

Georgia Masters Keightley

Vatican II on Authority and the Laity

There is in the Church a ready tendency to construe conflicts with authority in either legal or jurisdictional terms. More to the point, conflict resolution is presumed to require either the capitulation to law or one's obedient submission to officeholders.

According to social theory, however, there are other ways to look at authority. But being unfamiliar with these different approaches or failing to take them into account can mean that a contested matter may well be misinterpreted and a satisfactory resolution prove elusive. It is my thesis here that some of the contentious issues that plague the U.S. Catholic community pertain to the rightful place and legitimacy of these other types of authority. And the inability to recognize what is actually at stake not only prolongs argument and impedes final resolution, it also serves to deepen the division that grows within the U.S. Church.

As if in tacit recognition of the social science perspective, the Second Vatican Council in its theology adopted a more comprehensive view of authority and, in doing so, did much to reattribute, redistribute, and thus decentralize authority in the Church. This it did, for example, in those texts acknowledging the specific competence that resides in the bishop, the lived witness of the lay person, in the emphasis council documents place on the particular authority that belongs to the local church as well as to the cultural context in which it is situated. Again, many of today's debated questions originate in the council's clear intent to acknowledge—and to liberate—the different types of authority on which the Church must rely in its mission on behalf of the gospel. On the other hand, the present dearth of institutional structures by which these other forms might be actuated, is itself responsible for much of the disagreement found among Catholics today.

To illustrate my point, I will, with the help of social theory, review some of authority's several aspects and I will reference texts that indicate Vatican II's effort to acknowledge and legitimate these. I will go

on to examine conflicted areas in U.S. Church life today and indicate in each case the types of authority that are in contention. Doing so will not only help to clarify what is at issue, it will also point the way to the type of response that must finally be negotiated if, that is, there is to be any satisfactory or lasting resolution.

Ultimately all authority in the Church—and any exercise of it—is determined by the nature of the Church’s mission, the dissemination of the gospel to the world. But I would argue, the authority that supports this effort is not limited to just that of leadership or law; to the contrary, the Church’s work of evangelization includes, even depends on, the successful deployment of authority’s other forms as well. But this, after all, was perhaps one of the Council’s key insights and, as this essay will attempt to show, one of its most important unfinished works.

AUTHORITY

While there is a lack of consensus among theorists about the nature of authority, there is agreement about the need for such a concept. The term “authority” refers to a distinctive form of compliance in social life, i.e., it differs from power or force in that it is effective only over those who accept it. On the other hand, authority has also been defined as institutionalized power. And, as a form of social power, authority has its genesis in three major sources: (1) numbers of people, (2) social organization, and (3) resources (Bierstedt, 1950, 737).

Authority is voluntarily vested in a community’s institutions which embody, mediate the shared beliefs, values, traditions, and practices of its members. Furthermore, authority is attributed to those individuals and offices that oversee and direct the collective life. To these is given the right to exercise command or control over persons and all manner of social interaction. With this in mind, Max Weber distinguished three basic kinds of authority: (1) *legal*, which rests on belief in the legitimacy of enacted rules and the right of officials to enforce them, (2) *traditional*, which rests on the belief in the sanctity of tradition and the legitimate authority of those who safeguard it, and (3) *charismatic* which resides in devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and the normative patterns of behavior or order recommended by him (Gissuraron, 1993, 38).

In tightly organized groups, authority attaches to status, the lines of authority are clear and society’s requirements are set out in the norms (rules, statutes, laws) of the association. Due to changes in time and circumstance that weaken commitment and erode social structure, the parameters of authority begin to blur. As a result, those possessed of authority may resist exercising it because they know that to do so goes

against the majority view. Yet conversely, an official may find herself in a position to remove a subordinate from office, not because she has the authority but simply because she has the support of the group to do so.

