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Editorial: In the Vineyard

Before the passage, on Nov. 15, of the new document from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on “lay ecclesial ministry,” there was debate in the bishops’ meetings over whether the term “ministry” should be used to refer to laypersons working on behalf of the church. The debate ended—dramatically, according to some present—when Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., rose to defend the use of that word, saying that it was perfectly in keeping with “the documents of the Holy See and with a whole series of documents previously published by this conference.”

The new document, which passed by a vote of 190 to 49, with five abstentions, is entitled *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* and marks a notable step forward in recognizing the unique contribution of laypersons who are employed by the Catholic Church in the United States.

The growing number of lay ecclesial ministers over the past few decades represents a steady but nonetheless dramatic revolution in the parishes of this country, and the bishops have taken note. A recent study commissioned by the bishops and the National Pastoral Life Center reported that there are 30,652 lay ecclesial ministers working at least 20 hours a week in paid positions, marking an increase of 5 percent since 1997. Fully two-thirds of all American parishes have lay ecclesial ministers working at least 20 hours a week, up from 54 percent in 1990 and 60 percent in 1997. Of those, 93 percent are paid. (The study has just been published as a book entitled *Lay Parish Ministers*.)

Karen Smith, one of the editors of the new book, agreed. “Our bishops have noticed this phenomenon and are reflecting on it,” she told *America*. “They’re seeing the Spirit at work and are asking how best help to foster this gift of lay ecclesial ministers.” She compared the development to the story of St. Francis of Assisi, who came, while still a layman, before the pope to gain the church’s blessing on his new way of life. In this case, however, a wide array of people is stepping forward to offer service to the church. “Something new is happening,” said Ms. Smith.

The call to “lay ecclesial ministry” is a unique call within the church, distinct from the more common “lay ministry” that all Catholics are to perform in the secular world, and different from the volunteer work that many generous Catholics offer the church. As the bishops note, this ministry is clearly a “sign of the Holy Spirit’s movement.” That the hierarchy is taking this call seriously, particularly during a time when collaborative ministry between the ordained and the laity has become indispensable in many parishes, schools, hospitals and retreat houses, is a sign of health in the church.

It is also a sign of trust. While this brand of ministry has long been part of the life of the church (think of the martyrs who have been catechists), there is little way to know how the phenomenon will change the face of the church in the future. If the number of priests and deacons continues to

decline and of lay leaders to grow, for example, it may help to hasten the end of the kind of clericalism that is distasteful to so many American Catholics, and to which some point as one of the complicating factors in the sexual abuse crisis.

Like any call, lay ecclesial ministry requires a response. Part of that response is the commitment to serious training and formation. The type of “professionalizing” of lay ecclesial ministers—with an emphasis on formation in human development, spirituality, intellectual life and pastoral ministries—that many parishes and dioceses have long sponsored is an essential way to prepare well-trained ministers to spread the Gospel message.

Wisely, the bishops recognize that they cannot provide for every contingency in the varied world of the American church. Like many church teachings, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard* is left open-ended and, in some places, even vague. Nonetheless, it is an important and inspiring document. Dolores Leckey, senior fellow at the Woodstock Center in Washington, D.C., and former director of the bishops’ Office of Family, Laity, Women and Youth, agrees. “This is both a realistic and helpful resource that will help to foster the training necessary for a collaborative ministry that will carry out the mission of the church,” she told *America*. “People on the parish level will feel very encouraged.”

The bishops’ hope to professionalize the role of the lay ecclesial minister is welcome, for it will both encourage those already in ministry and aid those men and women whose service to the church grows more important with every year to become more and more proficient at serving the church and God. As Ms. Smith observed, there is something new happening; and for this all Catholics can be grateful.