet not only of those in the clergy but also of the laics, he moved with his tears the compassionate church of the merciful Christ.<sup>57</sup>

### THE ELEEMOSYNARY ROLE OF THE LAITY

Luke describes in Acts (2:44; 4:32ff.) the communism of the saints in Jerusalem as though to tell the Gentile world that its dream of the return of the golden age had in a sense been realized in the Church, as likewise the prophecies of the Old Testament had been fulfilled in this partial restoration of the goodness of paradise. The communism of the Dead Sea Essenes has recently provided us with fresh analogues and antecedents. The communistic motif after the first generation, though it was largely turned in the direction of monasticism, now needs fresh investigation, for the late credal addendum on the *communio sanctorum* may well have in its ultimate background not only the communion of the departed saints but the community of things made holy in the fellowship of the liturgy.<sup>58</sup> The liturgical offerings of olives, cheese, and oil, mentioned previously in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, had as their destination beyond the altar the poor and the needy of the parish. Pseudo-Clement, who incorporates a good many Pythagorean and Stoic ideas about the golden age and communism,<sup>59</sup> declares in his letter written to James as bishop of Jerusalem that, "as it is wicked for you to undertake secular cares . . . so it is sin for every laic if they do not stand by one

<sup>57</sup>The anonymous author of the *Little Labyrinth*, Eusebius, *H.E.*, v, 28, 8-12.

<sup>58</sup>Barely suggested by F. J. Badcock, *The History of the Creeds* (London, 1930), ch. xviii. See further the chapter on the Ebionites in K. Stendahl, ed., *op. cit.*, ch. xiii. We need more monographs like that of Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Communism of St. Ambrose," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, III (1942), 458-468; G. Sodeur, *Der Kommunismus in der Kirchengeschichte* (1920); and F. Meffert, *Der Kommunismus Jesu und der Kirchenväter* (1922). I have touched on the subject incidentally in "The Golden Priesthood and the Leaden State," *Harvard Theological Review*, XLIX (1956), No. 4, esp. 45ff.

<sup>59</sup>See Hans von Schubert, *Der Kommunismus der Wiedertäufer und seine Quellen*, Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, S. B. philo-hist. Kl., X:11 (1919).

another even in their daily needs (*biōtikais chreiais*).<sup>60</sup> The Ebionites retained longest the ideal of the community of goods, but, at last, it became a way of life for monks only.

Tertullian describes the common chest of a later date and in another tradition and the voluntary character of the offering:

*Though we have a kind of money-chest, it is not for the collection of official fees, as if ours were a religion of fixed prices. Each of us puts in a small donation on the appointed day in each month, or when he chooses, and only if he chooses, and only if he can; for no one is compelled and the offering is voluntary. This is as it were the deposit fund of kindness. For we do not pay out money from this fund to spend on feasts or drinking parties or inelegant sprees, but to pay for the nourishment and burial of the poor, to support boys and girls who are orphan or destitute; and old people who are confined to the house; and those who have been shipwrecked; and any who are in the mines, or banished to islands, or in prison, or are pensioners because of their confession, provided they are suffering because they belong to the followers of God.<sup>61</sup>*

The idea of bequests, a quota for the poor and for the benefit of the soul of a departed member, is first clearly traceable in the fourth century;<sup>62</sup> but the *Testament of our Lord*, which though later, preserves older usage, has instructions on bequests to the church, representing no doubt the survival of a more primitive view that such gifts should be made during the believer's lifetime:

*If any one depart from the world, either a faithful man or a faithful woman, having children, let them give their possessions to the Church, so that the Church may provide*

<sup>60</sup>*Hom., ep. Cl.*, Paul de Lagarde, ed., *Clementina* (Leipzig, 1865).

<sup>61</sup>*Apolog.*, 39.

<sup>62</sup>See Eberhard Bruck, *Kirchenväter und soziales Erbrecht* (Berlin/Göttingen/Heidelberg, 1956).

