

Call-Response-Relationship: A Theological Grounding for Lay Ecclesial Ministry

When I was a child at Star of the Sea, one of six Catholic churches, all within walking distance in East Boston, we had three priests in the rectory and twelve sisters of Mercy in the convent across Moore Street. The only lay staff were the rectory housekeeper whom I remember as very kind, a custodian who inspired fear in everyone, including the young curates, and an organist who regularly played the Waltz in A Flat at Communion time. What ministers were around were at the Protestant church on the next corner.

It was a wonderful time and gave me a rootedness for which I will always be grateful. But that was way back in the first half of the 20th century and we are here to look at the Church in the 21st century. We can be sure – it's going to be a different Church. It already is. Father Don Senior wrote recently that “One thing that becomes clear from a thoughtful study of the Bible as well as Church history is that it is the world, not the church, that usually sets the theological and pastoral agenda.”¹ He is writing about religious life, but it could as well include the diocesan priesthood. “What has been happening in our times is not explainable by a lack of zeal or integrity or some failure of strategy. The Church at large [is] being churned by wider cultural and historical forces, the outcome of which is not yet clear, Economic abundance, smaller families, an emphasis on personal fulfillment, a range of opportunities for service, focus on the individual and individual self-direction, the shifting plates of world politics – these and many other forces are at work.” Certainly the numbers of priests and religious are declining, but so are marriage rates, re-enlistment rates, and it is the rare individual indeed who retires, as my father did, after more than forty years with the same organization.

Stability and permanence which were high values in the medieval age are less highly valued in the 21st century. The long view is so important. I've often thought about a comment Father Michael Himes made a few years ago at a lay forum sponsored by several USCCB offices. I don't remember his exact words but they went something like “There is no indication from the astrophysicists and other such scientists that the universe is going to end soon and we have Jesus' own promise that the Church will endure. Someday, centuries hence, good Catholics will be asking, “Vatican II – did that come before or after Ephesus?”

When the bishops were preparing *Co-Workers*, The Subcommittee on Lay Ministry convened several regional consultations at which bishops from the region, theologians, pastors, those responsible for formation programs and lay ecclesial ministers themselves talked together about the issues involved.

At one of them, one of the theologians urged some caution about moving forward with a document since in his words “we really aren’t sure yet what the Holy Spirit is doing with the Church and it may be premature to attempt to position the lay ecclesial ministers into a framework which is obviously changing, with which the Holy Spirit is still working.” I was quite taken with his comments and was pondering them when one of the lay advisors to the Subcommittee responded that she saw the wisdom of what he was suggesting; but, on the other hand, reminded those gathered that lay men and women had been giving their professional lives to the Church for well over thirty years now and that they deserved some kind of recognition and affirmation and that those preparing lay ecclesial ministers had asked for some kind of guidance. The Subcommittee agreed and continued to move forward but were always conscious of the unfinished nature of what they were doing.

Co-Workers in the Vineyard needs to be seen in that long perspective, not just in the light of these days when the dioceses – in the words of the announcement for this symposium – “are quietly undergoing a major shift in ministry, driven both by the declining numbers of priests and the surprising rise in the number of trained lay ministers.” Our God is a God of surprises and who can predict what the Spirit is doing among us or how the Church will look at the end of the 21st century.

The bishops who were on the Subcommittee for lay ministry were firm in their belief that lay ministry is not simply a response to an emergency situation. It is, in itself, a legitimate expression of a response to the Baptismal call shared by all in the Church. In 2000, Cardinal Mahoney wrote, with his priests, a pastoral letter on ministry which he called, “As I have Done for You.” In it, he looked at a parish in 1955 and again in 2005 (already history, and in 2000 the Church had yet to be shattered by the sex abuse crisis.) The staffing of that imaginary parish is quite different in 2005 from what it was in 1955. One comment in the letter needs to be kept in mind as we look at the growing numbers of lay ecclesial ministers: “Even if seminaries were once again filled to overflowing and convents packed with Sisters, there would still remain the need for cultivating, developing, and sustaining the full flourishing of ministries that we have witnessed in the Church since the Second Vatican Council.”²

In one sense, what the bishops were doing as they worked on *Co-Workers* was helping position the Church for the 21st century. One of the theologians who worked with the Subcommittee which prepared the document used to say that the process was really one of theological reflection – looking at the reality and reflecting on it in the light of Scripture and Church teaching. *Co-Workers* takes its title from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans (16:3-16). The phenomenon of the baptized taking responsibility for leadership in the Church is not new, although it may have been eclipsed for several centuries. The

teaching of the Church is clear: *Lumen Gentium*(10-13,31) reminded us that the baptized are called to share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly work of Christ.

