

## CO-WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

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### INTRODUCTION

It has been my joy and honor over the last several years to serve as Episcopal Liaison for the National Association for Lay Ministry. I have come to know firsthand many women and men who dedicate their gifts and talents to build up the church in many important ministries. They bless the church by their service.

As a Diocesan Bishop, I relish the relationships with the likes of Sr. Lois Paha, O.P., and Margaret Lordon, who are present here, and with so many others who share significant ministry roles throughout our Diocese of Tucson. Through them, God works remarkable wonders.

While I do not know first hand all 30,000 lay ecclesial ministers who are working 20 hours or more in paid pastoral positions in nearly three fourths of the parishes throughout the United States or the countless others who volunteer substantial time to their ministry, I have learned a lot about them in the many consultations over the last ten years as a member and chair of the Subcommittee on Lay Ecclesial Ministry.

I have come to understand their *dedication*, loyalty, and love for the church. They have impressed and inspired me in my own ministry, and I have come to know them as a special blessing and gift for the church. This vast number of dedicated servants has graced the church in realizing its mission.

As I reflect with you on the new Conference of Bishops' document, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard*, I want to make five simple but important points. First, you do matter. Second, the harvest needs co-workers pulling together and working alongside one another. Third, effective lay ecclesial ministers are in life long formation. They keep growing and learning. Fourth, you need and deserve more official recognition. And finally, as church we need to develop workplaces where people are fulfilled and satisfied to work.

### YOU DO MATTER

Sr. Melanie Svoboda, SND, tells the story of Hannah in her book Everyday Epiphanies. Sr. Melanie was visiting some young married friends with two little children. While the parents were in the kitchen preparing supper, Sister was in the living room trying to entertain the little ones. She noticed that little Aaron, two, was running about with his shoe untied. She called him over, put him on her lap, and began tying his shoe. Hannah, four, watched as her brother sat on Sister's lap. Sr. Melanie noticed out of the corner of her eye that little Hannah took notice of what was happening, unbuckled the strap on her shoe and came over to Sister, picked up her shoe and said, "Fix my shoe." Sister had to laugh. How obvious children are in needing to be recognized, paid attention to. We all have a desire to be important, to matter, to be appreciated.

One of the central purposes of *Co-Workers* was to state clearly and unequivocally that lay involvement in the church matters. You are important. You make a difference. You will not go away. Lay ecclesial ministry is not just a stop gap measure to fill in for a shortage of priests, but the full flowering of our theology of communion and mission.

Through the sacraments of initiation we become members of Christ's body called to holiness and charged with the responsibility to embrace Christ's mission of salvation. The majority of laity will exercise their influence in the secular arena – the family, the workplace, the professions – bringing the gospel values to the primary questions of the society and culture. Some, like you, will join the ordained in forming and shaping parish communities into God's household. Your part in that, as directors of religious education, pastoral associates, youth ministers, music ministers, liturgists, and social justice ministers, contributes substantially to the mission of the church.

This document is about you. It applauds you. It thanks you. It recognizes you. Much attention is paid to priests and deacons, and rightly so. We cannot be the Catholic Church without an ordained ministry. But you, too, deserve recognition, to be singled out, to be paid attention to. The reality of laity serving in the church is held in the document as good, valuable, and necessary.

But that acknowledgement will take time to permeate the church. For example, my mother, now 93, like some in her generation, will change Communion lines to receive from the priest instead of the Extraordinary Minister of Communion. Some people feel slighted when only a lay parishioner – and not their pastor – visits them in the hospital. Some parish communities assigned a pastoral administrator feel cheated, second class, because they do not have a resident priest pastor. Some priests, even some bishops, might still look down upon lay involvement and remain hesitant or fearful to have laity take on substantial involvement in the parish. Nevertheless *Co-workers* states clearly and unequivocally that your work is "a cause for rejoicing."

The document calls you co-workers. The bishops, like Paul with Prisca and Aquila, recognize your call, value your contribution, and entrust to you an important share of caring for God's people.

## BE REAL CO-WORKERS

One of the benefits of being bishop of a diocese as big geographically as is the Diocese of Tucson – nearly 43,000 square miles – is the time I get to spend on Arizona highways, not the famous magazine about our State's beautiful scenery, but the actual highways – the interstates and state roads that I take to get from one part of the diocese to the other.