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*for their children, and that from the things which they have the poor may be given rest, that God may give mercy to their children and rest to those who have left them behind. But if a man have no children, let him have not much possessions, but let him give much of his possessions to the poor and to the prisoners, and only keep what is right and sufficient for himself.*<sup>63</sup>

Irenaeus, without the trace of calculating charity in Tertullian and the Syriac Testament, movingly describes the philanthropic outreach of Christian worship and the Christian's giving of his talent to the whole world:

*Wherefore, also, those who are in truth His disciples, receiving grace from Him, do in His name perform [miracles], so as to promote the welfare of other men, according to the gift which each one has received from Him. For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ], and join themselves to the Church. Others have foreknowledge of things to come. They see visions and utter prophetic expressions. Others still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole . . . . And what shall I more say? It is not possible to name the number of the gifts which the Church, [scattered] throughout the whole world, has received from God . . . and which she exerts day by day for the benefit of the Gentiles, neither practising deception upon them, nor taking any reward from them. For as she has received freely from God, freely also does she minister [to others].*<sup>64</sup>

Justin Martyr among many others refers to the converting example of Christian lives.<sup>65</sup> Dionysius of Alexandria describes the nursing and burying of those felled by the plague and contrasts the action of the "presbyters, deacons, and many

<sup>63</sup>*Op. cit.*, ii, 5.

<sup>64</sup>*Adv. haer.* ii, 32, 4. Very similar is Aristides, *Apol.*, xv (Syriac version).

<sup>65</sup>*Apol.* I, 16.

of the *laity* transferring death to themselves” to succor others, with the ignoble behavior of the pagans, who left even their closest loved ones in selfish haste.<sup>66</sup>

From this tribute to lay workers in time of plague we may turn to the quite specialized religio-medical practice of exorcism in the Ancient Church and the role of the laity therein. Exorcism and the renunciation of the devil and all his works was an integral part of the baptismal rite and the bishop pronounced the formulas. But besides this solemn, sacramental exorcism, there was the kindred therapeutic exorcism carried on by charismatic and commonly lay practitioners. The healing ministry of prayer to Christ to drive out the devils of insanity and sickness on the apostolic pattern is briefly referred to by Origen who says, “it is mostly people quite untrained who do this work.”

*Not a few Christians exorcise sufferers, and that without manipulations and magic or the use of drugs, but just by prayer and an invocation of the simpler kind and by such means as the simpler kind of man might be able to use.*<sup>67</sup>

Effective cures were among the most convincing credentials of Christians seeking to convert their pagan neighbors. To the role of the laity in the communication of the Gospel by example and precept we now turn.

THE COMPETENCE OF THE LAITY  
IN THE FORMULATION OF DOCTRINE,  
IN TEACHING AND IN  
MISSIONARY CONVERSION

As we turn from good works and the exercise of discipline to the communication of the tradition by missionary evangelism, instruction, catechizing, and the definition of doctrine in synod, we find that here too, after a period of rather full participation with the ordained clergy, the role of the laity declines, until it is virtually extinguished by the opening of

<sup>66</sup>Letter to the brethren, c. 252, *apud* Eusebius, *H.E.*, vii, 22, 7f.

<sup>67</sup>*Contra Celsum*, vii, 4.

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the era of the great councils, except insofar as Arianizing lay philosophers have their influence on one side of the great debate (undoubtedly to the further detriment of the reputation of the laity for competence in dogmatic formulation) and again insofar as the royal-priestly emperors do indeed represent the laity in the definition of the faith.<sup>68</sup>

Originally, "everyone taught" the redeeming faith that was his, says Ambrosiaster, looking back into the ante-Nicene period before the bishops as successors of the apostles came alone to exercise the magisterial function in the church.<sup>69</sup> To the compiler of the *Didache*, for example, the divinely called prophet and teacher (neither lay nor clerical in terms of a later nomenclature but "charismatic") is clearly to be supported by the laity (and lacking such itinerants the laity is to elect bishops as "teachers" in their stead).<sup>70</sup> *The Apostolic Constitutions* of a much later date reflects the coming to a close of the tradition of the charismatic teacher when it grudgingly orders that, "even if a teacher is a laic, still if he be skilled in the word and reverent in habit, let him teach . . . ." <sup>71</sup>In between the *Didache* and the *Constitutions* we may place the transitional emergence of the teaching order as the *choros* intermediate between the clergy and the laity. Justin Martyr and Origen were notable members of the "choir of teachers."<sup>72</sup>

Yet Origen, the greatest theologian of his time, was rebuked by his bishop in Alexandria for preaching and teaching, on invitation, in the presence of bishops. His bishop, Demetrius, also rebuked the responsible bishops (of Jerusalem and Caesarea) for permitting a laic to sit in the episcopal *cathedra* and

<sup>68</sup>On the authority of the emperors see Francis Dvornik, "Emperors, Popes, and General Councils," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, VI (Cambridge, 1951), 1-23. Two ancient historians mention laics skilled in dialectic participating in the Council of Nicaea in 325: Socrates, *H.E.*, i, 8; Sozomen, *H.E.*, i, 17.

