

Vatican II: a summons to 'grow up'

Are you active in parish or grassroots ministry? Then you know only too well the challenge of trying to mobilize the laity. Typically, five percent of the community shoulders 95% of the load.

Over a quarter of a century ago, a Jesuit priest came to Australia and addressed this problem head-on. He did so with all the confrontational style of a prophet. Too often, he said, lay people act like adolescents. They want the car keys whenever it fancies them, but have no intention of paying for the petrol — leave that for Dad! Translated into parish life: too many parishioners want involvement, but only on their terms. They are happy to 'dabble' in parish ministry as long as it's a 'feel good' experience; but as soon as the task becomes wearisome or difficult, they drop it back on Father's lap.

Then again, he continued, many lay people act like children. They may be company directors in the workplace, but come to parish life and suddenly they are like infants, wanting their hand held, their feelings stroked before they will apply themselves to the work of the parish. Our lay people need to grow up! said this fearless Jesuit. If you are going to be a lay leader in the parish, then be an 'adult' one. Follow through on your tasks, embrace

the learning curve, be the first to arrive at a parish gathering and the last to lock up. If there is a problem, sort it out. If you need co-workers, go looking for them. If you need more time for your parish involvement, give up your TV-time. If a ministry requires money, consider funding it yourself. In other words, give from your substance, not just your surplus. This is the only way the church will change: by deeply committed people making a mature, responsible, adult effort.

As you can imagine, this priest upset people. But he wasn't seeking the popularity vote. "You are too demanding," said some. "Yes, you are right," he replied. "I do need to 'gentle down.' And some of you 'gentle' types need to toughen up!"

Others said, "I would do more, but I'm not talented enough." To this he replied: "God can't afford the luxury of your poor self-image."

And to those who said, "I used to be active, but I stopped because so-and-so offended me," he had this to say: "Seek healing, and get back on board!"

I should add that this priest's message was not always confronting, nor only addressed to laity. It was delivered in the context of affirmation and conversion experiences, training and renewal, celebration and community support. Through his influence countless people experienced real hope and healing. Yet he never backed off from holding out to us the inescapable truth: the kingdom of

God is a pearl of great price. The Church's mission is not a hobby while the 'real' work is left to the priests. It is every Catholic's business, and it is serious business.

Yes, his message upset people. But there were many who embraced it. I was one of those. We squirmed and wrestled and sometimes adapted the message, but essentially we recognized its core, uncomfortable truthfulness. And our lives were changed forever. Somewhere inside ourselves we found untapped gifts, our capacity for giving expanded, our resilience grew, our faith deepened. Even the inevitable sufferings along the way were ultimately transformative. And, the greatest blessing of all: knowing that, over a quarter of a century, hundreds of thousands of lives have been touched by the combined efforts of our mission as lay people.

It was a blunt training apparatus, but prophetic voices can be like that; voices we still need to hear in this 'age of the laity.' •

