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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Formation of Lay Ecclesial Ministers

Rooted in a Genuinely Lay and Ecclesial Spirituality

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The stunning recognition of the emergence of the new vocation of lay ecclesial ministers over the last thirty years, as both a work of the Spirit and a development the United States bishops affirm and welcome with gratitude, is a cause for rejoicing.¹ This new Spirit-initiated development in our local churches leads to questions about how, as an ecclesial community, we might best nurture this expanding phenomenon with appropriate spiritual formation. This formation should assist ministry candidates in discerning their call and in developing an appropriate spirituality that will deepen and grow over time; that will help them integrate their distinctively lay spirituality with their new ministerial identity; and that will sustain them over time through disappointment, suffering, and conflict.

Zeni Fox reports that studies, prior to the release of Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry, discovered that spiritual formation within lay ministry programs varied significantly. She states, "twice as much time is given to spiritual formation of participants in non-degree programs as in degree programs." Spiritual formation components included eucharistic liturgies, prayer/reflection groups, prayer services, retreats or days of recollection, and spiritual advisors.² In a different study Fox cited, 50 to 80 percent of the participants rated opportunities for eucharistic liturgies, faith sharing, Scripture sharing, spiritual direction, and spiritual reading very highly.³ Perhaps lay ecclesial ministry has grown primarily from the generous response of laypersons, predominately of women, to the interior nudging of the Spirit to extend their care and concern beyond their immediate families to their parish or diocesan communities. Paul Wilkes noted the striking difference in the reported prayerfulness of lay ecclesial ministers as compared to the priests with whom they serve.

They "are more solicitous about prayer. . . (46 percent versus 23 percent for priests), for days of reflection and retreats (31 percent versus 10 percent), and faith sharing (35 percent versus 18 percent)."⁴ Is it possible that lay ecclesial ministers have a more personally developed relationship with God than some of their ordained partners in ministry? Is it their relationship with God that leads them into ministry because they want to share their experience of faith with others in their local parish community?

While Co-Workers espouses no single spirituality for lay ecclesial ministers other than "common grounding in God's word and the sacraments, in the pastoral life and communion of the Church, and in the one Spirit who has been given to all,"⁵ more can be said about the developed lay spirituality many already bring to their ministries, and which they need to complement with an explicitly ministerial spirituality. Just as there have been developments in the theology of ministry and other areas of theology since the Second Vatican Council, so too has the understanding of lay spirituality and vocation developed. Vatican II dramatically affirmed the universal call to holiness within the Church in *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church): All in the church are called to the one holiness, and all ways of life within the church are schools of holiness for those called to them.⁶

For all Christians, vocational discernment is a major task throughout the adult years. To what is God calling each of us as our way of life and our mission in life?⁷ Vatican II identified the transformation of the world as a task given specifically to lay men and women (LG 31). Although *Lumen Gentium* recognized that the laity are "called to participate actively in the whole life of the church" (LG 33), the Spirit's surprise was a vocation to church ministry for some laity.

With dramatically lengthened life spans, a call to ecclesial ministry may come later in life, enabling these ministers to enrich church communities with valuable life experience gained as spouses, parents, grandparents, adult children caring for parents. Ministers can bring valuable work experience in various careers from their vocations to single or married life. Youth ministers, who are typically much younger than their other partners in parish ministry, bring their unique understanding of the generation with whom they work, but may need something akin to initial formation in the spiritual life as well as in ministerial formation. Youth ministers frequently pursue a pastoral graduate ministry degree, but may have little experience of parishes and possess only an inchoate Catholic identity. Their spiritualities may be quite eclectic and less shaped by the

traditional fonts of Christian spirituality. They will benefit most from deepening their appropriation of specifically Christian spiritual practices. It is important to keep in mind that lay ecclesial ministers differ from the many, many laypersons who serve in a variety of ministries on a part-time basis for varying periods of time. Lay ecclesial ministers also differ across ethnic communities. For instance, the overwhelming number of lay ecclesial ministers, who work twenty or more hours per week in paid ministry, is largely a phenomenon in parishes attended primarily by white Catholics, in diocesan offices, and in varying positions of leadership, which implies a certain level of education and professional expectations.

Lay ecclesial ministry is also taking place within the rapidly growing Hispanic community, now 30 percent of the American church, but in this community, the ministers are usually women who work on a volunteer basis, without having had the same access to prior general education⁸ or access to Spanish language ministry programs. In the Hispanic communities and other ethnic communities, the spirituality and ecclesiology are deeply influenced by their countries of origin as well as their process of inculturation in the United States.

