

INTRODUCTION

Changes and Challenges

*And let us not grow weary in well-doing,
for in due season we shall reap,
if we do not lose heart.
So then, as we have opportunity,
let us do good to all,
and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

∞ GALATIANS 6:9–10

A perceived change is evident in the Roman Catholic community as well as in many other Christian communions as we reevaluate and return to our roots. Women and men, neither ordained nor members of the traditional religious communities of priests, brothers, or sisters, both in numbers and in ways not seen or experienced before in living memory, are undertaking ministry. Some people find this confusing or frightening and pray all the harder for vocations, without realizing that their prayers are perhaps being answered, but in a way that is not in keeping with the specifics of their petitions. God is indeed raising up ministry and ministers in the church, and while there are fewer ordained and vowed people in service to the growing and developing church, there is no shortage at all either of ministers or ministry. This might seem new, something of a major change. It is more a return to the way things once were in the very beginning (consider the division of labor in the Acts of the Apostles, for example).

Today's new pastoral ministers are undertaking their tasks not in place of priests but side by side with priests, involved in many aspects and areas in which they have both special competence and a specific vocation. You who undertake these ministries do so as a consequence of your baptismal commitment. Your dignity comes from Christ who claims us and commissions us to "go out and teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

So who am I to write for you? As a diocesan priest, I enjoyed ten years and seventeen days as a pastor and look on that era as a special time of grace. Since then, I have been in college and university classrooms, teaching in four different graduate programs of pastoral ministry, and two programs that do not grant degrees, from Long Island to Hawaii. I feel that I know you, the students and the ministers, as well as the folks in the pews, the problems and the possibilities. I hope that my own experiences, study, and pastoral and theological reflections will assist you, my colleagues in ministry with whom I am privileged to serve.

A word, then, about voice: I am clearly a pastoral minister, though not a lay minister. Sometimes I make reference to "we" or "us" and sometimes to "you." I trust that the distinction is evident and helpful. Please forgive what may occasionally seem awkward construction as I speak of "all of us ministers" or "we ministers" when I mean all ministers, and "you" or "lay ecclesial ministers" or "lay pastoral ministers" when I mean you, the target audience.

"What do we call you, anyway?" is a question pastoral ministers sometimes hear. They are usually Mrs. or Ms.; sometimes Mr.; and, occasionally Dr. But these ministers do not come equipped with a pastoral title as do the Fathers, the Sisters, and the Brothers. But what to call you is only one of the concerns (and most folks figure that out in a heartbeat anyway). We will here use the terms lay ministers, lay ecclesial ministers, and lay pastoral ministers interchangeably.

A New Generation

Hearing and recognizing your call as part of this new generation of ministers, you no doubt seek guidance as you grow into your role.

Programs of preparation have been springing up rapidly in dioceses across the United States, and Catholic colleges, universities, and seminaries are pioneering new programs for academic study and training in practical skills. This is a new phenomenon in a healthy, developing church. It is in keeping with the best interpretations of gospel mandates and conciliar and post-conciliar documents. Because this movement within ministry is new and still developing, we can understand that those involved in the programs of preparation might feel as did those involved in the formation of seminaries after the Council of Trent. It was a good idea then, as the Council fathers reacted to the obvious needs of the church for a better educated clergy. Today, in the best educated church ever to exist anywhere on earth, a new but similar development is underway. Thousands of pastoral ministers are busy about their tasks with eagerness and joy. But sometimes confidence does not match enthusiasm. Perhaps the new director of the RCIA was last year a third-grade teacher, and the youth minister has a bachelor's degree in business or perhaps Spanish literature. They may study in a diocesan or university program, understanding that their ministry is good work, but that with a firmer theological foundation they would both be and feel better equipped to meet the demands of the day.

Pastoral ministers, when employed full time, will certainly cost the church more than did the generations of Sisters and Brothers who built the vast network of Catholic schools, an enormous school system in the United States, second in size only to the public school systems. Those vowed folks, joined by the occasional lay teacher, were largely volunteer labor. The new generation of pastoral workers, with families, mortgages, and other obligations, cannot be volunteers. Scripture speaks authoritatively to their situation: "The laborer deserves to be paid" (1 Timothy 5:18). These ministers deserve, too, to be educated in a manner and place appropriate to their call and station. Programs and resources for academic and spiritual formation and ongoing development are clearly in order. Those who find a vocation in lay ministry must speak out about needs and challenges, remembering that this ministry is a response to the call of Baptism.

