



Passages Relative to the Theology of “Co-Responsibility”

(J.C. Cavadini for Called & Co-Responsible: Summer Seminars for Church Life Renewal, June 2, 2020)

Brief Introduction

1. **Q. Why this topic, now?**

A. Our Institute took up several initiatives in the wake of troubling developments in the sexual abuse crisis in the Church, and in particular the revelations associated with the former Cardinal McCarrick and the cover-up that permitted his abuse to go on for so long unaddressed. It seemed to us that this was due, in part, to an overly clericalized view of leadership in the Church. Our aim was not to dispute the settled teaching of *Lumen Gentium* (LG 10, for example) on the role of the hierarchical priesthood in teaching, governing and sanctifying, but rather to ask, is that a complete account of leadership in the Church, even as taught by *Lumen Gentium*, such that the word “leadership” would be applicable to none but the ordained? Is there a way of thinking about genuine lay leadership in the Church, including both men and women? The phrase “co-responsibility” turned up as a potentially promising idea.

2. **Q. Where do we first find the phrase “co-responsibility?”**

A. In two scantily publicized speeches of Benedict XVI. He delivered the first on May 26, 2009, speaking as the local bishop in his cathedral, the Lateran Basilica of St. John, his [Address to the Pastoral Convention of the Diocese of Rome](#), entitled “[Co-responsible for the Church's Being and Action](#),” with the subtitle “Church Membership and Pastoral Co-responsibility.” The second echoed this earlier speech. He delivered it in 2012 on the occasion of the [6th Ordinary Assembly of the International Forum of Catholic Action](#).

3. **Q. What are some key passages?**

A. Benedict, reflecting (in 2009) on the legacy of centuries of pastoral witness and action in the Diocese of Rome, asks the question “to what point our Diocese of Rome has reached. To what extent is the pastoral co-responsibility of all, and particularly the laity, recognized and encouraged?” Answering his own question, he takes note of a necessity to “improve pastoral structures” in the Diocese “in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is gradually promoted.” He further noted that to undertake such a promotion “demands a change in mindset, particularly concerning lay people. They must no longer be viewed as ‘collaborators’ of the clergy but truly recognized as ‘co-responsible’ for the Church’s being and action.”

4. Q. What does this mean?

A. **We weren't sure. But** one thing we liked was that this *was* a new idea, or rather, a new way of talking about Vatican II vision of the Church with designed to challenge the Catholic imagination to draw out more of the unrealized potential of this vision. We liked the idea that it seemed to be proposed by Benedict as a site for the imagination to be formed even more deeply in the ecclesiology of Vatican II.

5. Q. Does the context give us any clues?

A. **Absolutely!** In his address to the Diocesan Pastoral Convention B16 mentions the works of proclamation and evangelization of which the Diocese can rightly be proud, “the generous witness of the baptized” in teaching, healing and assisting the poor, ways in which the Diocese “proclaimed the Gospel to the inhabitants of Rome.” In the 2012 address Benedict doubles down on the “being and acting of the Church” for which the laity and the hierarchy are co-responsible by specifying it as “Guiding people to the encounter with Christ, proclaiming His Message of salvation in languages and ways understandable to our time,” in short, “the great challenge of the new evangelization.” Laity and clergy are co-responsible for the being and acting of the Church in her evangelizing mission, which Pope Francis has emphatically underscored even further as the “first task of the Church” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 15, citing JPII *Redemptoris Missio* 34). If the laity are “co-responsible” for the being and acting of the Church then there is a leadership role here with regard to the Church’s “first task.”

6. Q. Any other clues??

A. **Definitely!** Pope Benedict, in his address to the Diocesan Pastoral Convention, sums up the task of evangelization by citing (in part but intending the whole) 1 Peter 2.9, “*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” This verse is strongly associated in Church Tradition, and especially in the documents of Vatican II with the baptismal priesthood, that is, the priesthood conferred on all the baptized, or, to put it more precisely, the share in Christ’s one true priesthood that baptism confers on all the faithful. Here, for example, is the Vatican II Decree on Priestly Life and Ministry: “*The Lord Jesus, ‘whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world’ (Jn. 10.36) gave His whole Mystical Body a share in the anointing of the Spirit with which He was anointed. In that Body, all the faithful are made a holy and kingly priesthood. They offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ, and they proclaim the mighty acts of Him who has called them out of darkness into his marvelous light’ (Presbyterorum Ordinis 3, citing 1 Peter 2.5, 9).* The whole Church, as a “royal priesthood,” has as its purpose the witness to the wonderful deeds of God, who called each of us baptized out of darkness into His wonderful light. Pope Francis has also built on this idea, again, as emphatically as possible, when he says, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “*In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples (cf. Mt. 28.19). All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients*” (EG 120).

7. **Q. Any other clues?**

A. One more, maybe: The idea of **co-responsibility**, the idea that this is a *shared* responsibility specifically, is elaborated *specifically* against the context of what Benedict calls a “tendency to identify the Church unilaterally with the hierarchy, forgetting the common responsibility, the common mission of the People of God, which, in Christ, we all share” (2009). I take it that this is what we would identify, in common speech, as “clericalism,” the identification of “the Church” with the hierarchy, in thought and in how we structure the Church’s mission. *Further*, “co-responsibility” as a phrase is specifically chosen to *contrast* with the more limited idea of the laity’s role as merely “collaborating” with the clergy, as we have seen. It is at least implied that this more limited idea of “collaboration” corresponds to the “tendency to identify the Church unilaterally with the hierarchy,” that is, it corresponds to a clericalized view of the Church and thus does not give a full account of lay leadership in the Church.