Lay Spirituality

There are many ways of describing lay spirituality at the present time. Both Ed Sellner and more recently Kees Waaijman go back to the New Testament and patristic periods of Christian life as the starting point of lay spirituality since the entire Jesus movement was a lay phenomenon. The first Christian churches were house churches, presided over by the leader who hosted the community. Waaijman writes, "In the first century, . . . the conviction prevailed that all the baptized formed the church: all took part in the life of the church, practiced theology as well as their personal charism. The people was the subject of the liturgy."⁹ Sellner summarizes the results of consultations, prior to the Synod on the Laity in 1987, that revealed how deeply lay people had embraced the teachings of Vatican II. He described, "a universal reawakening among Roman Catholic laypeople to their gifts and responsibilities to serve wherever they are called, and they recognize that any dualism that splits body and soul, Church and world, ministry and work, laity and ordained is not true to their life experiences."¹⁰ Co-Workers¹¹ and all other church documents assert that a common spirituality is lived by all members of the church in different ways; the primary sources for spiritual growth

are sacramental life and Scripture; and the core spiritual dimension is a personal and growing relationship with Christ, from which flows one's life and actions in the world or in church ministries, according to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, for the good of the community.

However, what is distinctly lay in this spirituality? Waaijman puts it this way: "The unique profile of lay spirituality is defined by a number of structural elements: specific relational patterns (marriage partners, parents—children, family, neighbors, guests); a specific sense of time (generational consciousness, course of life, birth, death); a specific sense of space (the home), which mediates the connections with the immediate and more remote environment (world, church, labor, possessions); the personal life journey of the concrete individual is central."¹² Sellner offer descriptions and categories that further specify this distinction. "It is a spirituality of the family and the workplace, and is frequently expressed in the life of the local parish communities. Since there are many circumstances and types of lay people, there are a great variety of lay spiritualities related to personal vocations, choices, commitments, and life styles."¹³ The ascetic dimension of lay spirituality arises from "the discipline and struggle to care for families, maintain careers and jobs," sustain extended family members, endure the sufferings of everyday life, make meaning of one's existence, and balance the demands between work or ministry outside the home and family life.¹⁴ Fidelity to spiritual practices within this context is extremely important. Further, lay spirituality "is incarnational, enfleshed, and frequently expressed sexually."¹⁵ Forgiveness and reconciliation is an integral aspect of family life before it is expressed in a liturgical ritual. While family life and its particular concern with human flourishing from birth to death shapes lay spirituality, it also includes openness to care for creation and concern for the poor, the abused, and the neglected. Waaijman goes so far as to identify the works of mercy as characteristic of lay spirituality. Finally, lay spirituality is not limited to the domestic sphere alone. It is also concerned with a faith that does justice and with vocations to political life, the professions, the arts, the sciences, agriculture, and so on. Family may or may not form the primary community for lay adults although it does for many. Families exist in and contribute to the larger communities in which they participate. Because there are few supportive structures for lay spirituality, many form some kind of small faith-sharing groups with other lay people, as well as make use of spiritual direction to support their on-going spiritual growth.

I have tried to create a "thick description" of lay spirituality, emphasizing the variety of contexts and factors that each layperson will incarnate

uniquely, while at the same time expressing it within shared parish life or some other base Christian community. Lay ecclesial ministers bring their lived experiences of these realities, both their successes and their challenges, into their ministry. Because they share a similar "life-world" and experiences with those with whom they minister, they bring their graced wisdom and a deep understanding of the lives of the people they serve in ministry. In their public role of ministry, they exert a certain exemplary role in the community that in turn helps others to recognize their callings and gifts and live them more deeply both at home and in the community to which they are called.

Discipleship as the Shaping Influence

The spirituality common to all persons in the church, but absolutely essential for all ecclesial ministers, is characterized by a personal experience of "the love of the Father in Christ, through his Spirit."¹⁶ This graced experience is central for all forms of Christian discipleship but is essential for grounding one's ministry. Candidates presenting themselves for lay ecclesial ministry may have had such an experience but may not necessarily be able to reflect on that experience and articulate it in explicitly theological terms. A goal for initial and on-going spiritual formation is an ever-deeper appropriation of one's Christian discipleship as the primary influence shaping how one relates and ministers within the community.

