



Working in God's Vineyard, Celebrating the People of God

"The Laity's call to holiness is a gift from the Spirit. Their response is a gift to the Church and to the world." – United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium"

A call comes into the rectory office with information about the death of a parishioner. The parish receptionist takes down the information and calls the coordinator for the Ministry of Consolation with the details. The coordinator sets a process into action – someone from the ministry team calls the family to offer condolences on behalf of the entire parish community and to arrange to visit the family. Another member meets with the family to plan the funeral liturgy – the readings, the participants and their roles, the hymns to be sung – and then provides this information to the priest who will lead the Mass. A fourth minister leads the prayers at the wake service and offers words of encouragement and consolation to the many persons paying their respects. When it is time for the funeral Mass, family and friends of the deceased are greeted by two or three other team members who may act as Ministers of Hospitality, Lectors, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion or altar servers.

Or, a young woman rings the rectory doorbell and says to the parish receptionist that she is interested in becoming Catholic – what does she have to do? That very day, the young woman receives a call from the parish's RCIA coordinator who invites her to an "inquiry meeting" later that week. At this meeting, the coordinator introduces the young woman to two parishioners. Together they invite her into conversation about what brought her to this point in her life and begin to nurture the seed of faith that has started to grow in her. Another person brings in some refreshments for the group to share and discusses dates for future meetings.

What do all of these parish ministers have in common? They are all lay persons; people who Pope Benedict XVI said "must no longer be viewed as 'collaborators' of the clergy but truly recognized as 'co-responsible', for the Church's being and action, thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity."

The fact is that lay persons serve their parishes in a variety of ways, usually volunteering their precious time and giving generously of their many talents. They are visible when they minister at Sunday Mass as lectors, choir members, altar servers and ministers of communion.

They also serve in many ways that are not so visible, such as on parish pastoral, finance and school councils, as volunteers in parish youth ministry programs, on baptismal preparation teams, working in or providing meals for the parish's homeless shelter, coordinating the St. Vincent DePaul Society, visiting the sick and homebound, leading prayer and bible study groups, advocating for handicapped persons or immigrant groups, reaching out to the poor, homeless and hungry in the community and in so many other diverse ways.

With confidence we are able to say that this Church that we love could not exist without the many dedicated lay persons who give of themselves often at great personal cost.

For these and many other reasons, Lay Ministry Sunday is celebrated annually in the Diocese of Brooklyn on the Sunday prior to Ash Wednesday. This is a day to affirm and celebrate God's call to all the baptized to use their gifts in service to others and to the Church. Parishes may take advantage of this Sunday to acknowledge both the sanctity of God's call and the generous response of lay ministers.

While all of the laity are gifted for service, some are called to leadership and still others become commissioned lay pastoral leaders by completing the diocesan lay formation program that is sponsored by the Pastoral Institute. This program, known as the Lay Ministry Program, prepares lay persons to be volunteer coordinators or team members for a particular parish ministry. Participants in the three-year program take part in theology classes, spiritual reflection days, ministry preparation and mentoring.

Classes are held in various parts of the Diocese with a new group of participants accepted each September. Participants must be nominated by their Pastor or Administrator, usually during the spring. Interested persons are invited to attend one of two Information Sessions scheduled for early April. Registration forms for the Information sessions as well as additional information about the Lay Ministry Program are available from the Pastoral Institute's website at http://www.dioceseofbrooklyn.org/pastoral_inst/lay.aspx.

Lay Ministry Sunday is an opportunity for the entire Church of Brooklyn and Queens to acknowledge and thank all lay persons who freely give to their parishes. May it also encourage others to help and serve by becoming commissioned lay pastoral leaders for their parish.

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