There are miles and miles and miles of wide open spaces and beautiful vistas to look at, and sometimes on the side of the road I discover inspiration, inspiration that is very specific to what we are discussing: lay ecclesial ministry.

Let me give some examples:

On the way into Yuma in the winter time, I see hundreds of workers picking lettuce in huge fields. Now, you don't think of the desert as a place where lettuce would grow, but in the fertile Colorado River Valley in Western Arizona at Yuma, lettuce thrives. In fact, Yuma County really is the lettuce capital of the nation.

Bringing in the lettuce harvest is all about co-workers. First, the grower has to plant the seeds, very close together. Then, field crews have to thin the seedlings so they are about two feet apart. Some pull the weeds by hand, not by the hoe. In four or five weeks, the lettuce is ready for harvest.

Trios of workers team together, usually two cutters and one packer. The cutters use the sharpest knives, oftentimes sharpening them two or three times a day. They work side by side, hacking the lettuce so several of the bottom leaves remain. The lettuce heads rest on a blanket so as not to get dirty. Someone assembles the cartons that will be used to pack the lettuce for shipment. The packer carries high stacks of boxes to the area being worked by the cutters. They grab three heads of lettuce, almost like a juggling act, and pack twenty four head per box. A box can weigh as much as 45 pounds.

Planters, cutters, loaders, and drivers work alongside one another to bring in the harvest. Each plays their part. Each values the contribution of the others. They cannot reap the harvest alone, by themselves.

On the way to Casa Grande, northeast of Tucson, I see huge subdivisions popping up alongside the Interstate. Every trip there seems to be a new neighborhood, with hundreds and hundreds of houses being constructed. Pinal County, just north of Tucson, is the fifth fastest growing county in the nation.

Subdivisions go up in days. The land is leveled by huge earth movers. Carpenters put up frames. Dry wallers and roofers, painters and electricians, each adds their part as house after house goes up. The building trades each respect the skill of the others. They depend on one another to finish the task.

On the way to Green Valley and Nogales south of Tucson, I drive by the huge man-made mountains of soil that have been moved out of the open pit copper mines. Copper mining starts when a team of scientists, geologists, metallurgists, and engineers discover a copper ore deposit. Sometimes underground, but more often in an open pit, miners work to excavate the ore. Holes are drilled into the rock, and explosives in those holes blast the rock so that it can be hauled off. Then flotation takes place, where finely ground ore is mixed with water to form a slurry, and coated mineral particles are skimmed off and dried, leaving the tailings. At the smelter, non-copper elements are burned off, and the precious metal retained.

In lay ecclesial ministry, we are about bringing in a harvest, building a house, mining something precious. The task of ministry calls for co-workers who do not see one another as competitive, but who each contributes what they can to bring about the mission.

The document speaks about relationships and the communion that binds us together as priests, religious, deacons, and laity seeking to pastor God's people. The document seeks to clarify those relationships, not to blur or confuse them. The document states that, "An ecclesiology of communion looks upon different gifts and functions not as adversarial but as enriching and complementary." (Origins, 410)

Just as priests sometimes ignore or downplay or diminish the contributions of the laity, some lay ecclesial ministers can resent or be envious of the priest and find themselves singing the refrain from Oliver, "I can do anything better than you." Competition or envy or fear of priests for laity or laity for priests harms the church and diminishes its mission.

One bishop on the subcommittee suggested several times that if this document gets it right – "it" being the relationship between the ordained and lay ecclesial ministers – the document will have made a substantive contribution to the understanding of church in the Catholic tradition. I pray we got it right.

One of the pressing and important works of a diocesan bishop is to invite, encourage, and challenge priests, religious, deacons, and laity to stop fighting one another, diminishing one another, and to get on with the work of the church. "The bishop is the center of communion in the local church." (p. 411)

One of my first pastors in the Archdiocese of Chicago, Msgr. Daniel Cantwell, was a wise, gentle, but challenging father. I learned much from him. He was so

bothered by the pettiness and discord that he experienced in the church that he once suggested to me that he would like to get priests, religious, deacons, and laity in the school parking lot. Form us into a great circle. Have us turn toward one another. Kick each other in the pants for a half hour and then get on with the work of the church.

