

CONSILIUM DE LAICIS

quid dicis de teipso?

During the IV Plenary Session of the Consilium de Laicis, I formulated this problem in a manner reminiscent of a question which the Second Vatican Council asked itself. Since the question thus formulated was considered to be of interest and since it was included in the report of the Council of the Laity's Doctrinal Commission, I propose to set down a few considerations on the subject.

1. The advisability and purpose of bringing up this question

I consider it useful to bring up this question, primarily for reasons of a general character. Although the Council of the Laity was constituted de facto as a body attached to the Holy See - as an application of decisions made by the Second Vatican Council - the question of the meaning of its existence and a fundamental consideration of the manner of its existence still concern us at the present time. These questions are particularly important for the individuals who have been called by the Holy Father to take part in the Council of the Laity. Have the existence and the activity of the Council of the Laity a meaning? Is this meaning confirmed by what this Council is doing? Interrogation on the meaning leads to the question of the appropriate manner of being, that is to say, a manner which really corresponds to the purpose of this Council.

We must look for the answers to these questions in the light of the experience acquired up to the present, bearing in mind all the stages and all the component elements of this experience. Among these, the III Congress of the Apostolate of the Laity is particularly important. It must also be pointed out that the Council of the Laity shares the experience of its existence and its action in a particularly intimate way with the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, with which it has been closely associated from birth. In making these reflections on the existence and activity of the Council of the Laity, we must take into account the continual development and a certain extension of problems which this Council, in a comparatively brief space of time, has been obliged to recognize as part of its task. In this connection, the IV Plenary Session of the Council of the Laity seems to mark an important turning-point. In its previous sessions this Council was primarily concerned with its own internal structure and its adaptation to the two chief tasks indicated in the Motu Proprio "Catholicam Christi Ecclesiam" of Pope Paul VI - namely, promotion of the lay apostolate at international level and close contact with this apostolate at national level. The IV Plenary Session added to

this structural problem (which in a certain sense was concerned with subjects) a whole series of problems relating to objects: marriage, youth, spirituality of the present day, "the morals of revolution" and lastly, dialogue within the Church.

Within the context of all these component elements and stages of our experience, the question "What do you say of yourself?" which heads this memorandum asserts itself of its own accord. We can and we must make a continual effort to answer it. This self-examination represents an indispensable condition for future steady progress on the part of the Council of the Laity.

2. Theological foundation

In making this effort we must seek support not only in facts themselves but also, and to a certain extent primarily, in theological foundations. These foundations are to be found in a particular manner in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. In this respect, we cannot confine ourselves to the consideration of a single text - even of such an important text as the Decree "Apostolicam Actuositatem" - but we must consider the entire Council teaching and its general trend. Vatican II was a "pastoral" Council; it had certain apostolic and practical aims in view. In order to achieve these goals the Council considered it indispensable to reply to the question: "Church, what do you say of yourself?" and hence to elaborate a constitution on the Church. The latter needed to be completed by a pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world. It is in this meaningful combination that we find significant indications of a theological nature.

At the root of every "operari" is to be found a certain "esse". The apostolate of the laity and all lay activity in the world must be considered as a rigorous consequence of the specific "esse" of the laity in the Church. The teaching of the Second Vatican Council on this matter is extremely rich. We are particularly indebted to Vatican II for its very discerning description of what may be called the laity's "theological status", which is treated in great depth. It is therefore by all means advisable that the Council of the Laity cooperate in translating this status into the canonical language of ecclesiastical law. This collaboration indicates indirectly the deep meaning of the existence and orientation of the Laity Council's activity. In undertaking any form of activity this Council must look primarily to this characteristic "esse" of the laity in the Church. It would therefore seem that from this viewpoint the function of the Council is more fundamental than that of the Justice and Peace Commission. Since the Commission is called upon to consider the various possibilities and needs for lay activity in the modern world, and keeps its finger on the pulse of existing problems - the Council of the Laity must be all the more watchful to place this "operari" on sound foundations. There is nothing conservative or static in this vigilance, for the layman's status in the Church is essentially dynamic. It has a threefold dynamism, which is merely a consequence of participation in the threefold mission of Christ the Messiah. We find the explanation

of this prophetic, priestly and royal mission primarily in the Constitution "Lumen Gentium". If it is permissible still to use certain distinctions which were made during the Ecumenical Council, it can be said that the functions of the Council of the Laity are bound up in the first place with the aspect "Ecclesia ad intra", whereas the Justice and Peace Commission studies particularly the various perspectives of problems from the "Ecclesia ad extra" point of view. The former aspect is a necessary condition for the latter. The activity of the Council of the Laity, more particularly concerned with the aspect "Ecclesia ad intra", regulates the genuineness of all activity on the part of the laity, and primarily of their commitment in the world.