The U. S. bishops had written about the growing numbers of lay people who were exercising leadership in the Church at least since 1980 when they published *Called and Gifted* and welcomed these “lay persons who have prepared for professional ministry in the Church.” and called them “ecclesial ministers.”³ As Karen will tell us later, their numbers have grown dramatically in the last several years. As the bishops experienced this reality, they came to believe that it was important to give some guidance to its development and some recognition to those who served the Church in this way.

The U. S. bishops were not alone – nor were they the first – in doing that. The Brazilian, German, and Swiss bishops had all published documents on lay ministry, some of them as early as 1977.

Articulating a theological grounding for that recognition and guidance was a central part of their task. It was not done quickly. In 1997 the Subcommittee sponsored a theological colloquium to which theologians, canonists, and bishops were invited. Its title was modest: “Toward a Theology of Lay Ecclesial Ministry.” The papers prepared for that colloquium were subsequently published as *Together in God’s Service*.⁴ The fruits of that colloquium and subsequent consultations by the Subcommittee were published as a committee report, *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions*, in 1999.⁵

When the Subcommittee began work on what was to become *Co-Workers*, they began by convening yet another group of theologians. The group included lay and ordained, vowed religious and married, young and seasoned, and represented a wide spectrum of theological perspectives. That group included Father Frank Sullivan SJ of Boston College who generously and wisely continued to advise the subcommittee throughout the preparation of the document. For two and a half days that group met with the bishops on the Subcommittee and what emerged from that truly graced dialogue eventually became the first draft of the theological section of *Co-Workers*.

(That first draft was sent to every bishop and we received a number of diverse responses. A young graduate theology student, working with us at the time, became quite excited as she read the responses and said “I’m seeing theology develop right here!” My response was somewhat cautionary: we were seeing magisterial teaching develop, consistent with but distinct from theology.)

The document went through seven drafts, each draft changed as a result of consultations with the bishops, theologians, pastors, deacons, lay ministers, seminary rectors, formation program directors, human resource specialists, civil and canon lawyers. It has two parts: the first, *Foundations*, which establishes the theological grounding for lay ecclesial ministry and the second, *Pastoral Applications*

which treats of the path to such ministry, preparation for it, authorization for it, and the ministerial workplace.

The Foundations section begins with two simple but profound sentences: “God calls. We respond.”⁶ That dynamic of call and response is at the heart of the spiritual life; it is the beginning of what brings us into relationship with God and with one another. The bishops continue, citing *Lumen Gentium* (40) again: “The basic call is the same for all the followers of Christ, namely “that all Christians in whatever state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity, and this holiness is conducive to a more human way of living even in society here on earth.”⁷

The bishops continue in their own voice “Lay men and women hear and answer the universal call to holiness primarily and uniquely in the secular realm... All of them are called to work for the transformation of the world. Most do this by working in the secular realm; some do this by working in the Church and focusing on the building of ecclesial communion which has among its purposes the transformation of the world.”⁸ The document then notes that “Sharing in the function of Christ, priest, prophet and king, the laity have an active part of their own in the life and activity of the Church.”⁹ Many do so on a limited and voluntary basis – lectors, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, catechists, pastoral council members, those who serve in programs of sacramental preparation. You know them well; you are probably among them; no parish can survive, let alone flourish, without them. Within this very large group, probably 10% of all US Catholics, there is a smaller group on which the bishops focus – those men and women whose ecclesial service is characterized by

- Authorization by the hierarchy to serve publicly in the local Church
- Leadership in a particular area of ministry
- Close mutual collaboration with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons
- Preparation and formation appropriate to the level of responsibilities assigned to them.¹⁰

The bishops call these individuals lay ecclesial ministers, noting that the term describes a category, not a specific role. Within the parish, the specific roles would include pastoral associate, parish catechetical leader, youth ministry leader, school principal, director of liturgy or pastoral music. It is the responsibility of the local bishop to decide those roles in his diocese which exemplify lay ecclesial ministry, and the document acknowledges that its application will vary from diocese to diocese.

