

INSIGHT: Catholic laity in Canada...

Vatican II, the historic gathering of Catholic bishops from 1961 to 1965 to discuss and decide on the future course of action for the Church, gave a prominent place in its teachings to the role of lay people in the Church. Until then, the Church was often identified with bishops, priests and religious.

From now on, however, it would again be seen as the people of God or the community of all the faithful. Priests would retain primary responsibility for announcing the word of God and celebrating the sacraments. But lay people too, each in his or her own way, could share in this ministry. Their first duty would be to bring the message of the Gospel to society, but they should also help the pastors and apply their own talents for the good of the internal life of the Church.

As in many other countries, this appeal was very well received in Canada.

This desire for taking an active part in the parish led to the establishment of so-called parish councils. The 15 to 20 members of these councils are usually elected by the parish at large. Their duty is to plan and assist with liturgical celebrations, charitable activities and social justice issues, educational events as well as finance and building matters. A good many parish councils still deal mostly with administrative and fundraising activities. Many dioceses have published special guidelines for the work of parish councils and the

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops also has recently published suggestions on how parish councils should function and what their membership should be.

The Vatican Council also mentioned the need for consultative structures at the diocesan level. As of today, only half of the dioceses in Canada have responded to this wish. Because of the large territory of many dioceses, bishops have found it difficult to gather lay people for regular meetings.

An interesting development at the regional level is the establishment last year of an Ontario Council for Laity. This group of some 30 men and women was chosen by the Ontario bishops to study the life of the Church in Ontario and to make suggestions on how to strengthen it. The Quebec Bishops' Conference, on the other hand, maintains an office for laity and family life affairs.

At the national level, a lay apostolate office had been set up in 1963 serving the English sector dioceses. This office tried to promote a spirituality for the laity in accordance with the documents of Vatican II. It prepared and carried through programs for conferences of priests, religious and laity, and worked closely with similar diocesan bodies.

It also worked with the various lay organizations at the national level and initiated contact and coordination between these groups. In 1972, this office was closed because of efforts to rationalize the

resources of the Bishops' Secretariat. In 1978, an Episcopal Commission for the Laity was created. This Commission tries to alert the bishops to the concerns of lay people and to help lay people assume their place as Christians in society and the Church.

The work of parish and diocesan councils has been an important means for involving lay people in pastoral planning. But there are several other new ways for lay people to play a more direct role in the Church today. The development of the so-called New Ministries has given lay people a more visible place in the Church after Vatican II.

Lay people now read the Sacred Scriptures during the Mass and help distribute Holy Communion. Many lay volunteers prepare parishioners for the sacraments. Others visit the elderly or the sick in the name of the priest or visit homes to renew and strengthen contact with the parish members. In addition, there are many lay students in theology, men and women, who are not planning to enter the priesthood or the religious life but who wish to serve the Church full time as lay people.

The traditional ways for lay people to share in the life of the Church and society continue to exist. For example, there are the over 70 French and English lay organizations that have always given strong support and encouragement to lay people. Some of these groups or movements, such as the Charismatic Movement, the Cursillo Movement of Marriage

Encounter are relatively new in Canada. Especially in the area of marriage and family life, several new groups have recently come to life as a direct response to the pressures on Catholic marriage today. The Canadian Association of Separated, Divorced and Widowed Catholics, Reflet et lumiere, and Retrouvailles are some of these. However, such well established organizations as the Catholic Women's League, the Filles d'Isabelle, the Knights of Columbus, the St. Vincent de Paul Society and others continue to attract many lay men and women who wish to enjoy the company of fellow Catholics and at the same time do charitable work or assist the clergy in their duties.

Recently, lay organizations have felt an increasing need for establishing some form of ongoing contact and cooperation with each other. This has led to the establishment last November of a Conference of Catholic Lay Organizations. This Lay Organizations' Conference will bring Catholic lay leaders together for mutual exchange and sharing.