Cunningham and Egan¹⁷ describe discipleship as the key category for Christian spirituality. They assert that from earliest times, converts to Christianity clearly understood that they were embracing a "way" of life, indicating that they were embarking on a journey that has a beginning and an end. Life is moving in a particular direction, but one is always "on the way"—the church is a pilgrim people. To embrace a way of life implies that there are practices and behaviors consonant with this way. As Egan and Cunningham develop this theme, they identify this way of life as a life of discipleship, and they further specify what is entailed in this richly evocative word.

The Spirit initiates discipleship. One becomes a disciple by being called by Jesus who calls his disciples across both social and sexual lines. Ritual purity and obedience (to the Law) are not the primary criteria Jesus used. Responding to Jesus' call demands a radically changed life: one that risks all kinds of securities in order to follow him, and one that ultimately could lead to the cross. Jesus relates to his disciples as a Teacher (Rabbi), making the disciples his students, yet following him means more than

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learning his teaching; it also means attaching oneself to him personally. This relationship is always ongoing and living. Becoming his disciple means not only relating to Jesus but also sharing his ministry. Finally, to be Jesus' disciple is to love one another as he did and to share with one another in the beloved community.

Lay ecclesial ministers are Jesus' disciples within the unique circumstances of their lives. Yet, there is more to a ministerial spirituality. A lived experience of Jesus develops into learning about his life and teachings at all stages of the life cycle. Jesus' birth, ministerial life, death and resurrection, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can become everyone's personal story. Continual meditation on the gospels throughout the liturgical cycle leads to deeper appropriation of Jesus' story in one's life over a lifetime, but also constantly challenges ministers to relate to others and minister as Jesus did. His teachings on the Kingdom of God, fullness of life, the character of God, the beatitudes and the works of mercy constantly inform pastoral practice. The Spirit of Jesus, dwelling within each person, gifts each disciple, through nature and grace, with specific gifts for the good of the whole church.

Life-long Ministerial Formation

The progressive reality of life-long formation and transformation, grounds an appreciation for on-going conversion. Ministers become ministers over a lifetime, just as everyone becomes a Christian over a lifetime. Ministry is grounded in the minister's ever-renewing experience of grace. Genuinely altruistic responses to the other, to the world, to the poor are rooted in the minister's affective experience of God's love that enables the person to put self-centered needs aside in ministry. This core relationship with the triune God may be expressed in an attitude of praise and gratitude for the abundance of the God revealed in Jesus. Faith, hope, and love grow and mature in this climate. As ministers grow in grace, they begin to recognize that they represent God, mediate God's grace, love, and compassion. They begin to recognize the symbolic and charismatic power of ministry. God/Jesus works through them, and as officially designated ministers, they represent the church and the Christian community. As they come to rely more and more on God, they discover that they do not need to compulsively over-work or neglect the self-care that insures professional, competent, and faith-enlivened ministry.

To live and minister this way requires sufficient personal prayer, corporate prayer, and reflection to enable discernment of interior movements

within the minister that lead to a sense of abiding vocation and guidance in particular circumstances. By so doing, ministers grow to recognize God acting in and through pastoral relationships and activities such as teaching, preaching, facilitating, healing, organizing, counseling, and spiritual direction. This practice of prayer and the awareness of interior movements provide a contemplative sustenance for life and ministry. Ministry is relational and requires a developed capacity to live in the relational flow of God's triune love for oneself and for everyone, moving in and through the multiple interactions of the day, and of pastoral care with one another.

These relationships are multiple: self with God, self with oneself, self with the community, and self with the world beyond the church community. Ministry serves communion. Ministry is not authentic when it becomes self-serving. Ministers who are relational recognize a mutuality of interchange by offering competent and compassionate care to those who want the particular service offered. Ministers do not create dependency on their services. Rather, they strive to create a network of caring relationships within a community that can operate without the minister directing and controlling everything. They use their institutional and personal power for the up-building of the community and take responsibility for maintaining the safety and the boundaries for those who seek their care.

An intriguing issue around lay ecclesial ministry is whether or not the minister's call is to serve the church, the diocese, or the local parish. The most recent study of lay ministry published by the National Pastoral Life Center, done by David DeLambo, indicates that many lay ecclesial ministers are invited into ministry by their pastor or another local priest who knows them. Paul Wilkes states, "Lay workers do not consider themselves merely interchangeable contract laborers for hire. They are deeply and specifically committed to the parish in which they work, which is usually the parish in which they worship and in which their children may be educated."¹⁸ This finding is somewhat troubling. Is perhaps the sense of call as encouraged or even initiated by a local pastor too dependent on a single parish community and on a personal relationship with a single priest or other local minister?