Asking for resources and respect is not out of order. Blessed John XXIII, of happy memory, wrote in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*: “Those who discover that they have rights have the responsibility to claim them.”

But what about spiritual development? Many who run the programs of academic formation for lay ministers recognize that they are not seminaries and that the students they accept tend to be adults who, presumably, have already been formed in the practice of their faith. Whence will come ongoing spiritual direction and impetus, not to mention resources, for spiritual growth? These are issues yet to be addressed definitively. In periods of rapid growth and change, all matters cannot be settled at once. *The Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et spes*) speaks to the issue of ongoing development in decreeing that “new conditions in the end affect the religious life itself.” Development of and in lay ministry is clearly the work of God’s good Spirit, and we, all of us, are called to cooperation.

This book is written in grateful recognition of the growth that is underway among lay people and in our ecclesial institutions. The reign of God is present, and lay ministers are the seeds of its future growth. Those already in ministry, some well formed and educated, and others still on the way, seek and deserve celebration of their activities and worth, with challenges and support from the rest of us to ensure that development is ongoing. I write here of the dignity of the call to lay ministry, the opportunities and problems of lay ministers that need attention, the challenges to lay ministers that can enrich days and decades with a careful attention to the presence of God’s grace. This book is for you, that new breed, the new generation of lay church workers in the Catholic communion and in other Christian churches as well. My hope is that you will find your own concerns mirrored here, with suggestions for growth, questions for consideration, plans for prayer, prompts for study, and paths to peace.

We ministers—lay and ordained alike—move on then in lives of prayer and service. We recognize that the busyness of life causes us to move rapidly from concern to concern, sometimes with friction at our heels. Sometimes we wonder if our prayer life is as strong as our

burdens demand it be. We remember the dictum of St. Benedict, who wrote “The Holy Rule for Monasteries,” that we are to work and pray, so that the prayer of our lips perfects the work of our hands. We make peace with disturbances in our prayer life by recalling St. Vincent de Paul’s comforting caution: “Do not become upset or feel guilty because you interrupted your prayer to serve the poor. God is not neglected if you leave him for such service. One of God’s works is merely interrupted so that another can be carried out.”

We read in the book of Revelation, “Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.” Our efforts and our prayers, we believe, rise in the presence of God as sweet smelling incense. But Revelation continues: “Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (8:3–5). There may be clashes and even thunderous roars, but if we are about God’s work, seeking the truth, following the way, advancing God’s reign, we will move in hope and confidence.

Possible Clashes

Let’s consider some possible clashes or thunderous roars. Among them might be the way that we refer to God. I hope that references to God will not be a problem here. I consider inclusive language a very significant issue, but a linguistic and cultural issue, not a theological problem. More than half of pastoral ministers are women and many feel justifiably unhappy, confused, or disenfranchised by references to God as male. Language is evolving and we pastoral writers must shape a response that is helpful and challenging. We should not become part of the problem. If we render God neuter, avoiding any personal pronouns, we run the risk of making a linguistic problem into a theological issue by narrowing rather than broadening the avenues by which we come to God. We must not reinforce the mistaken idea that God

is a male, but point instead to inclusiveness as a cohesive virtue for the body of Christ.

I hope we can also acknowledge difficulties where we find them in pastoral practice as well as in ecclesial issues, and not avoid admitting that we have difficulties in the church in our own era. There are very certain problems those involved in lay ministry are apt to encounter. For example, Kathleen Hope Brown, in *Lay Leaders of Worship: A Practical and Spiritual Guide* (Liturgical Press, 2004), writes for lay presiders of community prayer. In examining the kinds of relationships such leaders have to the communities from which they are called, she asks pertinent questions about skills, training, and credentials. She examines issues surrounding spiritual formation, and recognizing that lay ministry is here to stay, wisely asserts that her questions call for ongoing and careful consideration. There is much in the book that is both helpful and provocative. Her considerations about spirituality, formation, and continuing development of spirituality are, I think, very helpful not just for lay presiders but for all those who lead in liturgical and other ministerial capacities.