In less formally structured groups, the importance of status comes to be replaced by commitment to persons. In these contexts, members interact not only in terms of status; they also come to know each other in relation to the roles they play and the personalities they exhibit (Bierstedt, 1950, 735). Here, while interaction continues on in accord with the group's designated norms, it also follows implicit extra-associational norms which have their locus in the wider community and which may or may not conflict with the group norms. In time, sub-groups come into existence and these begin to exert subtle pressures upon the common norms, some of which may either be ignored or increasingly challenged.

Outside the group, authority exists as the raw power which appears in the interstices between individual communities. Here, for example, power expresses itself in the form of competition that appears in the relations between like groups. It may also take the form of conflict that appears in the interaction between unlike groups.

In sum, authority is a two-tier concept. It refers to a mode of influence and compliance and to a set of criteria which identify who is to exercise this influence (Philip, 1985, 55). On this basis, theorists distinguish *de jure* from *de facto* authority. *De jure* authority exists when one complies with a set of socially defined rules. *De facto* authority, on the other hand, is the submission to another in light of the other's claims to be a rightful authority (Gissuraron, 38). Thus, theorists make a distinction between being a person *in* authority and someone who is *an* authority. Being *in* authority involves having a recognized status, a clearly delineated institutional role. Being an authority on the other hand means that one's authority resides in the possession of some special knowledge or expertise. For example, it is this kind of authority that is identified with and attributed to the charismatic leader.

SITUATION 1:
LAW ATTITUDES TOWARDS DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE
VS. OFFICIAL CHURCH TEACHING

Research shows that many U.S. Catholics do not support official Church teaching on the matter of divorce and remarriage. The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Life, for example, found that 64 percent of those surveyed agreed that the Church should liberalize its position on divorce (Gremillion and Castelli, 1987). A subsequent study published in 1989 established that only 23 percent of its respondents believed that Church leaders should have the final say about the morality of a

divorcee remarrying without an annulment (D'Antonio, Davidson, et al., 1989).

At the heart of Catholic teaching on marriage are two key assertions—marriage is defined as sacrament; then there is the claim that once created, the sacramental bond is irrevocable and indissoluble. In its theology, the official Church continues to view marriage in predominantly ontological and juridical terms. But for the lay church, marriage is primarily an experience, something best known in all its fragility and humanness. It has its reality in the effort of two uniquely separate people to come together to build—however haltingly—a relation of love, trust, mutuality, and ever-deepening friendship.

Church teaching holds that all marriages between baptized Catholics are sacraments and it does not discriminate between those who approach the ideal and those who do not. This means that even those marriages that are a potent counter-symbol to Christ's love for the Church, i.e., marriages maintained more out of fear, anger, and economic need, are no less sacraments than are loving, passionate ones. But from a lay perspective to call these kinds of unions "sacraments" empties the term of its meaning. Likewise, to claim that such marriages are indissoluble precisely because they are sacraments also strains credulity. The miserable state of the union itself—recognizable even to outsiders—testifies to the brokenness of the marriage bond; but especially is this breach evident in those instances where there is infidelity and the betrayal of trust.

From a lay standpoint, Church teaching about marriage not only lacks realism, it also appears to go against Jesus' proclamation of God's love and concern for the well-being of all women and men. Certainly God's generous mercy and forgiveness seems confounded when the official Church denies to divorced Catholics the opportunity to begin again, to attempt to rebuild their lives with another partner in a caring, committed way and to do this with the Catholic community's blessing and within its compassionate, healing context.

There was a time prior to Vatican II when divorced Catholics did not question Church teaching and took for granted that they must either leave the Church to remarry or consign themselves to a life of celibate singlehood. In other words, laity looked to the hierarchy to define what was an appropriate way to live in a Christian way the social institution of marriage. The surveys cited above show that something has changed in lay people's minds and that has made them no longer willing to give the hierarchy this exclusive right. There is considerable evidence that some Catholics have decided for themselves that they can divorce and remarry without annulment and still be faithful followers of Christ. This, of course, presents a serious challenge to the

magisterium's authority and its capacity to deny to laity this way of thinking and acting.