Women who may have been out of the work force while their children were young are more likely to lose their sense of competency beyond the home. The recognition of their gifts for ministry—through their volunteer work in the parish by serving on committees or participating in one program or another—can be very encouraging and affirming and

draw women into ministry as they receive more preparation for and experience in the ministry. More than one lay ecclesial minister, however, has failed to survive a change of pastor when his or her ministry in the parish depended on a personal relationship with the previous pastor.

While it is understandable that lay ecclesial ministers may not wish to relocate to another part of the state or country, for example, can they be encouraged to grow into a sense of church that extends beyond their own parish? Some lay ecclesial ministers have earned a master's or doctoral degree, and have held leadership positions in diocesan offices. The experience they acquire in one church position (as chancellor, financial officer, canon lawyer, faith formation director, youth ministry director, and so on) is more easily transferable to another parish or diocese than for those who do not share the same level of education. One's level of professional experience and educational background profoundly affect ministerial identity and one's vision of whom one is called to serve within the church.

Professionalization

Because ministry is both professional as well as charismatic, it requires dedication to professional growth through theological and pastoral study beyond the period of initial formation. Contracts and compensation for lay ecclesial ministers should include church-funded opportunities for workshops, in-service education, and additional course work. Shared Scripture study in a supportive community is often a very helpful way of cultivating a deepening understanding of Scripture both personally and professionally. Such Scripture study can help the minister internalize a gospel vision of ministry.

Ministry Supervision

Formation programs need to include courses in the ethics of ministry, and church employers should encourage the use of a ministry supervisor. A ministry supervisor's role is not so much onsite mentoring or supervision of the minister's performance of assigned areas (although this is also very important). Instead, this supervision is a confidential, one-on-one relationship in which the pastoral minister can process challenging or troubling interactions with staff and people to whom they minister, so as to sort out the psychological issues from the minister's past that may get stirred up, or to help to interpret the transference and

counter-transferential reactions in ways that support more competent ministry. This relationship with a supervisor is one way of coping with the unavoidable frustrations in ministry that are particularly difficult.

Spiritual Direction and Retreats

Finally, spiritual direction can assist the minister in a personalized way with growth in prayer, awareness of religious experience, reflection on interior movements, and the guidance offered by the Holy Spirit. Opportunity for an annual week-long retreat or two shorter periods of retreat should also be an employment benefit. Lay ministers may not be able to afford either the cost or the time for a retreat. If retreats are encouraged and expected for clergy and religious, they are needed just as much, if not more, by lay ministers. Extended retreat times often restore one's perspective, deepen one's relationship with God and sense of calling, and refresh one's body and spirit. Retreats allow time for discernment about particularly challenging situations and often help in restoring balance and reconnecting with God in a deeper way than may be possible in the midst of family and ministry.

Coping with Conflict

While the development and official recognition of lay ecclesial ministry is surely cause for rejoicing, lay ecclesial ministry is not universally accepted throughout the country in the same way. Power and authority within the church continues to be linked to ordination. Members of the clerical system today manifest differing ecclesiologies; differing liturgical preferences; differing attitudes about the role of laity, especially women, in ministry; and differing theologies of priesthood and ministry. As a result, many lay ecclesial ministers find themselves in conflict within the church.

The final issue I wish to address is preparing lay ministers for suffering and conflict within the church. Many who comment on Vatican II recognize that it takes a hundred years to implement an ecumenical council, and that we are only halfway there. Lay ministry and the affirmation of the women's contribution in the church were clearly significant theological and pastoral breakthroughs. These breakthroughs occurred within the larger paradigm shifts initiated by Vatican II and developments since the council, such as the preferential option for the poor from Medellín, a robust development in the social teachings of the church; and the need

to reinterpret our understanding of the creation in response to the new cosmology. As Kenan Osborne so aptly describes in his book on lay ministry, when the laity who were deposed gradually over many centuries in the church are rapidly repositioned, the clergy feel as if they are being deposed.¹⁹

Jon Sobrino devotes an entire chapter in his *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* to the topic of conflict in the church. His analysis is loving, courageous, and compassionate. He recognizes both the sinfulness of members within the church and the reality of conflict caused by "the newness willed by God for the church expressed in Vatican II and in Medellín."²⁰ We are still in the process of receiving and rejecting these developments and everything in between. These conflicting interpretations of Vatican II and subsequent developments are a major root of much conflict in the church today. All groups within the church—laity, clergy, hierarchy, and members of religious institutes—are on different sides of many issues. On the one hand, Sobrino suggests this is simply human nature. On the other hand, he acknowledges that "the most acute element of conflictuality is to be found in the difficulty of honestly maintaining the fundamental novelty of Vatican II and Medellín in the face of the ever present danger of involution that would put them both to a thousand kinds of death."²¹ The conversion in thought and behavior required for the full implementation of the reform and renewal of the church is very hard for everyone.

