

ABSTRACT

LAITY AND MINISTRY IN YVES M.J. CONGAR, O.P.: EVOLUTION, EVALUATION AND ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES

Richard J. Beauchesne

Dissertation Director: Dr. J. Robert Nelson, Professor of Systematic Theology,
Boston University School of Theology

Definition of the Problem

This dissertation deals with Yves Congar's concept of the laity and ministry, its evolution, evaluation and ecumenical perspectives within the framework of Congar's ecclesiology. The concepts of laity and ministry are considered both *in se* and in their interrelationships. A last section describes points of ecumenical *rapprochement* and *éloignement*.

The exposition of Congar's concepts of laity and ministry is made more difficult because they have been evolving over the years. Although Congar now affirms: "I have always objected to defining the priesthood by utilizing the concept of mediation,"¹ in his earlier works² he speaks of two ways of sharing in the mediation of Christ; namely, that of the hierarchy and that of the faithful. He now states: "There is no sacrament of the priesthood except Baptism: there is a sacrament of order."³

Methodology of the Dissertation

Throughout the dissertation a chronological study is made of Congar's works: Congar, prior to 1941 (Chapter I), From 1941 to 1960 (Chapter II), In the 1960's and Early 1970's (Chapter IV] At each phase, there is an evaluation of Congar's theological conclusions. This is done by utilizing a recent theological tool referred to as the model approach. In Chapter III, a key concept in relation to Congar's theology of the laity and ministry; namely, that of the Christian

¹ A *personal letter* from Congar, Oct. 17, 1971.

² For example, In *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat*, Unam Sancta 23 (Paris: Cerf 1954), p. 158.

³ A *personal letter*, Oct. 17, 1971.

cult, which is explained. In Chapter IV the more recent Congar is evaluated in reference to contemporary Protestant studies on the Church, the laity and ministry.

Evaluation and Conclusions

The sacramental model is suggested as the one that describes Congar's ecclesiology: from a significantly undifferentiated sacramental realism (Chapter I), Congar has evolved to a more nuanced sacramental model, which, nevertheless, remains clerically oriented (Chapter II). Through his understanding of Christian cult along with the *spécifique chrétien* - the priestly quality of each Christian - (Chapter III), he is led to emphasize ever more strongly the communion aspect of the Church which is still seen from the perspective of the sacramental model (Chapter IV).

Prior to 1950, Congar had a mediatory understanding of the ministerial priesthood. In the '40's and early '50's, however, he minimizes whatever mediatory dimensions remain in his earlier writings. The unique mediation of Jesus Christ is firmly ascertained. Nevertheless, Congar speaks of a double participation in Christ's mediation (that of the ministerial priesthood and that of the universal priesthood); thus, he has not left completely intact the unique mediation of Christ. Chapter III reflects a major turning point in Congar's understanding of the ministerial priesthood as a ministry tending the community of the sacerdotal people of God in order to activate its priestly qualities. In the final phase of his evolution (Chapter IV), there is a clear non-mediatory definition of the ministerial priesthood which consists in a *representation* within the Christian community - a representation related to the leadership aspect of Christ as Head of the Church. As such, the ministerial priesthood is conceived as a *service* within the community.

With regard to ecumenism, Congar's ecclesiological context offers premises which, from an ecumenical stand point, are more potentially productive than the conclusions that he draws. For example, despite the fact that he has constantly emphasized the Spirit's role in the Church, he relates the Spirit of the historical Jesus (i.e., Jesus as sent in the Spirit) exclusively to the function of the ministerial priesthood.

The evolution of Congar's concept of laity and ministry might be sketched in the following way: from the *Church – Ministerial Priesthood – Universal Priesthood* sequence of his earlier

days, Congar has moved on to the *Church – Universal Priesthood¹ – Ministerial Priesthood* sequence.

¹ In a *personal letter*, Dec. 12, 1974, in which (after having reviewed my dissertation), Congar wrote some eighteen handwritten comments concerning my work. The second remark deals with the second sequence referred to in the text. above; namely “*Church – Universal Priesthood – Ministerial Priesthood*,” Congar corrects the latter sequence as follows: “*Church – Communautés des baptisés [Community of the baptized] – ministerial priesthood*.”