One explanation for the laity's new sense of freedom can be found in the theology of the Second Vatican Council which attributed a change of status to laity. This the Council did in *Lumen Gentium* by acknowledging that before any functional distinctions can be made, all the baptized are to be seen as constituting the one People of God, all have a common share in the Church's mission and in Christ's three-fold office of priest, prophet, and king. In contrast to prior understandings where laity were placed at the margins of Church life or at the receiving end of the clergy's ministrations, the council now proclaimed them to be active ecclesial subjects and as having an equal responsibility for Church mission, a mission—given their state of life and context—specifically their own.

Council documents also indicate that in light of their new status, laity also have their own proper, *de jure* authority. For example, laity are seen as having their own definite work and area of evangelization; to them is given the task of imbuing with gospel values the temporal order, the ordinary circumstances of family, business, the professions, etc. It is here that they act as Church and give it a viable historical presence; indeed, it is in this light that the laity's "secular" quality must be understood. Other texts note the singular importance of the laity's lived witness of faith. For instance, LG #12 notes that as believers go about enfleshing the gospel in the categories and exigences of everyday life, they give authoritative testimony. And because in this effort they are guided by a "sense of the faith" "which is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth," the council goes so far as to say that this witness has an infallible character. While the tradition has always acknowledged the presence of the *sensus fidei* in believers, the council specifically linked this form of discernment with the laity's total expression of faith in practical, lived terms.

Since the council there have been efforts to create appropriate structures to accommodate the laity's new status. Thus they have been invited to an active participation in worship and to perform many different types of Church ministry. Lay men and women have been called upon to constitute parish councils, diocesan synods, to act as consultants to bishops, to serve as diocesan administrators and officials. Yet the truth is, the opportunities afforded laity have been selective and carefully regulated by clergy.

The limits imposed on lay participation due to the absence of adequate institutional means become most apparent in terms of the local Church's effort to respond to the missionary needs of its community. While this has been a source of no little tension, the main neuralgic

point between laity and the hierarchy has been lay people's growing exercise of freedom and discretion in shaping a Catholic identity fitting their individual situation and circumstance. In short, laity have taken it upon themselves to determine the exact form and content of lay status, and to define for themselves how to perform the role of a lay Catholic in its totality in a way that is faithful to both the gospel and tradition.

As the example of marriage shows, laity no longer find official descriptions consistent or true to their own experience, something that the council took pains to recognize as having a validity and veracity of its own. And so, while lay people are quite willing to look to Church teaching, they also see a need for their own experience to be recounted in it—but especially is this essential concerning those areas that the council gave to them as their own special charge. And because of its centrality to lay life, marriage has become a ready case in point.

Until such time as some formal means is found to incorporate a lay perspective in Church teaching, not just in regard to marriage but touching all aspects of Christian discipleship, lay struggle with clergy over the right to articulate their own authentic witness, their own instancing of the Church as Church, will continue. The danger is that without ongoing, substantive dialogue between the tradition and contemporary U.S. experience, there is the possibility that beliefs, values belonging to an authentic Catholic identity and in the case of marriage, values that ought to characterize a union that is truly Catholic may be overlooked or missed. There is the real possibility that an authentically Catholic interpretation of identity, of what being Christian means for the U.S. context will elude the Church.

SITUATION 2:

THE AUTHORITY OF LAY EXPERTISE:

"ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL,"

MICHAEL NOVAK AND THE LAY COMMISSION

In setting out those areas suitable for lay evangelization, Vatican II admitted that these were (1) contexts pertaining to the lay lifestyle, and (2) areas of experience where members of the laity could be expected to have practical expertise and/or advanced education. In other words, the council acknowledged lay capacity to exercise in selected areas what social theorists call *de facto* authority. *Lumen gentium* #37 notes "that by reason of the knowledge, competence, or outstanding ability which he may enjoy" a lay person not only has the right to be heard, he must be heard so that pastors by means of "the experience of the laity, can more clearly and more suitably come to decisions regarding spiritual and temporal matters."