<sup>69</sup>*Com. in Eph.*, 4:11.

<sup>70</sup>*Op. cit.*, 13.

<sup>71</sup>*Op. cit.*, viii, 31.

<sup>72</sup>I have brought together some of this material in *Ministry in Historical Perspectives*, 46-48. See Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen, *Kirchliches Amt und Geistliche Vollmacht* (Tübingen, 1953), ch. viii.

preach. Their self-defense is preserved by Eusebius in a document suggesting that such usage, despite their own magnanimity, was indeed on the way out. They report that Demetrius added, in his letter to them:

*that such a thing had never been heard of, nor taken place hitherto, that laics should preach (homilein) in the presence of bishops; though I [Alexander or Theocritus] do not know how he comes to say what is evidently not true. For instance, where there are found persons suited to help the brethren, they also are invited to preach to the people by the holy bishops, as, for example, in Laranda Euelpis by Neon, and in Iconium Paulinus by Celsus, and in Synnada Theodore by Atticus, our blessed brother bishops. And it is likely that this thing happens in other places also without our knowing it.<sup>73</sup>*

More significant for our present purpose than the feats of such learned laics as Origen and the lay succession of brilliant heads of the catechetical school in Alexandria of which he was one, was the role of the unnamed and less tutored laity who seemed to have participated rather actively, not only in the disciplinary sessions of the church, but also in the synods convened for the clarification of the faith and practice received. Our most interesting and conclusive material happens to center in actions connected with Origen and more generally with Egypt.

In the newly discovered, stenographically recorded papyrus on the debate of Origen with Heraclides<sup>74</sup> we have first-hand evidence of the modest but essential part played by the

<sup>73</sup>Eusebius, *H.E.*, vi, 19, 18. Adolf Harnack notes how far-fetched the examples are and calls these men the last preaching teachers known by name besides Origen. For other pertinent material see his *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (English translation), 2 vols. (New York, 1908).

<sup>74</sup>Jean Scherer, ed., *Entretien d'Origène avec Héraclide et les évêques sur le Père, le Fils, et l'âme*, Publications de la Société Fouad et de Papyrologie, Textes et Documents, IX (Cairo, 1949); translated in the *Library of Christian Classics*, II (Philadelphia, 1954).

## *The Role of the Layman in the Ancient Church*

simple laity in doctrinal formulation; for we can literally overhear the great (essentially lay) theologian himself solemnly asseverate in an Arabian synod (called to deal with problems of the Trinity and the final resurrection): "Accordingly, with the permission of God and secondly of the bishops [there were several in the debate with him], and thirdly of the presbyters and of the *laity*, I say again what I think on the subject." Then after summarizing his position he again takes cognizance of the laity: "If you agree to these statements, they also with the solemn testimony of the *laity* shall be made legally binding and established."<sup>75</sup> It appears that at the end of the synod the doctrinal formulations were formally set forth, the whole assembly including the laity ratifying them. Moreover the laity probably had a good deal to do with initiating the original petitions which occasioned the synod.<sup>76</sup>

The doctrinal competence of the laity in the sense of their feeling responsible for an explicit faith and of having the right to demand clarification on disputed points of tradition and scripture comes out vividly again in a letter of Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria preserved by Eusebius. A certain Nepos, on the basis of the book of Revelation, had been teaching a rather fleshly millennium. The Church's view of the Kingdom and the place of Revelation in the still incompletely clarified canon of New Testament scriptures was thus at stake—scarcely *adiaphora*! The bishop tells how he went out to the center of the affected region, Arsinoe, to discuss the whole problem reasonably and with charity:

*Now when I came [c. 254] to the [nome] of Arsinoe, where, as thou knowest, this doctrine of Nepos had long been prevalent, so that schisms and defections of whole churches had taken place, I called together the presbyters*

<sup>75</sup>Scherer, *op. cit.*, 128 and 134.

<sup>76</sup>In two other synods at which Origen dealt with doctrinal matters the laity are known to have been present, surely in more than the role of auditors or spectators for otherwise their presence would not have been noticed in such brief accounts. Eusebius, *H.E.*, vi, 37; Carl Lommatzsch, ed., *Opera omnia*, XVII, 9. "A great majority of the laity" were also present in the important synod of eighty-three bishops in Carthage of September 1, 256; *apud* Cypr.

