CHAPTER SIX

BELIEFS ABOUT THE CHURCH

Our exploration of the belief dimension of popular religiosity now turns to beliefs about the church. The church, too, is a core object of the Christian faith: faith in God and Jesus Christ is concretised in communities that try to enact it (cf. Van der Ven et al. 2004, 318). Reflection on the identity and aims of the Christian community is so important that a whole branch of theology, known as ecclesiology, is dedicated to it. In Italy by far the largest community where the Christian faith is enacted is the Catholic Church, to which all the parishioners in our survey belong. Hence this chapter is restricted to Catholic ecclesiology: how Catholic teachings interpret the Christian tradition with reference to the church. We examine two dimensions of beliefs about the church: a dimension _ad intra_ and a dimension _ad extra_. The former concerns lay participation in the leadership of local church communities (i.e. parishes); the latter concerns relations between church and society.

In a theological study of popular religiosity ecclesiological questions are focal: in spite of empirical findings showing how Italian popular religious participants are assiduous church-goers (cf. Pizzuti 2004, 113), in theological and ecclesial circles popular religiosity is often said to be passive about lay participation in church leadership and about the church’s role in society. That is why this chapter deals with the following question: what beliefs about the church are found in high and low level participation in popular religiosity, and what is the social location of these beliefs?

To formulate some expectations about the answer to this question we first look at Catholic teachings about the church, and then try to identify a characteristic popular religious emphasis in beliefs about the church.

The first section of the chapter is devoted to beliefs about the church’s dimension _ad intra_, that is lay participation in parish leadership (6.1); the second section investigates beliefs about the church’s dimension _ad extra_, that is the relation between church and society (6.2).
6.1. Beliefs About Participation in the Church: Dimension ad Intra

In this first section we consider beliefs about the church’s dimension **ad intra**, that is participation in the church and, more specifically, lay participation in the leadership of local church communities (i.e. parishes). To determine the Catholic teachings about lay participation in parish leadership we start by analysing the model proposed by Vatican II, namely its communion ecclesiology. We will see that communion ecclesiology allows for lay participation in church leadership and that Catholic teachings define it as an advisory role (6.1.1). We then advance some theological arguments which go beyond a purely advisory role for the laity and assign them a responsible role in church leadership as the full realisation of the communion model (6.1.2). Next we give some interpretations of popular religiosity referring to the role of the laity in church leadership, settling for an interpretation that emphasises beliefs about participation as taught by the Catholic Church (6.1.3). We then conceptualise the beliefs about lay participation in parish leadership with the help of a ‘ladder of participation in leadership’, which describes participation on an incremental scale with five different levels. The ladder enables us to distinguish clearly between the advisory role of the laity in the church proposed by Catholic teachings and the responsible role, which goes beyond it. The former is confined to the first three rungs of the ladder (information, consultation, conversation), the responsible role includes the last two levels as well (joint decision making and autonomy) (6.1.4). In the last subsection we answer our question: what beliefs about the church (**ad intra**) are found in high and low level participation in popular religiosity, and what is the social location of these beliefs? (6.1.5).

6.1.1. Participation in the Church According to the Teachings of the Catholic Church: Advisory Role of the Laity in Parish Leadership

To appraise the issue of lay participation in the church we turn to Vatican II to determine what the Catholic Church officially teaches in this regard, which we assume is transmitted to and supported by parishioners in the actual pastoral life of local Christian communities. First we sketch the Council’s communion ecclesiology. On the basis of the idea of the church as **communio** all members are considered to be active and able to participate in church life. The communion