Since the council, U.S. Church life has been marked by the ongoing clash between these two sets of expert knowledges, that of the bishops as guardians of the tradition and that of an increasingly educated and technologically aware laity. The question urgently needing an answer today is: what is the proper role of the *de facto* authority of the laity in Church life and how does it relate to the magisterial and administrative authority of the bishops?

To illustrate all that is involved it is useful to look at lay criticism of the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter "Economic Justice for All."

While the bishops' document was in progress, a parallel study was published by the Lay Commission on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy organized in 1984 by Michael Novak and William E. Simon. The Commission's published report begins with a quote from the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity to suggest that the project the bishops undertake is more appropriately a lay endeavor. For Novak et al., not only did the council give primary responsibility for the secular order to laity but also, because it is a part of their everyday milieu, lay people are better able to speak about economic matters "from hard experience and in a spirit of realism." Commission members agreed that bishops can and must teach the moral principles that guide economic life but they questioned that it is the clergy's responsibility to go so far as to put forward specific policy proposals.

Subsequently, Novak observed that when "bringing religious judgment to bear on economic matters," religious leaders and theologians are prone to operate from within what he called "the charismatic habit of mind," that is, an affective approach "aimed at social activism in political and economic matters" (1989, 6). But the problem is, he says, such individuals usually know little about the basic concepts and methods of economic analysis. Nor do clergy and cleric theologians have a ready familiarity with factual materials concerning domestic and international economic activities but about which they are most willing to make religious judgments (1989, 15). In the end, guided more by ideology than facts, religious groups, though well-intentioned, risk becoming pressure groups for bad public policy.

Novak also criticizes the bishops for replicating in their analysis the European Catholic bias against business, profits, and markets. He notes that while the bishops encourage political activism, they do not promote a like level of economic activism, they do not call for concerted lay effort at saving, productive investments, invention, and enterprise. From this, Novak concludes that while the bishops are eager to criticize the U.S. economy, they exhibit bias in their unwillingness to praise it for the many good results that it has also been able to produce (1989, 40). What Novak and the Lay Commission obviously want to establish

is that there are other, possibly even better, ways to achieve economic justice than those recommended by the bishops in their pastoral letter.

While Novak and the Lay Commission raise the issue of the bishops' ability to mount an adequate critique of U.S. economic life as well as the appropriateness of their doing so, other questions are posed in the study, *Catholic Bishops in American Politics*. Here for example the author asserts that while the hierarchy has deliberately set out to use the U.S. political process to influence public policy on a number of issues, it is also the case that the bishops and their agenda have sometimes been co-opted by politicians of both parties in the interests of building new electoral coalitions and of gaining access to Catholic voters and the Church's "unparalleled resources" (Byrnes, 1991, 3). Byrnes even goes so far as to state that "the content of the moral and political debate *within* the American hierarchy has itself been determined by political developments" (1991, 4). If this be true, one must ask how fitting it is that outsiders may well have had more to say about formulating Catholic positions than have lay Catholics, who not only have extensive knowledge of public policy issues but who are also expert practitioners of the political process itself. The question is, does proper exercise of the bishops' authority actually require regular consultation with lay experts?

In addition, Byrnes notes that the manner in which episcopal authority has been exercised in the political arena has often caused difficulty for the lay Church. For example, those bishops who have demanded that abortion must be the Catholic's political priority have made it extremely difficult for Catholic politicians who believe they have just as compelling an obligation to pay attention to such other issues as welfare, social security, and health care. The same is true for many Catholic voters who see need to support candidates whose broader agendas promote in various ways the well-being of their own and others' families. Furthermore, some laity question the moral correctness of bishops entering into alliances on the abortion question with those who otherwise oppose much of what the Church's social justice tradition stands for. The truth is, bishops have on occasion used their authority against fellow Catholics and in so doing have served to further the political ends of those completely indifferent to the Church's moral claims. But, is this too a fitting exercise of episcopal authority?

