

QUESTION-AND-ANSWER GUIDE TO USCCB'S "CO-WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD"

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INTRODUCTION

(Winona, Minn.) November 15, 2005 - The U.S. Catholic bishops' new document on lay ecclesial ministry will be warmly embraced by the Institute in Pastoral Ministries, says Gregory Sobolewski, PhD, director of the graduate programs in lay ministry and pastoral administration at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

"We'll need to grow our imagination of ministry, just as the bishops have," he says. "With the bishops and all pastors, we'll need to study, to design, and to implement new delivery systems for ways of educating Catholics called to ministerial service."

Some 30,000 Catholic lay ecclesial ministers aren't the only ones who have cause to celebrate the U.S. Catholic bishops' new document on lay ecclesial ministry. Lay ministers are likely to welcome the bishops' affirmation that the Holy Spirit calls the laity to Catholic leadership. But the document will benefit pastors, too, by providing them with specific ways to draw on the talents of the laity at a time when ordained ministers face increasingly large workloads. And for the scandal-weary people in the pews, the document shows a way for Catholics to live their faith through creative collaboration and openness to the Holy Spirit, rather than crisis and conflict.

Professor Sobolewski has a broad, national perspective on the new document, "Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry." He was an invited participant in the bishops' national consultations on the document, as well as a contributing writer for the "Proposed Foundational Document on Lay Ecclesial Ministry" that informed "Co-Workers." As director of the Institute in Pastoral Ministries at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota since 1996, Sobolewski has participated in the formation of hundreds of lay ecclesial ministers from across the country. In addition, he served on the executive committee of the Association for Graduate Programs in Ministry from 2001-2003. He replies below to frequently-asked questions about "Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord."

FREQUENTLY-ASKED QUESTIONS

Why did the bishops prepare this document?

They write a pastoral and theological reflection on lay ecclesial ministry to affirm lay ecclesial ministers and to synthesize best thinking and practices.

This provides a common frame of reference to continue the development of lay ecclesial ministry in accord with the Church's theological and doctrinal traditions as well as to respond effectively to contemporary pastoral needs and situations. It is a resource for diocesan bishops and all others responsible for guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry in the United States.

What are the document's most important insights or suggestions?

First, this guidance takes a place alongside USCCB's "Program of Priestly Formation" and "National Directory for the Formation, Life and Ministry of Permanent Deacons in the United States" in preparing official Catholic leadership in the United States. Unlike them, it does not propose norms or particular law.

Second, lay ecclesial ministers can experience and live their call to ministry in terms of Catholic wisdom and practices.

Third, collaboration between the ordained and laity in service of our Church is now a real fact for the U.S. bishops in both doctrinal and managerial ways.

Fourth, details are stated to guide formation of a lay Catholic Christian from a spiritual call through professional certification to official authorization in Roman Catholic lay ecclesial ministry.

Fifth, "Co-Workers" presents a beautiful theological reflection on how Catholic leaders in the United States should strive to live the mission of the Holy Trinity. This easy-to-read teaching eloquently describes Catholic leadership as a united service to God, Church, and society. This ministerial service respects the diverse roles of bishops, priests, deacons, and lay ecclesial ministers.

How does "Co-Workers" address the most pressing needs and concerns of those involved in lay ministry?

The guidance is inspiring and workable.

The bishops assert that the Holy Spirit calls lay people to official Catholic leadership. The bishops detail requirements for a lay Catholic leader's training and authorization. The bishops discuss authorization for ministry in both spiritual and managerial terms. The bishops hope for greater service of our Church to American culture.

Also, it specifies ways that pastors can act to meet increasing needs that they recognize in their parishes. This should inspire pastors who are generally satisfied with their role in the Church but may be discouraged in the face of recent scandals and an increasing decline in numbers of priests.

How might lay ministry in the United States be different in the future as a result of "Co-Workers"?

It will be more Catholic, more collaborative, and more mission-driven. "Co-Workers" clarifies doctrinally what Catholic lay leadership looks like. It implements practically, together with allied documents on the ordained ministry, effective guidance to high standards and best practices. "Co-Workers" diminishes any self-preoccupation of all ministers by orienting them to Christ's Gospel, Roman Catholic wisdom in interpreting that Gospel, and challenges to living daily the Christian Good News.

Why should the average person in the pews care about this document?

Their children and young friends will receive a stronger Catholic faith because the bishops and lay leaders of this generation listened to the Holy Spirit. "Co-Workers" shows that crisis is not the defining way of Catholic faith. This document shows how the Gospel of Jesus is discovered by today's Catholic leaders, both clerical and lay. Every Catholic is being asked right now to consider afresh what God wants. Do they have a call to lay ecclesial ministry? Do they have a call to endow a scholarship in a university or diocese? Do they know a friend who should think about Catholic ministry, either lay or ordained? For every person who cares to see the movement of the Holy Spirit in somewhat dispiriting times, "Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord" points the way!

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

Do you expect that the document's specific recommendations regarding the formation of lay ministers will affect programs such as the Institute in Pastoral Ministries?