Hence the activity of the Council of the Laity and the very meaning of its existence have a more "interior" and perhaps a more hidden character than is the case with the Justice and Peace Commission, but at the same time, as has already been said, it is more fundamental. In the light of the theological indications to which we have already alluded, the Council of the Laity will fulfil the hopes which the Church places in it if it becomes fully aware of its own character and deepens its awareness of its responsibility in relation to this genuine "esse" of the laity in the Church. It would also seem that the apostolate of the laity is fundamentally identified with the laity's genuine "esse" in the Church. All manifestations of activity on the part of the laity in temporal affairs belong to the apostolate if they are the result of this "esse", and, even if only indirectly, they cause it to strike deeper roots.

3. Structure for dialogue

An analogy strikes us here which, although it is not convincing from every aspect, is nevertheless stimulating. In developing this analogy, we move away from theoretical considerations to reach the order of structures which have practical consequences in the first place. We refer to conciliar structures whose realization is being superintended by the Apostolic See. Actually, it is a question of two types of council which are intended for the moment to be formed "ad experimentum" at the level of each diocese: a priests' council and a pastoral council. Going through all the canonical descriptions which are to be found in the document establishing these two councils, we seem to find in the first place a close connection between the same "esse" of the diocesan presbyterate (that is to say, of the priestly community) and their pastoral "operari". Here the analogy between the Council of the Laity with its relations with the Justice and Peace Commission is evidently slightly inadequate. In the first instance, from the point of view of level, the Council of the Laity and the Justice and Peace Commission are at the level of the universal Church, while the two councils we have mentioned are at diocesan level. Furthermore, the pastoral council in the majority of cases involves not only priests but lay people also. To a certain extent it represents the synthesis of pastoral work and apostolate of the laity bracketed together. However, the analogy is an interesting one. The pastoral council must guard the authenticity of the priestly

"esse" in the setting of the diocesan community, for this is a necessary condition for an effective pastoral ministry.

It may be asked, then, "What purpose does this analogy serve?" It is obviously a question of solving the problem which arose at the start. To this our analogy does not lead directly but indirectly. It indicates - at the level of structures - a trend which coincides with the theological foundations already mentioned. What is interesting is that we find in all three cases the same title of "Concilium", or council. This name suggests that we are dealing here with a structure for dialogue which is so characteristic of the post-conciliar Church. It is evidently a question of dialogue within the Church, for the purpose of producing a deeper awareness of the Church (see the Encyclical "Ecclesiam Suam") and thus pre-disposing the Church for more fruitful dialogue with the outside world. For this second form of dialogue calls for a more mature knowledge of the Church and for greater cohesion within its ranks. At diocesan level the pastoral council and the priests' council serve this purpose with regard to the clerical milieu. At the level of the universal Church, this purpose must be served by the Council of the Laity as regards the lay milieu, both by means of international activities and the corresponding national activities. Hence the analogy of which we have just spoken. If the Council of the Laity constitutes one of the structures intended for the Church's internal dialogue, it must recognize as one of its principal tasks the elaboration of clear ideas concerning such dialogue, as was seen already at the time of its IV Session.

4. Interrogation as to the manner of being

All that has been said so far, even if it does not represent the answer to the initial question on the meaning of the existence of the Laity Council, prepares the ground to some extent for this reply. The question as to the meaning of this Council's existence was asked in conjunction with the question on the manner of its being. The latter question is merely secondary and accidental, although it is important for the future of the Consilium. It is precisely because of its practical importance that it is well to raise it here.

The experience acquired up to the present does not yet enable us to formulate an adequate answer. This must not surprise us. The Council of the Laity has not yet been in existence for more than a quarter of the experimental period granted to it. For this reason it would be premature to answer in regard to its future manner of being.

Nevertheless, we must endeavour to arrive at this answer, foreseeing the result of partial experience and of the reflections which are all the time to be linked up with the theological foundations. Since it is not possible to reply at present to the question concerning the manner of being

of this Council, and since we must await further experience, it is well at least to appraise the activities already realized in the light of this question.

The evaluation would appear to be a favourable one. All that the Council of the Laity has undertaken so far, either of itself or in conjunction with the Justice and Peace Commission, leads in the direction of an adequate and increasingly complete reply as to the future manner of being of this Council. Thus, for instance, we have the Third World Congress of the Apostolate of the Laity, the content of which ought still to be the object of deep reflection. Similarly, we have the initiative to create within the Council of the Laity various working groups (commissions) to deal with the tasks attributed to it by the Motu Proprio "Catholicam Christi Ecclesiam" (international activity, national activity, doctrine, ecumenism, juridical questions and Canon Law, etc. etc.). An important step has been taken towards the creation of new working groups to deal with certain topics (dialogue, youth, family, spirituality).

All these undertakings already contain various elements of the answer as to the manner of being of the Council of the Laity. Probably other elements will be added later. When we reflect more deeply on all these things in the light of our experience and in the light of the theological data, we can, at a given moment, find it possible to answer also the second question which is so important not only for our own group but also for the Holy See and for the laity throughout the world.

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