

Entry for *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*

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Laity, Theology of. [[Introduction]] A theology concerned with recovering the active role and responsibilities of the layperson in both church and world. Although there were different roles in the Church since NT time, Christianity did not have a clear distinction between clergy and laity for its first 150 years. By the close of the second century a distinction between the whole Christian people and church leadership began to appear. This distinction would be hardened into a separation by the fifth century as the laity were gradually reduced to passive recipients of clerical ministrations.

[[Distinctive Understanding # 1]] *Theologies of the Laity Emerging out of the Reformation.* The Reformers challenged the separation of clergy and laity with Luther recovering the biblical teaching on the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2: 9-10). Luther insisted that all Christians are priests by virtue of their baptism and held that no other priesthood ought to be granted a separate ontological status. Catholic reaction to the Reformers led to an even more restrictive view of the laity, eventually culminating in Pope Pius X's declaration in *Vehementor nos* (1906) that the church was an "unequal society" comprised of two ranks, clergy and laity, the primary obligation of the latter being to docilely follow their pastors.

[[Distinctive Understanding # 2]] *An Orthodox Theology of the Laity.* Eastern Christianity's theology of the laity is grounded in the Divine Liturgy. Since baptism initiates the believer into the distinctive *ordo* of the Christian assembly, the laity are defined, not passively, but by way of their active participation in Christian worship.

[[Distinctive Understanding # 3]] *Mid-Twentieth Century Theologies of the Laity*.

In the mid-twentieth century, a number of Catholic theologians sought an alternative to the largely passive and reductive theology of the laity dominant at the time. Karl Rahner defined the laity by the full integration of the life of the world into their Christian existence. Marie-Dominique Chenu described the task of the laity as that of consecrating the world to Christ. Yves Congar was the first theologian to apply the threefold office of Christ—priest, prophet and king—to the laity by virtue of their baptism. As priests the laity are called to make their ordinary lives a living sacrifice to God. As prophets the laity receive God’s Word, penetrate its depths, apply it to their life in the world and participate in and handing it on in the life of the church. Their kingly office is fulfilled through their exercise of Christian service in the world. Congar’s thought would have a major influence on Vatican II’s more positive teaching on the laity. The council saw the distinctive participation of the laity in the church’s mission grounded in the “secular character” of the laity. This secular character recognized the typical (but not exclusive) orientation of the lay person to the world.

[[Distinctive Understanding # 4]] *Post-Conciliar Theologies of the Laity*. John Paul II endorsed Vatican II’s positive teaching on the laity, combining the council’s typological view (the laity are secular in view of their ordinary involvement in the world) with its theological interpretation of the laity’s secularity (they embody in a particular way the church’s mission to the world). He would also affirm the possibility of lay ministry, even as certain official documents during his pontificate worried that lay ministry might undermine priestly ministry.

After the council, Congar would question the helpfulness of the lay-clergy distinction, wondering whether it ought to be replaced by a focus on the relationship between community and ministries in service of community. Finally, a number of contemporary theologians, particularly coming from the third world, have questioned whether the laity-clergy language remains helpful. The entire church ought to be considered in terms of its secularity, that is, its mission to be a sacrament of the reign of God in its mission to the world.

Bibliography

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