While it is clear too that bishops can and sometimes must take a prophetic stance on social issues, the fact of the matter is laity many times simply are not free to do so. For example, while bishops and clergy were publicly able to oppose U.S. nuclear defense strategy, many laity could not because they were either employed by the government,

defense contractors, or else had made a career of military life. For these, the bishops' very public stance imposed a heavy burden. The question is, what then is the obligation of the teaching authority to be mindful of and even respectful of the laity's need sometimes to opt for what George Weigel calls "moderate realism," i.e., a moral stance that, while utterly realistic in its view of human nature, is one that also knows that with determined effort, human affairs can be "rightly ordered and justly governed" (Weigel, 1987, 43). But again, are there times when a lay perspective on issues must be taken into account by bishops before they venture to speak in the name of the entire U.S. church?

What these examples indicate is that the two forms of authority, the *de jure* authority of the bishops and the *de facto* authority of the lay expert, are essentially complementary and need to be exercised by both sides in collaboration and in a spirit of collegiality for the good of the Church and the success of its mission. But there are presently no suitable institutional means to allow this to happen. And, until such are created, this means that the Christian message cannot be given its fullest expression, nor can the church in the United States be the effective evangelizing presence it ought to be.

SITUATION 3:

THE AUTHORITY OF CULTURE:

COMPETING VIEWS OF CATHOLIC LAYWOMEN

As indicated above, per social theory, culture itself functions authoritatively in that the common beliefs, values, traditions, and practices of a people are accepted as being normative and thus to be complied with by all of society's members. Culture's authority devolves to leaders whose task it is to ensure that tradition and customs are adhered to by the community.

In the documents of Vatican II, acknowledgement of culture's authoritative character occurs in several places. For example, *Lumen gentium* #3 notes the autonomy of the temporal order and states that it is "governed by its own principles." *Gaudium et spes* affirms that there is much the Church can learn about human nature through careful study of a culture's various symbolic and artistic expressions. And, in discussing Church mission, *Gaudium et spes* #42 suggests that culture even has a certain priority over the gospel; since the Church is bound to no political, economic, or social system, the missionary task is to translate gospel meaning and values into the specific idiom and ethos of a people. Ultimately, each nation must "develop the ability to express Christ's message in its own way."

At the heart of the debate between U.S. Catholic laywomen today, between those who identify themselves as feminist Catholics and

those, on the other hand, who describe themselves as traditionalists are two competing cultures, and thus two authoritative views of women and their role in society and Church. At issue is this: which cultural view has authority for Catholic women as they attempt to articulate an authentic Catholic Christian identity? Bernard Lonergan's distinction between classicist and empirical culture is very helpful in putting this matter of competing cultures into proper focus.

Lonergan notes that for over two millennia, the presumption has been that there is just one culture, western culture, and that this is normative for all people, all times, and places (Lonergan, 1972, 363). Implicit to this classicist approach has been the assumption that reality is ultimately stable, fixed, immutable. Historically, ecclesial culture has itself been classicist. Accordingly, woman has been defined in essentialist terms; there has been an effort to specify what constitutes her feminine nature and "genius." In patriarchal society, this definition has been used both to subordinate women to men and to prescribe what activities were appropriate in both society and Church. Traditionally, women have been consigned to the private sphere, to those roles associated with home and family. Today conservative Catholics find this view appealing because it not only legitimates their preferred lifestyle; they also believe that the tasks of wife, mother, and moral guarantor of culture are God-intended ones for women. For this reason, they welcome the support and protection of Church norms and institutions (Bork, 1994, 24).

Due to the rise of historical consciousness and the flourishing of empirical studies, the idea of a monolithic culture is no longer tenable. Research shows that there are as many different cultures as there are distinct sets of agreed upon meanings and values to live by. Furthermore, in contrast to being something static, culture is now seen to be dynamic, progressive, and ever open to the achievement of a higher viewpoint. Consistent with this, women's reality is seen to be a product of the exigencies of their historical and social experience—and not just a matter of their "nature" or biology.

