Short, unshaven, dark closely cropped hair, and the brownest eyes I have ever seen. The poet says that the eyes are the windows to the soul. Perhaps that is why those eyes stare so intensely into the eyes of my memory.

Alessandro is Roman. He is also Catholic, a layperson, and a member of the Community of St. Egidio. Alessandro is a student of archaeology, a teacher of history, a guide into the Catacombs of Priscilla in this eternal city. Alessandro is young. He is quiet, somewhat intense, or is it, I wonder, more that he is focused. A smile easily crosses his face, and a peace flows below this man’s countenance.

Bishop Melczek and I first meet him as we are bartering the currency of two languages with an Italian sister on an afternoon visit to the catacombs during a recent trip to the Vatican and Rome. In an effort to help, he tosses in a spare phrase or two, and so sister, priest, and bishop can now better understand each other.

Hmm. Now that’s a thought worth pursuing. A layperson is facilitating the communication, negotiating the language, leading the conversation among the bishop, the priest, and the sister.

Take this scene out of the catacombs and into the light of the day. The question amidst horrific scandal, lost credibility, and broken trust for us right now begs an answer: Who at this time can most effectively communicate in this mix of what Jesus’ disciples called “ekklesia”? Is it the layperson? What is the role of the layperson in communicating the faith in this day and age? At this moment in history, could it be that the laity are indeed the prophetic voices that will lead our Church out of crisis?

Let me tell you about Alessandro first. He was our tour guide as the bishop and I went beneath the earth of this ancient city, two Americans with a group of about 25 Slovenians. Alessandro was a great teacher, obviously because he is equally a great student. He pointed to the earliest, most primitive, and most profound remnants of the expression of Christian faith in the drawings, lines, colors, and inscriptions on the walls of these holy burial grounds of martyrs, rich and poor, young and old—all in waiting for the day of resurrection. A rich tapestry of theology before words—I would argue the richest and fullest summa that could ever store our deposit of faith.
Faith colored in peacocks, doves, shepherds and sheep (really goats), magi, angels, three men in a furnace. Latin inscriptions dug into the walls or over the archways, sometimes misspelled, revealing the broad sweep of class and education. One touching plaque with the word dulce, meaning “sweet,” describing the six-year-old whose body was now committed back to the earth.

And so we tunnel this faith of ours underneath a city contoured and cornered with churches above. Living faith buried deep under the ground.

We pause on our tour, waiting for the group to catch up. Underneath this dimly lit, low ceiling Alessandro beams a flashlight above us. With a gentle, reverential, but strong voice he shows us the earliest known drawing of Madonna and Child with the prophet Balaam pointing to the star above them, above us. Straining to see the faded star, we are staring into the Incarnation, the centerpiece of our faith.

Alessandro smiles with those intense, focused eyes, pausing, now scanning the group, then saying, “I know you to be pilgrims, and so for that reason, I invite you to bow your heads in silent prayer and then we can pray the Hail Mary.” The echo of this holy silence reverberates in one divine language of the heart. Then, after a time, we make noise with the human language of our native tongues.

And a layperson shall lead them.

Alessandro finishes the tour, but motions for the bishop and me to follow him. He brings us into a place in the catacombs not open to the public. We see more drawings, carvings, and now the walled shelves visible with the bones of these early Christians.

His work day now ending, Alessandro offers us a ride back toward our piazza, stopping along the way to show us some of his favorite churches. His story quietly slips into the Christian story that he is narrating, but shyly, humbly, almost self-consciously. He has been a member of the Community of St. Egidio for nearly 20 years, since the age of 14. He works with the gypsies in the city.

“How often?” my pragmatic, American mind directs the question. He shrugs away the issue of time. “I go there if they need me. They are my friends. I see them as my brothers and sisters. I help teach them to read. I go to them if there is a birthday.”

And a layperson shall lead them.

I will later discover that this whole trip to Rome is about the
layperson. The first morning, Bishop Melczek and I go to Trastevere (a Roman neighborhood) for a meeting with Cardinal James Francis Stafford, the Prefect for the Congregation of the Laity. Since we are a half-hour early, the bishop takes me to the Church of Santa Maria Trastevere across the square. He explains about this phenomenal group called the Community of St. Egidio, which began in this church. Little did we know that one of their own, a man named Alessandro, would cross our lives later in the week.

The Community of St. Egidio was founded in Rome. Their founder, a priest, was recently made a bishop. The community numbers 50,000 in Rome! The numbers are so large that now several Churches in Rome house their gatherings. We will later learn that they have spread to other nations, but outside of Rome they total only 15,000.

This community is marked by two “charisms.” First, they gather each evening for sung Vespers (8:30 p.m. Alessandro will later tell me). Second, they need to move their prayer life into some sort of work with the poor. That’s it. That’s all. It’s much too simple, I think.

And a layperson shall lead them.

As the bishop and I are touring the church, a priest, Father Mateo, approaches us and warmly welcomes us. He is the pastor. He haltingly speaks his little English as we haltingly speak our little Italian (actually Bishop Melczek’s Italian is halting, mine is nearly at a complete stop!). Mateo answers a few questions about the Community, smiling warmly in acknowledging the rise of this group mostly young, mostly lay. Mateo then excitedly brings us to into the sanctuary to show us a plaque dedicated to Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore. We are at home in his home, he seems to assure us.

We now hurry along to our meeting with Cardinal Stafford. The Cardinal shares with us the fact that around the world there is a plethora of emerging lay associations that constitute the present and the evolving future vitality of the Church. This meeting is like a theological reflection. We have just had the living experience outside the door, and now we are coming into this room, listening, reflecting and putting words onto the living experience.

The Cardinal is quite interested and affirming of the NACC, especially as he learns that we are now only 17 percent priests, with the laity the fastest growing group in our association.

Ironically, on our tour of the catacombs a few days later, one from the group of Slovenians, a young man, Philip, begins a conversation with me. He is in the seminary. He tells me that he is a member of a
young community begun in France in 1975—lay, religious, and ordained. I learn that this community is spreading throughout Europe. He shares that theirs is a two-fold charism, adoration and evangelization. Listening to him, I hear an echo of the earlier words of the Cardinal as I now uniquely enjoy this firsthand experience of lay associations in this one, holy, universal, truly “Catholic” Church.

And a layperson shall lead them.

Back in the United States, I am now starkly aware of the depression, the wariness, the loss, and pain of a Church institution in a steep decline of credibility, especially in matters of sexuality and authority. Truth be told, this decline is a long time coming.

Not so in Rome. Rome of all places, I think.

For it is Rome where I learn about the vitality of a laity worldwide that is tunneling a faith as rich in color, line, and drawing as the primitive expressions found in the catacombs. The catacombs were dug by laypersons, let’s take note.

And it is in Rome that I see the church buildings above ground, while I experience living faith buried deep under the ground. And it is Rome that I meet Alessandro and hear about his gathering with his gypsies before, after, and during a life centered around the evening twilight of vespers.

Back in the United States, I wonder now, who is leading this Church of ours? Not the bishops at this moment. Not the priests.

Is it not the laity? Is it not the laity who are speaking the truth at this time that one bishop has described as the “worst crisis in the Catholic Church since the Reformation?” Is it not the laity who time and again in interview after interview have said they are not leaving their Church, and that while their trust in leadership is shaken, their faith is not?

That’s primitive faith. That’s profound faith. That’s a faith tunnelled deep underneath the contours and corners of Church institutions in all their fallibility. We may have to strain to see the star at times like this, but someone—like an Alessandro, or thousands and thousands like him—is always there to shine the light on the truth that our God became one of us, is with us, and will be with us until the end of time.