Brown begins and concludes with the lament that “lay leaders of prayer sometimes find their ministry questioned, objected to, and even openly opposed.” She herself, just before her first service, was told, “That’s all very nice, honey. Now, where’s the priest?” The woman who asked the question perhaps pinpointed the idea to which Brown and other lay presiders need urgently to attend: There are instances in which they appropriately act as prayer leaders and in which they claim their rightful place among the people of God. There are other moments when they take the place of an absent priest. While she is correct that “lay presiders are not a stopgap solution to temporary need but a gift to the church for the long term,” she and we must recognize the primacy of the Eucharist for the Sunday assembly. Lamenting its absence is not to disparage the one who fills in for the absent priest, but is an appropriate response. Better, it seems to me, is to concentrate on the many instances when it is entirely appropriate for a lay person to preside.

Two examples: The college where I currently teach is on the grounds of a Benedictine Monastery. I prayed vespers one recent evening with the Sisters in anticipation of a feast and the Prioress presided. It seemed entirely usual (because it is, in fact, entirely usual), and the blessing she imparted as we concluded bristled with the onrush of God's good Spirit. At a recent Mundelein gathering of the Pastoral Associates of the Archdiocese of Chicago at which I made a presentation, morning prayer was presided over by one of the participants who gave as fine a reflection on the morning's Scripture as I had heard in many months. No one could have asked where the priest was at either service; both women did as their office and community called them to do.

Brown points out that "lay preaching, until very recently, has been extremely rare and even now is not commonplace." But she cites another lay presider at the Children's Liturgy of the Word who later saw her five-year-old daughter delivering animated oratory into the bedroom mirror, explaining, "Mommy, I'm preaching—just like you!" This preacher wisely suggests that "perhaps the other little girls who participate in the Children's Liturgy of the Word will know from an early age that women can preach, can share the good news, and do it well."

This particular study would have been more helpful (and here is an agenda for some other lay minister's next book!) if it had delineated when lay presiders are appropriately put to work in graced moments in which they "give voice to the prayer of the community ... [leading] the community pastorally and reverently in an experience of worship" and when their presence will legitimately provoke the lament, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a priest?" Sunday without the Eucharist is a problem not the making of the lay presider, but she or he does preside in the lamentable absence of the priest.

Brown also relates the story of a lay presider who prepared and presided at a funeral service for an infant. Interestingly, though, she reports that "the pastor was supportive as he prayed with us as a community member." It seems very unusual for a pastor to attend a funeral at which a lay person presides, but she offers no explanation. Brown also fails to address when lay presiders ought to expect to be wel-

comed, and when they can legitimately be viewed as something other than what the church might expect. Not all lay ministers are liturgical ministers, but highlighting what remains unaddressed in her fine book suggests that there is much yet to be done in defining and recognizing ministries, in isolating problems, seeking solutions, and learning to live together in a way that seeks and serves the peaceable reign of God. As the church continues to reform, we will look for more of these kinds of reflections and guides, among which I hope my own book here is numbered, and can today be grateful for Brown's inspired insights and apt second name: Hope.

Reasons for Opposition

But sometimes lay leaders will find their ministry outside of preaching or presiding still questioned, objected to, and even openly opposed. It is important to understand some of the reasons that may be at play. One very bright and capable minister who holds a master of arts degree in pastoral ministry tearfully told me of her pastor who had demanded to see the papers she had written (and I had graded) in a summer seminar. She had earned a grade of A by virtue of careful reading, thoughtful analysis, finely tuned writing, and an insightfully prepared and well-presented project. He scanned what she presented and pronounced that had he been the professor, she would not have had the A. She was too hurt and flummoxed to recall that he had not in fact been the professor. He had not been the professor because her university did not hire people who hold the bachelor of science degree to teach graduate seminars in pastoral theology. He had not been successful in his own attempt to earn a master of arts and clearly (at least it seemed clear to me) felt some shame about this fact (and it was a fact, not a failure, as he seemed to fear). Apparently he felt the need to belittle his parishioner and coworker's efforts. He is not a bad man; he is a priest of considerable talent. My guess is that he felt uncomfortable having an employee and coworker who was not just a better student than he, but who held a more advanced academic degree.