*Co-Workers* reminds all of us of our need to join hands and hearts. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Together we build the household of God. Together we unveil the mystery of God, who is unseen but nevertheless is present always and everywhere.

## FORMATION COUNTS MUCH

Just as development directors mouth the refrain, "Ask. Ask. Ask. Thank. Thank. Thank," I want to leave you with a mantra" Learn. Learn. Learn. Grow. Grow. Grow.

*Co-workers* goes into great detail in keeping with canon law and the consistent teaching of the church to emphasize the need for those laity charged with leadership responsibilities in parishes and dioceses to be well prepared humanly, spiritually, intellectually, and pastorally. The faithful they serve deserve no less. The church deserves no less.

I served most of my priesthood in the seminary, forming candidates for the priesthood. I know the incredible commitment, at great sacrifice, the church makes to form its priests, and rightly so. Yet, even such an intensive and extensive effort always seemed inadequate. There was more to be done. Our efforts at formation of lay ecclesial ministers pale in comparison with priestly formation, but it would be foolhardy at best to place lay women and lay men, inadequately prepared, into positions of pastoral leadership. They will falter and fail. They could even harm the faithful they are trying to serve. We all know that. We have experienced that. Poorly formed priests or deacons or laity cause harm in parish communities where they serve.

Laity to whom we entrust peoples' growth in faith, no less than priests, need to be properly formed. "Lay ecclesial ministers just like the ordained need and deserve formation of high standards, effective methods, and comprehensive goals." (p. 415)

While much has been done over the last several decades in Catholic universities and colleges and within dioceses to enhance the formation of laity, the document asserts that more needs to be done and done now. We have to raise the bar by taking seriously the responsibility the bishop and diocese have to form lay ecclesial ministers and to foster their ongoing formation.

Recently, I have been in contact with several university presidents and administrators. I am encouraged to hear their desire to partner with dioceses in providing formation opportunities for the laity. They want to help. We need their help. One of the possible follow ups to the publication of *Co-Workers* might be an ongoing forum between dioceses and Catholic universities and colleges to plan and develop programs for lay ecclesial ministers especially in areas of the United States, like Arizona, where there are no Catholic institutions of higher learning. Such a forum might result in new and creative ways to form lay ecclesial ministers.

Let me make an aside here. For some time now, there have been cautions expressed about lay ecclesial ministry by some bishops, administrators of Catholic institutions of higher learning, and theologians. I see this as regretful. In developing *Co-workers*, the subcommittee held several forums between bishops and theologians and held consultations with many different groups of people. These gatherings were among the most stimulating and valuable experiences I have had as a bishop. We worked together. We learned together, and much good resulted. I experienced a similar enthusiasm and good result when bishops and administrators of Catholic universities and colleges met to discuss our response to Catholic politicians who hold opposing views to those of the church as well as the conversations bishops have recently had with those politicians themselves. We cannot be afraid of talking together or hesitant to work side by side to address issues.

I can only believe that bishops and administrators of Catholic institutions of higher learning working together could come up with some marvelous new initiatives and directions for formation so necessary and needed today.

The section on formation can seem daunting and even pie in the sky especially for smaller dioceses, like Tucson, which have so few resources. Many of our lay ecclesial ministers could not or would not step aside from their pastoral work to enroll in full time or even part time formation programs. They lack the resources to enroll in programs. And yet, we have to find a way to properly form lay ecclesial ministers, and once they are formed, we need to keep them as active learners.

Ben Zander, an accomplished and distinguished musician and orchestra conductor, at an early age was learning to play the cello. His teacher was Herbert Wilhems, a master cellist. Wilhems gave Zander a new piece to play on the cello. Zander began and messed it up. He began again and messed it up again. He began a third time and still messed it up. He threw his cello aside in frustration and discouragement. Wilhems said to Zander, "You mean you have been playing this new challenging piece for six whole minutes and you have not yet mastered it?" One never masters ministry. It is a life-long processes of formation. Effective and comprehensive initial formation and the continued opportunity for ongoing formation are necessary for all in ministry.

## AUTHORIZATION

One of the key points of *Co-workers* is that one does not just decide to be a lay ecclesial minister, hang up one's shingle, and begin. Rather, lay ecclesial ministers who feel called by God to serve in the church need to be authorized by ecclesiastical authority to undertake such responsibilities.