Having explained its terminology, the document then notes that “all ministry finds its place within the communion of the Church and serves the mission of Christ in the Spirit.”¹¹ Communion and

relationships, mission and ministry are the poles around which the theology of lay ecclesial ministry is constructed.

In one of the early drafts of this section there was a sentence about the Trinity which I hoped would be retained: “Our God doesn’t *have* relationships; our God *is* relationship.” The emphasis of that phrasing has been lost in the revisions, but the centrality of relationship to the communion that is the church and to the service that is ministry has been fully maintained. Occasionally one can still find – after all the revisions - phrases that are inspiring, for example: “Holiness is nothing other than the gift of loving union with God and the sharing of this love in right relationships with others. In this way we live the Trinitarian community in our daily lives.”¹²

The Church is a communion for mission – the mission of Jesus – and ministry is the means for accomplishing that mission. The document notes that the “primary distinction lies between the ministry of the lay faithful and the ministry of the ordained.” It continues that “the recognition of the unique role of the ordained is not a distinction based on merit or rank, but rather on the sacramental character ... and the particular relationship of service that Holy Orders brings about between ecclesiastical ministry and the community.”¹³

Co-Workers then moves into a section that I think is probably its most significant contribution. It says “Ministry is diverse and, at the same time, profoundly relational.”

I don’t think I’m alone in having found ontological or functional descriptions of ministry inadequate or inaccessible. In what follows, the document attempts to describe the specific place of lay ecclesial ministers in what is “an ordered, relational, ministerial community”¹⁴ by explaining the relationship of the lay ecclesial minister with the bishop, the priest, the deacon and the lay faithful. The words *collaborate* or *collaborative* recur several times throughout this section. You may remember that it was mentioned in the description of the lay ecclesial minister at the start.

It was this aspect of *Co-Workers*, its treatment of the whole church, that led theologian Richard Gaillardetz to comment that it is “the most mature and coherent ecclesiastical document ever produced on a theology of ministry. One of the real strengths of this document is the way in which it successfully integrates lay ecclesial ministry within a broader theology of church and ministry .”¹⁵ There were already very fine separate documents for the priests, the deacons, and the laity. This is the first that sees them all in relationship.

Gaillardetz also highlights the significance of a change from an earlier bishops’ document. In the 1999 report, they wrote “all the *laity* are called to work toward the transformation of the secular world;”

in *Co-Workers*, they wrote; “all of the *baptized* are called to work for the transformation of the world.” He says that this “seemingly minor change in wording actually represents a theological sea change. ... It reflects the insight of the council’s most mature document, *Gaudium et Spes*, which attributed the image of leaven not to the laity alone, as other conciliar passages had, but to the church itself, which ‘is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God.’”¹⁶ Gaillardetz continues: “All those who engage in formal church ministry – whether by virtue of sacramental ordination or by virtue of authorization as lay ecclesial ministers – must see their ministry as building up ecclesial communion for the sake of mission in the world.”¹⁷

Co-Workers has been criticized by some for the modesty of its goals and the tentativeness of its recommendations. That was a deliberate choice on the part of the bishops who prepared the document. They were very aware that lay ecclesial ministry is a relatively new phenomenon in the Church and that the US Church is a very diverse church. Few dioceses, for example, have the bountiful educational resources that you have here in Boston. Setting professional qualifications and standards for lay ecclesial ministers in this archdiocese is - and should be - quite different from setting them, for example, in Tucson where Bishop Kicanas, who chaired the Subcommittee, is the ordinary. On the other hand, there is a statement in the section on Formation - which I was not asked to address – that needs to be kept in mind in every parish and diocese: “Inadequate and faulty formation harms rather than helps the mission of the Church.”¹⁸ As financial pressures mount, the temptation to “dumb-down” the ministry must be recognized for what it is – a short term solution that can only lead to long-term problems.

Modesty and tentativeness, however, do not characterize the theological section of the document. I remember one cardinal-advisor to the subcommittee saying on several occasions “Get the theology right and then all else will follow.” It was the theology section that drew the most comments, modifications, and amendments from the bishops in the consultation process. The theses that emerged from that process are quite clear and unambiguous:

- Lay ecclesial ministry is a response to a call from God
- The triune God is the source of the Church’s Mission
- The Church is a Communion – a Communion for Mission
- Ministry means serving the Church and its mission
- All ministry is relational
- All the baptized are called to be part of a community that is ordered, relational, and ministerial.