The very first graduate student with whom I worked had her final project published by Liturgical Press. There was much rejoicing in her scholarly cohort and family. But her supervisor, a chancery official, took the news very hard and could not manage any congratulations at all. Her book came to the attention of another chancery half a continent away (priests are not always the villains; they are more often good readers, true talent scouts, and heroic coworkers). She was called for an interview and offered a better position in a more hospitable climate (both metaphorically and literally) even though she had not even been an applicant. She and her colleagues in lay ministry have recognized that a new and better education often leads to new employment and other opportunities. It is not so much that they outgrow their surroundings and colleagues, but that higher education is often threatening to undereducated supervisors and colleagues. One can understand why pastors or supervisors often hire workers whose credentials are limited: They are not just less expensive but also less threatening.

The academic dean of a seminary where lay people also study told me that the seminarians are often frustrated when studying side by side with lay students. When they wish to pull apart, they suggest that it is because of a need to build a priestly identity. There seem to be two issues at work here—or an issue and an excuse.

Issue one: Learning what it means to have a priestly identity is important for those who seek ordination. These candidates must observe, however, that even in a scandal-plagued church, we priests have a strong identity. We have a well-defined role in the ecclesial and civic communities. The ordination ceremony speaks volumes about who we are and how both church and self should understand that identity. The bishops give faculties and assignments. There is a special place where most priests live, dress that sets us apart in the sanctuary and on the streets, and formal terms of address. Ours is not a weak identity.

Issue two (the excuse): Studying scriptural pericopes or canon law with lay students will not impede the development of priestly identity. But to sit side by side with better students or harder workers, with folks who view themselves in a collegial and not subservient role,

challenges us to ask what it means to serve as a priest in a church that is no longer one of immigrants and illiterates. The priest is no longer the only or best-educated person in a parish. We all, including and especially seminarians and others who aspire to ministry either lay or ordained, must understand, celebrate, and work with that understanding. Developing a priestly identity is a true concern both for seminarians and for those who form them; it is a concern for all the church as well, since we both seek and deserve competent, confident people serving in holy orders. The task is not just to craft and develop that identity, but also to distinguish between formation and fear. This, too, is part of our search for a spirituality that fits and forms.

Recognizing New Ministries

We who live in this extraordinarily well-educated church are coming more and more to recognize the ministries of those who serve us outside of holy orders. We do not have commissioning ceremonies for them, we are not sure exactly of what their titles should be, and we are not quite sure of how to pay a living wage (or even how to compute it fairly; since lay ministers live at home and not in rectories, their salaries cannot be compared to the priest's which includes a rectory, meals, and an amplitude of other considerations). We are not certain how to ensure just treatment in making contracts and terminating employment when necessary, or even what to do with their families when they are diversified through remarriage. All of these matters suggest a subject that needs to be midwifed into the imagination of the church: the future. Among the many tasks of the heroic lay ecclesial ministers is helping us keep one eye on our past and another on the future, that we might live daringly in the tension between what has gone before and what lies ahead. Think of Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel where God's finger reaches out toward Adam's. We must see ourselves as living in that space, in that tension. Learning to live there is to chart a spirituality for lay ministry.

Obviously enough, this book cannot address all of these difficulties. But it can point to the hope of justice that animates the church in every

age. We are always a people passionately committed to justice (even when it takes us centuries to discover what justice might look like in a given instance), open to Benedict XVI's reminder that we are called to go beyond the minimal requirements of justice to the fullness of charity. This book, I hope, can also suggest a method for dealing with those opportunities and difficulties, a spirituality that will guide our feet in peaceful paths and our hearts to a more certain rhythm.

One of the techniques I employ here is a liberal use of quotes from both Scripture and church documents. I think the defining task of pastoral ministers is to dip into the church's treasury and make those treasures accessible to people who might otherwise not know them. So, rather than sending people to the Catechism or the ancient Christian writers, or even the Sacramentary, the pastoral minister uncovers and explicates the treasures found there. This is a hard sell in an era in which our culture tends to celebrate individual opinion as if it were on the plain of revelation, but this task is surely high among the duties of the church's ministers. It is a serviceable way, I think, to consider questions and concerns, and it suggests a manner in which together we can craft our own developing opinions in light of the sources available to us.

I hope that my experience can inform yours, so that you can, as Mary did, keep what is "treasure" and ponder these things in your hearts (Luke 2:19). I pray that these reflections find a home, promote thoughtful prayer and prayerful action, and that together we will labor and laugh until we, having seen removed all obstacles which might hinder us from receiving Christ with joy, merrily meet in heaven.

Next we will consider our identity as Christians and as ministers.