At this November

meeting, ninety lay men and women representing 50 organizations explored issues in society and the Church that Canadian lay people see as especially important.

Anti-human attitudes were identified as the forces working to legalize abortion, infanticide and euthanasia, which are direct attacks on life, and also drug abuse and pornography. Attacks on the quality of life include neglect of the aged, unequal distribution of good, unemployment and attacks on the welfare and medicare system. Problems in Catholic schools were examined. The need for parents to accept responsibility for the faith education of their children and the need for teachers to be strong witnesses to faith were stressed.

Other than in the province of Quebec, Catholic lay people have traditionally kept a low profile in Canadian society. This is not to say they have been absent. In fact, many Catholic laity have attained prominent positions in public life. However, as most other Catholics in public life, they do not emphasize their religious affiliation.

In recent years, the Canadian bishops have repeatedly urged Catholics to play a more active role in building a more just and fraternal society.

At the present time, the efforts of Catholics to bring about social change are focussed on three areas: the pro-life cause, education, and international development. Thousands of Catholics from across the country have tried for several years through letter writing campaigns, education efforts, and hospital board elections to stem the growing tide of abortions.

The area of education has always been of special interest to Catholics in the Canadian Confedera-

tion. With varying success Catholics have been fighting for years to achieve legal guarantees for Catholic education in their respective province.

The question of international development has been a special concern of Canadian lay people ever since the creation in 1966 of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace. Financed by Catholic lay people and matching funds from the Canadian government, CCODP is administered and staffed for the most part by Catholic lay people.

There are many other concerns that Catholic lay people share about the Canadian society.

NOTICE

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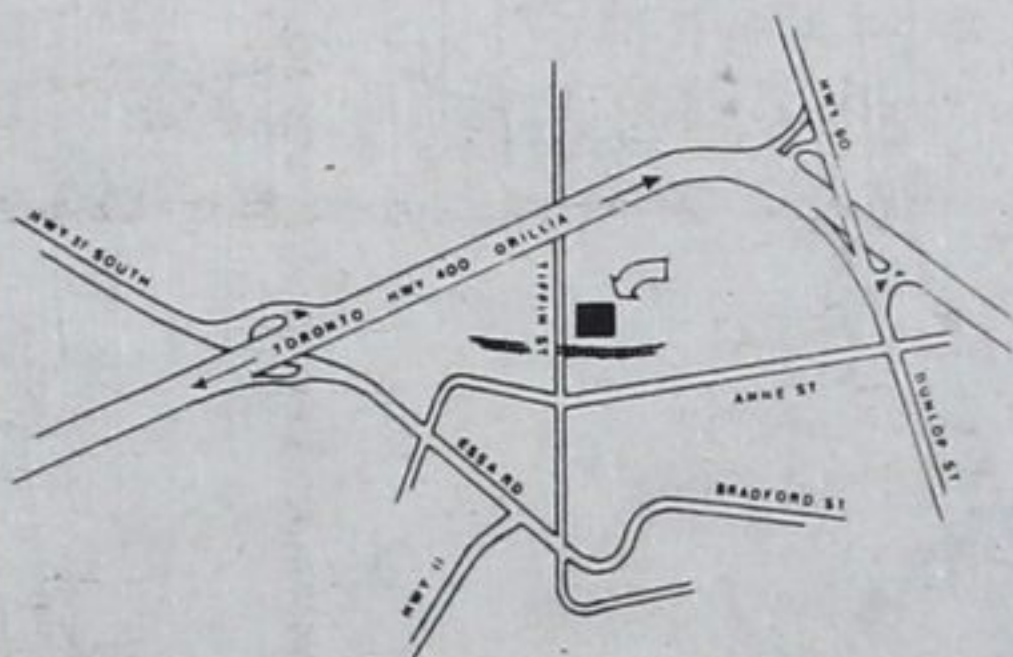
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