That said, I'd like to close by commenting on what the document could not address – our theology of vocation. The bishops acknowledge that limitation in their conclusion when they say “The preparation of *Co-Workers* has already indicated a need for a more thorough study of our theology of vocation.”¹⁹ The 1999 report had included the following: “Lay ministers speak often and reverently of their call or vocation to ministry, a call that finds its origin in the call of God and its confirmation in the appointment to a specific ministry within the Church. These ministers often experience such a call within, and sometimes transcending, a vocation to married, single, or religious life.... We conclude that this call or vocation is worthy of respect and sustained attention.”²⁰

When the first drafts of *Co-Workers* were being written, the language of *vocation* was used for lay ecclesial ministry. It evoked some not entirely unexpected questions from several bishops, questions about permanence and total commitment which heretofore in ordinary Church parlance have been associated with the word *vocation*. The Subcommittee made a deliberate decision to concentrate on the theology of lay ecclesial ministry, to use the word *call*, and to remind their brothers that the theology of vocation needed attention. There are two articles that I would call to your attention on the topic, both of them in *America*. The first, written by Russell Shaw and published in the March 29, 2004 issue, is entitled “What Vocation Shortage?” He describes the “three distinct but related senses that the word ‘vocation’ has in religious talk.”²¹ The first is the universal vocation to holiness which is all of ours through Baptism; the second is what is traditionally called “state of life.” That is the sense with which permanence is attached. The third is what Shaw calls “personal vocation ... the unique combination of commitments, relationships, obligations, opportunities, strengths and weaknesses through which the common Christian vocation and a state of life are concretely expressed in the case of someone trying to discern, accept and live out God’s will; it is the particular role intended by God for each of us in his redemptive plan.”²² This sense of personal vocation calls for continuous discernment. Shaw cites Pope John Paul II in his post-synodal document on the laity where he says “The fundamental objective of the formation of the lay faithful is an ever-clearer discovery of one’s vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it out.”²³

The second article was published within the month in the October 9 issue of *America*. Written by theologian Edward Hahnenberg, who served as a primary consultant for the theological section of *Co-Workers*, it’s titled “When the Church Calls,” and addresses the process by which lay ecclesial ministers are called in the Church. Near the end of his article, Hahnenberg writes: “The church in the United States is witnessing not just the birth of a new vocation in ministry. It is witnessing the emergence of a

new process for calling people to ministry.”²⁴ It is only an emerging process and it is too soon to expect that the Church can speak definitively about it, but it is essential that the issue be given attention by all of us in the Church.

The process of writing and getting approval for *Co-Workers* involved revisiting some of the old questions about whether it is appropriate to use the terms *minister* and *ministry* for anyone other than the ordained. Both terms had been long used by theologians and ordinary Catholics; they had even been used in some magisterial documents. That did not prevent a small number of bishops from raising objections to such use. The adoption of *Co-Workers* by the full body of US bishops (and it is important to remember that over four times as many bishops voted for the document as against it) makes its theology part of the magisterial teaching of our Church. But the beauty of our Church and the gift of places like Boston College is that we are not finished. There are new understandings to be probed and new horizons to be explored.

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¹ Donald Senior, “Religious Life at the Brink,” *America*, October 16, 2006, 17- 19.

² Cardinal Roger Mahoney, *As I Have Done for You*, p.5

³ USCCB, *Called and Gifted*, 1980, p.4.

⁴ USCCB, *Together in God’s Service*, 1998.

⁵ USCCB, *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions*, 1999.

⁶ USCCB, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 2006, p. 7.

⁷ *Co-Workers*, p.7

⁸ *Co-Workers*, p.8.

⁹ *Co-Workers*, p. 9

¹⁰ *Co-Workers*, p.10

¹¹ *Co-Workers*, p.17

¹² *Co-Workers*, p. 18

¹³ *Co-Workers*, p. 21

¹⁴ idem

¹⁵ *Origins*, July 20, 2006, p. 139.

¹⁶ p.140.

¹⁷ p.140.

¹⁸ *Co-Workers*, p.34.

¹⁹ p. 67

²⁰ *The State of the Questions*, p. 27

²¹ Russell Shaw, “What Vocation Shortage?” *America*, March 29, 2004, p.10

²² p. 11.

²³ p.12.

²⁴ Edward Hahnenberg, “When the Church Calls,” *America*, October 9, 2006, p.14