A clear distinction was made in our discussions between the service that flows from one's baptism and the ministry that requires authorization. Such authorization involves "acknowledgement of the competence of an individual for a specific ministerial role (often called certification); appointment of an individual to a specific position (in some dioceses called commissioning) along with a delineation of obligations, responsibilities, and authority of that position...and finally an announcement of the appointment to the community." (P. 422)

When lay persons are entrusted with ministerial responsibilities that involve leadership in the pastoral care of a community, they need to be authorized.

One responsibility I enjoy very much is presiding at the installation of a pastor. Having appointed him to his office, it is a moving experience to present him to the parish community and have them receive and accept him as their pastor. The new pastor receives the symbols of his office and is oftentimes embraced by the people presenting them to him.

Symbol is fundamental to the celebration of our faith. The document encourages diocesan bishops to develop ways to formally authorize and commission those he identifies as lay ecclesial ministers.

Cardinal Francis George, O.M.I., has done that very effectively with pastoral associates and directors of religious education by instituting a liturgical celebration, known as a "calling rite," that acknowledges and publicly proclaims the confidence and commitment that the Archdiocese gives to those called to serve. Such commissioning could happen on the diocesan or parish level.

## BEST PLACES TO WORK

Recently, I traveled to a board meeting at a seminary and had a chance to ride from the airport with the maintenance director. In the course of our conversation, he suddenly commented, "This is the best job and the best place I have ever worked, physically and spiritually." Wouldn't it be fantastic if all who worked in the church felt the same way, especially our lay ecclesial ministers, deacons, and priests!

Regretfully, no diocese has ever appeared in Fortune Magazine's best places to work. I am sure that no diocese or parish has ever entered their name for

recognition, but I am not sure that if we did we would be among the top 100 companies. What do you think?

Too many dioceses are still run like "ma and pa" organizations. Such informality and lack of proper processes or procedures oftentimes results in hurt and angry feelings and leads to people leaving. We have not developed, implemented, and sustained comprehensive human resource systems.

While we cannot appropriately just transfer business concepts and management techniques to church or parish, the document suggests that we can do better to create workplaces that are consistent, person enhancing, energizing, and empowering.

When you are in an institution that puts people first, treats people fairly and respectfully, recognizes each person's gifts, and harmonizes those gifts, people are drawn to go to work, even though salaries and benefits may not be the best.

We ought not to be afraid of business models or administrative best practices. While they will never make a community of faith, they can, as the document suggests, improve morale, save time and money, avoid fracturing the community in resolving conflicts, and lead top people to want and to desire to work for the church and to stay working for the church.

## CONCLUSION

I have been very encouraged by the reception *Co-workers* has received. Cardinal Avery Dulles, whose wisdom, expertise, and theological savvy helped to develop this document and to have it accepted by the Conference of Bishops, chose to give this year's McGinley Lecture at Fordham University on "The Mission of the Laity," which appeared in *Origins* April 20, 2006, Volume 35, Number 44. He says, "Without making a class out of lay ministers, {*Co-workers in the Vineyard*} does give them the kind of recognition they so richly deserve." (*Origins*, p. 729) Likewise Archbishop Michael Miller, Secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, in a recent talk, "The Integral Formation of Lay Students in Rome," (*Origins*, March 9, 2006, Volume 35, Number 38) quoted extensively from *Co-Workers*. I have heard of many Catholic universities, like Loyola in Chicago, that are holding forums and discussions of the document. And dioceses have used the document in constructive and helpful ways to begin conversations about those in ministry.

I leave you with a challenge. The document has been approved by the bishops and published. But, so what? What is next? That is your job. I hope that you and many other organizations will reflect deeply on the document and begin to draw out some recommendations for future steps that need to be taken.

How can lay ecclesial ministers be more appreciated and valued? How can we bring about closer collaboration between all those involved in ministry? How can we break down some of the fears in our working together? How can we better prepare lay people for service in the church and how can those in leadership roles stay at the task of their formation? How can lay ecclesial ministers be more publicly acknowledged? How can we create workplaces that mirror what we value and profess?

As you can see, there is much more that needs to be done. As we reflect on *Co-workers*, keep asking yourself, “So what? What is next?”