8. **Q. What is the relationship between “co-responsibility” and what is commonly, in the U.S., called “lay ecclesial ministry?”**

A. “Lay ecclesial ministry,” as a concept, is fundamentally construed as a paradigm of “collaboration” (at least as I see it), that is, of collaboration of the laity in the ministry proper to the ordained. A lay ecclesial minister is someone who exercises the “ministry” appropriate to the laity, to the common priesthood of the baptized, by collaborating in the “ministry” appropriate to the ordained, or, as it says in the document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, “in close collaboration with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons,” and it “entails an explicit relationship of mutual accountability to and collaboration with the Church hierarchy.” It is ironic, but the paradigm of “lay ecclesial ministry,” if it is *the* paradigm accepted for lay leadership in the Church, is actually one that can block the “change of mindset” that Benedict called for. The paradigm of “lay ecclesial ministry,” ironically seems to be a return to a pre-Vatican II model, to an older ecclesiology and to the clericalism it supported and continues to support, where the leadership of lay people is always a subordinate participation in a leadership that is not actually *theirs*. It is only a collaboration or participation in a ministry that is essentially *someone else’s*, the ministry of the ordained. There is no change in the center of gravity of the Church so to speak. *NB:* I am not in saying this intending to undercut or deflate the very important leadership role that those called “lay ecclesial ministers” play in the Church! I am speaking about what is an adequate paradigm for thinking of lay leadership in the Church. “Co-responsibility” has more promise than the “collaboration” represented by the paradigm of “lay ecclesial ministry.”

9. Q. What would be the mandate necessary from the hierarchy to exercise the leadership envisioned in “co-responsibility?”

A. None. Baptism itself is that mandate and there is no supplementary permission necessary to exercise it. We are charged and empowered by the grace of Baptism to *declare the wonderful deeds of him who called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light.*” This includes the organization of lay-initiated and lay-led projects of evangelization, broadly construed, initiatives not directly supervised by (or supported by) the hierarchy. Benedict commented in his speech to the Diocese of Rome, “There is still a long way to go ... Compared to the number of inhabitants in each parish, the lay people who are ready to work in the various apostolic fields ... are still few and far between.” In other words (at least in part), where are the lay leaders in the mission of the Church, the lay-led projects, the lay-led initiatives, etc., and where are the ordained ministers who can foster them in this work of leadership?

10. Q. Does this mean that these initiatives are free-lance initiatives, independent of the hierarchy?

A. No, that is why we speak of “co-responsibility.” If the priesthood of the baptized is *truly a share in the priesthood* of Christ, then it is thereby *ordered towards communion* since it is the sacrifice of Christ, his work as High Priest, that *makes* the communion of the Church. The communion of the Church, into which we are baptized, is a communion in Christ’s sacrifice, and any exercise of priesthood, ordained or non-ordained, is ordered towards encounter with the Risen Lord in Eucharistic communion. This means that the exercise of the baptismal priesthood is not truly an exercise of a *priesthood* if it tends toward the rupture of communion instead of building communion. It cannot be exercised independently of the exercise of the ordained priesthood in its functions of teaching, sanctifying and governing.

11. Q. What then is the role of the priesthood of the ordained relative to the priesthood of the baptized?

A. The priesthood of the ordained is a share in Christ’s priesthood different in kind, not in degree, from that of the baptized. The ordained priesthood is *ordered towards* the building up of the royal priesthood of the baptized. It exists, “for the sake of the universal priesthood of the new covenant,” and it does not “replace but promote[s] the baptismal priesthood of the entire people of God” (JPII, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* 14; 17, citing *PO* 10). By celebrating the Eucharist, making present the one Sacrifice in which we have communion, by authoritatively teaching the Word of God and by overseeing the internal affairs of the Church in the spirit of the Good Shepherd, the priesthood of the ordained builds up and nurtures the leadership of the baptized, “fostering the different roles, charisms and ministries present within the ecclesial community” (*PDV* 18).

12. Q. Is there further work remaining to be done in thinking about “co-responsibility?”

A. Undoubtedly, Yes. This, in a way, is what attracted us to the concept in the first place. It is an invitation to renew the Catholic, ecclesial imagination, reflecting further and always more deeply on the mystery of the Church as a mystery of communion in the sacrifice of Christ, and the kinds of leadership that flow from this communion and, in their complimentary ways, build it up.

Brief Catechetical Review

An Appeal to the Imagination

Q. What Makes the Church?

A. “The Church is born primarily of Christ’s total self-giving for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the Cross. ‘The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus’ (*Lumen Gentium* 3). ‘For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church’ (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5). As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam’s side, so the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross (St. Ambrose, *Homilies on Luke* 2.85-89)” (CCC #766).

Q. What Makes the Church?

A. “The Eucharist Makes the Church: Those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ. Through it Christ unites them to all the faithful in one body – the Church. Communion renews, strengthens, and deepens this incorporation into the Church, already achieved by Baptism. In Baptism we have been called to form but one body. The Eucharist fulfills this call: *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?...*” (CCC 1396, citing 1 Cor. 10.16-17).

Q. What Makes the Church?

A. “Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ. ... Baptism incorporates us *into the Church*. The baptized have become *living stones* to be *built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood* (1 Pet. 2.5). By Baptism they share in the priesthood of Christ, in his prophetic and royal mission. They are *a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called [them] out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (CCC ## 1267, 1268, citing 1 Pet. 2.9).

Q. What Makes the Church?

A. “In the ecclesial service of the ordained minister, it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head of his Body, Shepherd of his flock, high priest of the redemptive sacrifice, Teacher of Truth. This is what the Church means by saying that the priest, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, acts *in persona Christi Capitis* [in the person of Christ the Head of the Church]” (CCC #1548).

Conclusion: What does NOT make the Church is anything we bring to it, our will to associate, our virtue (or lack thereof), our strategizing or our reason, at least, not in any constitutive way.