

Lay Ecclesial Ministry

The Catholic Review

Co-Workers in the Vineyard

Last week I met with more than two hundred of our lay people at the end of their full day conference, “Co-Workers in the Vineyard.” These dedicated people, many of whom are employed at some level of Archdiocesan and parish administration, were called together to discuss the December 2005 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ document, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*.

Despite its lengthy title, the document is an excellent one for where we now find ourselves. In light of a vast expansion of lay involvement in every sector of Church life since the Second Vatican Council, *Co-Workers* seeks to identify lay ecclesial ministers, their roles, relationship to hierarchy and clergy, qualifications, and formation.

The very title “minister” has been somewhat embattled. Up to the Council, the word within Catholic circles referred to one in holy orders. In time, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes it, “ministry” defined “the service or work of sanctification performed by the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments by those in holy orders or, in determined circumstances, by laity” (#903).

Pope John Paul was quite insistent in stating, “Only in virtue of sacred ordination does the word [ministry] obtain that full univocal meaning that tradition has accorded to it.” The Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos makes clear why precise theological language is crucial: “Confusion in terminology generates and expresses ambiguity and confusion in theology.”

Co-Workers suggests criteria for the “determined circumstances” which establish a layperson as a lay ecclesial minister:

- authorization of the hierarchy to serve publicly in the local church;
- leadership in a particular area of ministry;
- preparation and formation appropriate to the level of responsibilities that are assigned to them;
- close mutual collaboration with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons.

It is my responsibility as diocesan bishop—with the advice of our auxiliary bishops, pastors, and department heads—to mark the need and set the role and conditions for lay ecclesial ministries. It is also my responsibility, and one in which, I pray, you will all join, to spare no effort in encouraging vocations to the ordained ministry and to consecrated life.

In most local churches, as here in Baltimore, there are liturgical ministries such as leaders of song, liturgical coordinators, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, lectors, and altar servers. Add to that those lay ecclesial ministers intimately involved in Church administration: principals, pastoral associates, and business managers. In the field of evangelization, we are continually enriched by youth ministers, DREs, RCIA leaders, and catechists.

The list is far from exhaustive and, in fact, expanding as *Co-Workers* points out: “Continually, the Spirit calls forth new ministries and new ministers to serve evolving needs, as the history of the Church shows.”

Important to note: these ministries flow not from the Sacrament of Holy Orders, but from the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist). They are functional in nature and in no way do they constitute a new “order” in the Church.

Here in Baltimore since 1985, we have experienced the leadership of Pastoral Life Directors (PLDs). Some of them are deacons, while others are members of religious orders, and laity who administer those parishes lacking a resident priest pastor for a time. I have met most of our eight present PLDs and esteem them and their ministry highly. While every parish has an assigned priest who attends to the sacramental needs of the parish, the PLD exercises leadership in a wide range of administrative and ministerial capacities.

Nearly ten years ago, the Archdiocese clearly wanted to address the impact that having fewer priests has on ministry. Cardinal Keeler called forth clergy, religious and laity to serve on a committee to study the allocation and recruitment of priests. The result of their study of the data provided by CARA – the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, – and other data relative to the issues led to producing the document *The Hope That Lies Before Us*. This document developed a plan that seeks both to ensure quality pastoral care to all the parishes and people throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore, and to renew efforts for recruiting candidates for future priestly service. Assigning Pastoral Life Directors was one of several strategies recommended and implemented. It was this study that prompted a more deliberate initiative on assigning PLDs to parishes in varied regions throughout the Archdiocese.

Now that this new initiative is nearly 10 years old, I have asked our Presbyteral Council, to review the role of these important co-workers. I know that the Council will welcome the suggestions of our PLDs. How grateful we all should be for their continuing dedicated ministry. I support them fully, and hope that our review will enhance their effectiveness.

Meanwhile, other reviews are also at work. The number and variety of co-worker ministries in the Baltimore Archdiocese are numerous. They are in need of coordination on the part of the three critical offices most involved in our lay ministry program. That coordination is now taking place. Here in The Catholic Center, the divisions of Evangelization and Catechesis, Ministry Formation and Development, and Youth and Young Adult Ministry are collaborating in hammering out uniform recommendations for a comprehensive and uniform approach to all lay minister and ministries.

The zeal, good will and self-sacrifice of last week's conference participants are inspiring gifts to our local Church. In the words of Co-Workers, lay ecclesial ministers, "are the Church in the heart of the world and bring the world into the heart of the Church." The operational reviews in progress will hopefully confirm and encourage these servants of God's people in their invaluable ministries. And may our pastors and those leading offices at The Catholic Center give every encouragement to them and to others to join their ranks.