NEW PARISH MINISTERS
THEOLOGICAL, PASTORAL &
CANONICAL REFLECTIONS

- FOR INSTRUCTORS ONLY -

The National Pastoral Life Center recently completed a study of the growing number of lay people and religious working full-time as ministers on parish staffs. A generation ago, priests occupied such positions exclusively. We have asked a theologian, a bishop, and a canon lawyer to reflect on this development as described in our book, New Parish Ministers, and to suggest from their perspectives implications for the future of parish life and ministry.

—THE EDITORS

Georgia Masters Keightley
ECCLESIOLOGY
IN PRACTICE

The Second Vatican Council’s Lumen gentium affirmed that the church is comprised of both divine and human elements. Theologians have argued that failure to give due regard to either element will result in a distorted view of the church. To speak of the Christian assembly, then, in exclusively biblical or doctrinal language presumes the church to be “so absolutely unique in character that it can be understood only in its own private language” (James Gustafson). On the other hand, to focus entirely on the church’s social or institutional reality provides just as limited a vision.

From the standpoint of the lay theologian, too many ecclesiologies tend toward the abstract and do not reflect what the church essentially is: the sociohistorical result of women’s and men’s response to God’s Word and Spirit. While New Parish Ministers studies one aspect of the church’s visible side, it also presents a remarkable opportunity to consider the degree to which theological reflection about the church coincides with its actual practice and self-realization by the baptized. In addition to providing a major study of the development of lay ministry, this report yields critical insights for a theology of the local church. These relate to the four themes that emerge from an analysis of the data, those that show the church to be increasingly local, lay, ministerial, and feminine in character. What are the implications for ecclesiology that pertain to each of these four developments?

A Local Dimension
Since Vatican II, theologians have focused their attention on the local church. In most instances, however, the diocesan church has been the subject of their scrutiny and study. By contrast, New Parish Ministers underscores that for laity it is the parish that provides the primary experience of church; it is this eucharistic assembly that is formative; it is this experience of community that is formative to their lives as believers.

Above all, the report makes clear that ministry itself is a thoroughly local, parochial affair. It highlights the extent to which ministry is an activity that is always done both in and for some specific community of believers. In other words, ministry is ever directed to the building up of the church of a certain time and place. For this reason, ministry’s basic contours will always be reflective of the special needs as well as of the unique gifts present within the individual assembly. That report notes the growing role played by the parish council, “the increasing involvement of parishioners in determining the staff positions to be filled and in the search and screening process of hiring staff” (pp. 88; 41).

One of the more striking facts presented is the relatively limited role played by the episcopal office in the development of ministers and ministries in relation to the parishes surveyed. Chapter 5 begins with the observa-

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tion: “All involved in the emergence of these new ministers will cite the leadership and disposition of the pastor as perhaps the single most significant factor.” Because canon law gives pastors “considerable autonomy,” they have “enormous freedom regarding the ministries and structures of the parish.” The chapter concludes, “almost all of the developments of parish ministry, then depend on the judgment and initiative of pastors...” (p. 55).

Chapter 10, which examines the role of the diocese, confirms that its involvement tends to be purely administrative. Yet even here such things as personnel issues and the training and certification of ministers are frequently left to parishes; in these cases, too, the pastor finds himself largely free of episcopal oversight and direction (p. 106).

Perhaps what is most important here is the natural, implicit connection shown to exist between community and ministry. Approximately nine out of ten lay persons were reported to have been active as parish volunteers first, before shifting to a more formal status. Almost half of them “indicated that the pastor’s personal invitation was one of their reasons for entering church ministry” (p. 35). Actually, pastors prefer tapping parishioners to be ministers because of their pre-existing knowledge of the local community and its people, and because of their own personal commitment to it. The practice bears good fruit, if one can judge by the study’s finding that the greatest impact such lay ministers make on a parish is their ability “to make parishioners feel at home” and welcome.

Beyond the capacity to foster a spirit of community within the parish, lay ministers are also adept at getting parishioners more involved in the parish’s life and work. This in turn can result—and usually does—in a deepening of faith and a “commitment to its consequences” (p. 78).

One negative factor, but one which also confirms the inherently local character of ministry, is the tension created when new clergy are assigned to a parish. The report observes that frequently priests had to adjust to the reality that “sometimes the other ministers were more competent than they in various areas, enjoyed better relationships among staff and with parishioners, and were more popular” (p. 61). The report also remarks on the sometimes odd-man-out status of the associate pastor; he, too, must compete with the pastor and the other ministers for parishioner loyalty; at the same time, the lay minister’s presence and expertise can undermine or even threaten his own relationship with the pastor (p. 63).