Absolutely. Many American lay ecclesial ministry programs started in the last two decades and were modeled on formational programs for priests and deacons, especially their academic components. Thus, many programs have a core structure that already embodies the bishops' guidance in "Co-Workers," itself incorporating the best practices of centuries past. However, many academic programs evolved increasingly apart from discussions with ordained leaders, for various reasons too entangled to describe here. "Co-Workers" invites programs that train lay ecclesial ministers to be more radically and innovatively Catholic. It also expects that ordained leaders incorporate rigorous academic training into preparing their lay collaborators. Thus, universities and chanceries will need to discover ways of meeting, dialoguing, and living that advance beyond the strained relationships of recent years.

The *mandatum* is neither a starting point nor the main point of educating lay ecclesial ministers. "Co-Workers" calls for a practical compatibility of reason and faith, curricula and Catholic doctrine. I look for exciting new relationships to develop in the next decade, albeit with great work by persevering leaders.

At the Institute in Pastoral Ministries, I look for new discussions by our highly credentialed faculty of priests, religious, and laity, who assist us from all parts of the country. We faculty need to grow our imagination of ministry as the bishops have. With them and all pastors we'll need to study, to design, and to implement new ways of educating Catholics called to ministerial service. The Institute in Pastoral Ministries pioneered a blended delivery of Catholic education twenty years ago, incorporating distance learning and summer residency. Thus, we combine spiritual friendships, academic rigor, and flexible structures. I think that our 250 alums are confident that we're up to this fresh task!

Overall, the Institute in Pastoral Ministries and other programs to form lay ecclesial ministers now have two constitutional documents to renew our dedication to reasonable, pastoral Catholic faith. First, "Co-Workers" by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops; and second, "National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers" (2003), co-authored by The National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM), the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL), and the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM).

By the way, these national certification standards are mentioned several times in "Co-Workers."

What is the documentary context of "Co-Workers"?

This "guidance" enlarges an evolving body of documents from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on lay ministry:

- 1980: "Called and Gifted," commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of Vatican II's "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity";
- 1995: "Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium," commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Vatican II's "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity." In this document, the bishops said, "As an episcopal conference, we will expand our study and dialogue concerning lay ministry in order to understand better the critical issues and find effective ways to address them. The new evangelization will become a reality only if ordained and lay members of Christ's faithful understand their roles and ministries as complementary, and their purposes joined to the one mission and ministry of Jesus Christ" (par. 18); and,
- 1999: Subcommittee on Lay Ministry, "Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions."

"Co-Workers" is analogous to two other documents from the USCCB: "Program of Priestly Formation" and "National Directory for the Formation, Life and Ministry of Permanent Deacons in the United States."

"Co-Workers" also addresses concerns raised in August 1997 by eight dicasteries of the Holy See in "Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of the Priest." The eight dicasteries were: Congregation for the Clergy, Pontifical Council for the Laity, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Congregation for Bishops, Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts.

Finally, "Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord" fulfills in one remarkable way the documents of the Second Vatican Council. In his book *Co-responsibility in the Church* [*Co-responsabilité dans l'église d'aujourd'hui* (Bruges: Desclee De Brouwer, 1968)] Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens writes:

"History will render glory to the council for having beautifully defined the nature of the church, the people of God, and for having boldly sketched the place and the role of the laity in the church. History will no doubt also accuse us of not having sufficiently put into practice that which is so well defined—the co-responsibility of the laity" (187). Also, "It will be left to men under the impulse of the Holy Spirit to disentangle all the latent forces contained in the conciliar texts, and to bring to light their deep significance" (21).

"Co-Workers" is an inspiring and truly American gift to our Catholic Church. It captures the American experience of Vatican II in a discerning way and produces a significant practical outcome for which Cardinal Suenens hoped.

Do the bishops say anything new in "Co-Workers," compared to what they have said in previous documents?

Several developments are particularly striking.

First, our bishops repeatedly emphasize collaborative leadership between clerics (bishops, priests, deacons) and lay ecclesial ministers. This high emphasis of collaboration is noted in the title of the document, the purposes stated in the introduction, the doctrinal and theological teachings, and the guidance offered for recruiting, training, and authorizing lay ecclesial ministers.

Second, the bishops created this document by practicing the collaboration that it encourages. Patiently, they have engaged hundreds of people nationally and internationally, from parishes, chanceries, the academy, and professional organizations. Thus, their words refreshingly present a coherence of Catholic teachings, innovative theology, best practices, and true optimism.

Third, given a current and well-defined crisis in Catholic leadership in the United States, this document presents real evidences and heartfelt hope that Roman Catholic wisdom is vital, adaptive, and submissive to the mission of Jesus Christ. In this document, the Catholic bishops of the United States fulfill their pledge from 1995 to study, dialogue, and effectively address lay ministry.

Fourth, given the unprecedented combination of a) teachings of the universal church, b) American experiences of Catholic faith, c) collaborative consultation of academics and practitioners, and d) coherent practical guidance, this document must be called momentous.