

Toward a Theology of “Co-Responsibility” for the Church’s Being and Action

POPE BENEDICT XVI ([2009](#))

To what extent is the pastoral co-responsibility of all, and particularly of the laity, recognized and encouraged? ...

There is still a long way to go. Too many of the baptized do not feel part of the ecclesial community and live on its margins, only coming to parishes in certain circumstances to receive religious services. Compared to the number of inhabitants in each parish, the lay people who are ready to work in the various apostolic fields, although they profess to be Catholic, are still few and far between. Of course, social and cultural difficulties abound but faithful to the Lord's mandate, we cannot resign ourselves to preserving what exists. Trusting in the grace of the Spirit which the Risen Christ guaranteed to us, we must continue on our way with renewed energy. What paths can we take? In the first place we must renew our efforts for a formation which is more attentive and focused on the vision of the Church, of which I spoke and this should be both on the part of priests as well as of religious and lay people to understand ever better what this Church is, this People of God in the Body of Christ. At the same time, it is necessary to improve pastoral structures in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is gradually promoted, with respect for vocations and for the respective roles of the consecrated and of lay people. This demands a change in mindset, particularly concerning lay people. **They must no longer be viewed as "collaborators" of the clergy but truly recognized as "coresponsible", for the Church's being and action, thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity.** *[emphasis added]* This common awareness of being Church of all the baptized in no way diminishes the responsibility of parish priests. It is precisely your task, dear parish priests, to nurture the spiritual and apostolic growth of those who are already committed to working hard in the parishes. They form the core of the community that will act as a leaven for the others.

DR. JOHN C. CAVADINI ([2020](#))

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.

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).