In order to cope with such conflict gracefully, Sobrino proposes a spirituality of conflict which includes four basic principles encompassing both attitudes and behaviors of dealing with conflict and attempting to resolve conflicts in a way consonant with the Gospel. Without summarizing all of these principles, let me simply note that he sees conflict as a reality in the church and as inevitable. This reality requires a love for truth and neither denial of differences nor attempts to ignore it. At the same time, some members within a faith community may need to place their faith in God alone, and in the Spirit who is the ultimate norm and guide of the church, while living from a hope for church unity. A spirituality of conflict is opposed to the use of sheer force as the ultimate means of resolving conflict. Parties in conflict need to be willing to try to identify the issue correctly and engage in honest dialogue. Holiness is required as the ultimate means, but resolution from this approach historically takes a long time. Genuine humility and self-examination are appropriate dispositions. Ultimately, the criteria of verification are supplied by God's Spirit in the church's becoming more clearly a wit-

ness to the Gospel, appearing more like Jesus in his life and his death. And finally, conflict is reducible to love. "Within and without conflict, a member of the church should have great love for God and Jesus, for the poor, and for the reign of God."²²

Conclusion

The advent of lay ecclesial ministry under the sway of God's Spirit is, indeed, cause for rejoicing. It is also one of the marks of novelty initiated by Vatican II. The bishops welcome it and affirm it, yet like all the developments heralded by Vatican II, this enthusiasm is not necessarily universal. Innovators and pioneers in lay ministry deserve the support and the formation that will enable them to serve communion in the church for the long haul. In turn, they will continue to deeply enrich the church by their particular expertise, their specifically lay spirituality, and their integrated ministerial identity.

Reflection Questions

1. Ruffing points out that *lay spiritualities* are often marked by concerns about family life and efforts to maintain jobs and careers. How can lay ecclesial ministers who are committed to the ongoing development of their spiritual lives bring a distinctive perspective to ministry, a perspective that enriches ecclesial ministry by complementing the spiritual and ministerial outlooks of vowed religious men and women and clergy?
2. From your perspective, what are the most important spiritual formation needs of those preparing to become lay ecclesial ministers? How can and should the church support the ongoing spiritual formation of lay ecclesial ministers?
3. How can lay ecclesial ministers be prepared spiritually to deal with conflicts about issues of power, authority, and ministerial responsibility? How might dealing with such conflicts in healthy ways contribute to the ongoing evolution of ministry in the church today?

Notes

1. USCCB, Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 2005), 9.

2. Zeni Fox, *New Ecclesial Ministry: Lay Professionals Serving the Church* (Franklin WI: Sheed and Ward, 2002), 32.
3. *Ibid.*, 32.
4. David DeLambo, *Lay Parish Ministry: A Study of Emerging Leadership* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 2005), 73, quoted in Paul Wilkes, "A Prediction Fulfilled," *America* (February 27, 2006): 13.
5. USCCB, Co-Workers, 38.
6. *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, 350-440 (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1987).
7. Since 1999, the Lilly Endowment's Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation has sponsored programs in eighty-eight U.S. colleges and universities. See John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006) as representative of the recognition for the pressing need to development vocational awareness within the Christian community beyond specifically ecclesial vocations.
8. Thirty percent of white adults in the United States have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 49 percent of Asians, 17 percent of blacks and 12 percent of Hispanics. Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, "Election 2008: A Practical Resource," <http://www.sistersofmercy.org/images/stories/documents/resources/electionresource.pdf> (accessed March 2, 2011):11.
9. Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peters, 2002), 21.
10. Edward C. Sellner, "Lay Spirituality," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, in Michael Downey, ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 593.
11. Co-Workers, 39.
12. Kees Waaijan, *Spirituality*, 23.
13. Sellner, 593-94.
14. *Ibid.*, 594.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Co-Workers, 38.
17. The section that follows is based on Lawrence S. Cunningham and Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 9-11.
18. Wilkes, "A Prediction Fulfilled," 13.
19. Kenan Osborne, *Ministry: Lay Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993).
20. Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 145.
21. *Ibid.*, 146.
22. *Ibid.*, 149.