U.S. culture has seen the opening of the public world of work, economic enterprise, and political participation to women who find themselves active in all areas of contemporary life. And, while this has resulted in great personal growth and enrichment, this has not been without dramatic shifts in woman's own self-understanding, particularly in a developed sense of her own agency, and in the consequent restructuring of her personal relationships, but especially familial ones.

While feminist Catholics appreciate the many new opportunities culture affords them, they also wish that the same degree of equality and opportunity that they experience in society were also possible in

the Church. While some women insist that women's ordination must be the ultimate goal, the fact is, most laywomen would be satisfied if they could be assured an accepted presence in all aspects and at all levels of Church life, so that they could carry out unimpeded the works of service they feel the Spirit calls them to do.

More importantly perhaps, women would like the Church to bring its considerable moral influence to bear to address the many difficult social problems they now confront. From all that voiced by Catholic women in the first draft of the never published pastoral on women, "Partners in the Mystery of Redemption," this includes such things as equal pay for equal work, the experience of discrimination in the workplace, the lack of adequate health care, the need for quality day care. Within the private sphere, a host of other issues also calls for Church attention: spouse and child abuse, the "super-mom" complex and the male refusal to share responsibility for home duties, the issues faced by the single parent, the economic hardships of divorce and separation.

Feminist Catholics find the U.S. hierarchy quite selective in its support for justice for women. While there has been considerable activism and commitment of Church resources in relation to such issues as abortion and euthanasia, bishops appear to be less than enthusiastic advocates for the other matters critical to women. Furthermore, when feminist Catholics read official Church documents, they not only find themselves described in abstract, classicist terms, they also find there continued insistence that the traditional roles of wife and mother are to take precedence over all others. But as women see it, this not only ignores the actuality of their lives, it also seems to dismiss the cultural ideals of equality and freedom of participation—principles that many U.S. Catholic women not only value deeply but see as essential to personal dignity and believe fundamental to and thoroughly rooted in the gospel.

On the other hand, traditionalist women believe that the U.S. hierarchy does not go far enough to protect their interests. They watch with alarm as cultural feminism invades the Church. For this group, the deconstruction (and destruction) of traditional ecclesial culture is symbolized most effectively by the effort to introduce inclusive language into the life and worship of the Church (Hitchcock, 1994, 12). These women fault the bishops for failing to require fidelity to traditional Church teaching and attitudes, for their apparent willingness to listen and take seriously the demands of feminist Catholics.

At the present time, these two different, competing cultures co-exist in U.S. Catholic life. The solution, however, is not to have to choose between them. Neither of itself can supply all of the elements for

fashioning a meaningful Catholic identity for U.S. women. The challenge is to create a new ecclesial culture, one that retains what is truest of the old and incorporates what is good of the new. Again, if there were adequate structures for dialogue, for bringing together proponents of the two sets of views, the commonalities held by both groups of women would become apparent.

For example, traditionalist women show their concern by asking what U.S. culture is doing to family life, what women's, men's, society's responsibilities for children actually are. On the other hand, feminist women approach the question from the standpoint of the need to reform work life, economic and political systems if the dignity of women and children, the well-being of families, is ever to be achieved. But the point is, only when the two positions are brought into constructive dialogue will new insights, new approaches, ones truly reflective of Catholic women's experience and discernment, become an effective reality.

On the other hand, this debate between Catholic women is at bottom symptomatic of a larger task that remains undone, and that is the complete inculturation of the church in U.S. culture. But in the final analysis, this is something that only laity and clergy—enabled by the exercise of authority in all its aspects—can, and must, do together.

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Georgia Masters Keightley, Ph.D., is associate professor of theology at Trinity College, Washington, D.C. She is chair of a Catholic Theological Society of America task force preparing a study on communion ecclesiology and collaborative ministry. She has served as advisor to the Bishops' Committee on Laity and has been consultant to the Family, Women, and Evangelization Committees. Her essays on feminism and Catholic social thought have appeared in Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited (University Press of America, 1993) and Values, Work, Education: The Meanings of Work (Rodopi, 1995).