**NEW PARISH MINISTERS**

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A Lay Dimension

Past ecclesiologies placed disproportionate emphasis on the agency of the hierarchy in giving the church a historical reality and presence. Even now, lay interests and the uniquely lay experience of being the church are rarely the subject of the theologian’s reflection. In reporting on the recent developments in church ministry, however, *New Parish Ministers* succeeds in directing attention to the parochial church’s essential lay character.

It does so, first of all, by providing a close-up look at the life and activity of the local Christian community. The ordinary—and everyday—works of the parish are here identified and named. Included among them: visiting the sick and homebound, counseling the bereaved, social service work, catechesis and the various activities having to do with evangelization, the conscious outreach to special populations, such as the young and the elderly. The point here, of course, is that these tasks are done mainly by laity, both as ministers and as parishioners. Thus, one cannot fail to notice that the local church acquires a vital presence and reality primarily in and through the action of the ordinary baptized Catholic lay person. Of course, the influential role of lay ministers in the promotion and direction of these activities is not to be missed. While *New Parish Ministers* in no way ignores the liturgy’s central place, it shows the local church to have a range of concerns and involvements that go beyond those associated with worship.
and the sacraments, that is, with those things that fall strictly under the purview of clergy. In truth, most of the parish's time and energies revolve around tasks dedicated to building up the community itself (for example, religious education, Bible study, spiritual counseling) or to those efforts that support its missionary outreach to the world. While pastors and other clergy play a role, it is largely what engages lay interest and concern that determines the actual direction and content of parish life.

As noted, the parish's lay character makes itself evident in the decisions parish councils make about the directions parish ministry will take, in their collaborative decisions about who will serve as ministers. More important, the report explains that because laity "bring a different set of perspectives and conditions of life to the exercise of ministry than do priests and religious" (p. 10), the result has been the dramatic expansion of parish ministry in order to meet the new needs of parishioners. Today's ministries include promoting "support and sociability among the elderly and young adults, advocacy and organizing among the poor and near poor, healing groups for the bereaved and the separated and divorced" (p. 10).

In particular, the report shows that lay ministers themselves enhance parish sensitivities to lay concerns, such as "those of family, of the elderly and of women in general" (p. 11). If that is true, then the church should be careful about any "clericalizing" of the laity, which would not only bring a loss of such sensibilities to parish leadership but also lead to a circumscription of ministry that would hamper the local church's ability to be fully what it is, serving both its mission and its people well.

what it is, when ministry does become the concern and work of the entire community.

As New Parish Ministers shows, however, this broader approach to ministry—particularly as the conciliar ecclesiology is translated into practice—has generated a plethora of questions. And it is precisely in the parish context that the many questions the report identifies originally present themselves.

What, for example, is the best means for the community to discern the rich diversity of gifts possessed by its members? What sort of enabling, authorization of the charismata, is appropriate and/or necessary? What type of preparation ought to be required of lay ministers? To this end, the study cites the danger of overly professionalizing ministry; yet it also questions the wisdom of permitting the different ministries to remain on a strictly charismatic, informal basis. The report also suggests that in requiring some sort of preparatory training for its ministers, the parish can no longer discriminate between those preparing for ordination and those preparing for service as laity. Rather, the community must be ready to commit itself to the whole-hearted, sustained support, moral and financial, of all those who minister in and on its behalf.

The study shows that as laity have become active participants, Christian ministry becomes firmly cast in the light of service rather than the exercise of authority or power. This shift, however, increasingly calls into question the relationship existing between the ministry of the ordinary baptized and that of the ordained. For instance, the report indicates that today's lay ministers demonstrate leadership, they serve the many different needs of parishioners, they provide spiritual counseling and advice. Indeed, the summary lists provided on pages 90-91 indicate the great extent to which activities of lay and clergy now overlap. Furthermore, the study notes that while lay ministers "are already doing what
people want them to do,” parishioners are quite open “to much more involvement” by them (p.78). Clearly the contributions of this group to local church life are both substantial and gratefully received. But again, this only serves to press the difficult question: how does what laity do differ from the work of the clergy? How is theirs a ministry that differs in essence and not just degree as the council asserted (LG #10)? The point is, of course, that practically speaking, this difference is simply neither evident nor obvious.

As a corollary, the report lays challenge to past thinking about the integral relation that pertains between celibacy and the vows to church ministry. The report shows that the majority of lay ministers are married and have families, yet they also devote themselves full-time to the work of the church. No less than those of clergy and religious, their lives are also marked by a spirit of self-sacrifice and dedication. This is borne out by the accounts of low pay, lack of adequate benefits, and long, demanding work hours that pit personal commitments against parish needs.