*and [lay] teachers of the brethren in the village—there were present also such of the brethren as wished; and I urged them to hold the examination of the question publicly.*

Then follows a description of a friendly give-and-take. Dionysius expresses:

*greatest admiration for . . . their firmness, love of truth, facility in following an argument, and intelligence, as we propounded in order and with forbearance the questions, the difficulties raised and the points of agreement, on the one hand [their] refusing to cling obstinately and at all costs (even though they were manifestly wrong) to opinions once held; and on the other hand [their] not shirking the counter-arguments, but as far as possible attempting to grapple with the questions in hand and master them.<sup>77</sup>*

Dionysius goes on to admit he could not always understand the Apocalypse and acknowledges further that, "if convinced by reason" on the part of these nimble-witted and earnest presbyters, lay teachers, and simple laics, he was not "ashamed to change our [episcopall] opinions and give our assent . . ."

Besides their teaching in catechetical classes and their limited but significant doctrinal competence in synod, the laity were also engaged in the direct communication of the gospel, each believer on his own, and not infrequently in the course of his or her martyrdom.

One Papyllas, presumably a lay member of the church in Pergamon, during the persecution under Marcus Aurelius proudly addressed the interrogating proconsul who had asked whether he had any children: "In every district and city I have children in God . . . yes, and many of them, thanks be to God!"<sup>78</sup> The Phrygian physician Alexander, renowned in Gaul for his love toward God and his boldness of speech, "for he was not without a share of the *apostolic* gift," encouraged the confessors and then was himself seized and taken with

<sup>77</sup>*Apud* Eusebius, *H.E.*, vii, 24, 6.

<sup>78</sup>E. C. E. Owen, *Some Authentic Acts of the Early Martyrs* (Oxford, 1927), 42f.

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them into the amphitheater.<sup>79</sup> The martyred centurion Marcellus (d. 298), in court martial under the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, by his Christian "soldierly" example in responding to the enraged examiner converted the court stenographer, Cassian, who threw down his notebook in disgust and followed the Christian way.<sup>80</sup>

Of the missionary teachers, most of them in his day laics rather than clerics, Origen has the following description:

*... as far as they are able Christians leave no stone unturned to spread the faith in all parts of the world. Some, in fact, have done the work of going round not only cities but even villages and country cottages to make others also pious towards God. One could not say that they did this for the sake of wealth, since sometimes they do not even accept money for the necessities of life, and if ever they are compelled to do so by want in this respect, they are content with what is necessary and no more, even if several people are willing to share with them and to give them more than they need.*<sup>81</sup>

But a more eloquent observer is Celsus, the philosophical foe of Christianity, to the refutation of whose charges Origen devoted a major work. We may properly close our account of the role of the laity in the period of the persecutions with the former's disdainful caricature of the little people (men, women,<sup>82</sup> and children) ever ready for a martyr's death, who carried the Gospel into the recesses of society and who, though nameless and despised by such cultured and informed observers as pagan Celsus, probably did more even than bishops, apologists, and theologians to prepare for the sudden conquest of the Graeco-Roman world in the fourth century:

<sup>79</sup>Eusebius, *H.E.*, v, 1, 49.

<sup>80</sup>Owen, *op. cit.*, 121.

<sup>81</sup>*Contra Cel.* iii, 9. We know that an earlier head of the catechetical school of Alexandria, the lay teacher Pantaenus, was said to have been sent as a missionary to India. Eusebius, *H.E.*, v, 10.

<sup>82</sup>J. Foster, *op. cit.*, has underscored the prominence of women among the laity in the quiet propagation of the Gospel. He quotes effectively among others, Paul, Tertullian, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Julian the Apostate, and Libanius.

*In private houses also [Celsus writes] we see wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who would not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters. But when they get hold of children in private and some little old women with them, they let out some astounding statements as, for example, that they must not pay any attention to their father and school-teachers, but must obey them; they say that these talk nonsense and have no understanding, and that in reality they neither know nor are able to do anything good, but are taken up with mere empty chatter. But they alone, they say, know the right way to live, and if the children would believe them, they would become happy and make their home happy as well.<sup>83</sup>*

Disparagingly, a philosophical publicist here describes better than he knew how in fact it was the little people, the lay men and women of the ante-Nicene Church, who built the foundations of that spiritual mansion (we need not insist on the happy home) in which even an emperor, a very practical layman, was one day to choose to live.

<sup>83</sup>Quoted by Origen, *Contra Cel.* iii, 55.