At the same time, the report shows that lay ministers sometimes find themselves in conflict with their clerical supervisors. Of greater concern is the finding that lay ministers currently find themselves at the margins of the church’s ministerial community. Structures currently in place are insufficient to supply the sort of formation, support, and integration that lay ministers actually need (p.11). The study recommends this as the area most deserving of episcopal action and attention.

A last point: New Parish Ministers confirms that current understandings of Christian ministry have generated considerable debate about just what sorts of activity are actually ministerial. Does this term apply only to those forms of service directed to worship or to the equipping of the church for mission? What about those forms of service oriented to the world which the ordinary baptized perform? Do they also come under the rubric of ministry? Although the study addresses itself to ad intra ministries in the main, it implicitly underlines the diagonal character of the Christian’s life in the world and presents this as being an increasingly critical issue for the church today. As lay sensibilities are heightened and lay involvement in parish life increases, parishes need to be aware of their responsibility to encourage and prepare parishioners for Christian service to the world.

There is growing appreciation that pastoral ministry must adequately support “people’s attempts to live the Christian life in their families, communities, and work places,” in addition to their lives as citizens and consumers (p. 10). On the other hand, the report acknowledges that this is an aspect of parish life that is deficient, that there is need then to redouble community efforts on this score.

A Feminine Dimension

One of the more interesting finds of New Parish Ministers is its assertion that lay ministry has become the unofficial preserve of the church’s women, lay and religious alike. The study reports that 85 percent of the new ministers are women (p.27), that slightly more than half of these are lay (58 percent), the remainder (42 percent) are women religious. While the reasons for this feminization of ministry are mainly economic, these statistics are nonetheless significant in that they conflict with widely accepted beliefs about women’s place in the church, especially with those views that surfaced during the recent debate over the proposed pastoral letter on women.

The first draft of the pastoral letter “Partners in the Mystery of Redemption,” for example, cites women as believing that their gifts are rarely accepted and/or empowered by clergy, that they have little or no role in the shaping of church life, that there is no place for them as advisers, that there is no forum for their voices to be heard. In particular, paragraph #188 citing the alienation young Catholic women feel, speaks of the unwillingness of this group “to stand back and wait until the church (acknowledges) equality and the feminine dimension of ministry” (italics mine). Others said progress for women would depend on the day “when people see a church where men interact successfully with women, as for example in team ministry, on parish committees and in a variety of educational and apostolic settings” (italics mine).

New Parish Ministers, however, presents evidence to challenge these claims. It substantiates that in the area of lay ministry, women have indeed been chosen and empowered for service both by their pastors and their communities, that in many areas, their advice is sought, their experience and expertise highly regarded. Laywomen are also shown to lead, empower others, teach, counsel, serve at the altar. Furthermore, their active pres-
ence in parish life is changing the very patterns, dynamics, and quality of lay-clergy relationships. In short, there is much evidence that women's contributions are not only accepted but highly valued and esteemed.

The question is then: How is one to explain the discrepancy between these facts and the popular perception, expressed in the testimony given the bishops? Is it the case that for women, change is not happening rapidly enough at the local level, that conflict with pastors is more problematic than the report reveals? Or are there other factors remaining to be identified that obstruct or deter women from parish service? Or is the clue to be found in the composition implied to exist between laywomen and women religious? After all, this is the one arena in which both groups have been able to seek new opportunities in the church; and, as the report concedes, almost half of the pastors interviewed prefer to hire women religious—and not a few by reason of the sisters' lower salary demands. While laywomen constitute just over half of the lay ministers, the number of women religious—given their overall total—clearly fill a disproportionate number of ministerial positions.

Because of the ecclesiological implications as well as the practical consequences for church mission, this gap—between what many women perceive to be true and the reality women ministers know—is deserving of careful reflection and discernment. New Parish Ministers provides grounds for arguing that it not so much the feminization of ministry but the clericalizing of women (rather than of the entire laity, as is so often presumed!) that is occurring. Such clericalization is symptomatic of the failure of both laity and clergy to appreciate the true religious value, the spiritual dignity, and worth of the lay life and vocation. At the least, this discrepancy dramatically attests to women's search for a meaningful identity and place in Catholic life goes as yet unfulfilled.

At the same time, the absence of laymen enlisted in its service ought to be of grave concern to the local church. While there are obvious economic reasons for this (see Appendix A), it is worth noting that this void coincides with the study's finding that a sensitivity to men's concerns and the ability to get them involved in parish life are two areas where parish efforts are unsuccessful. The inability to address men's spiritual needs and interests suggests perhaps that parishes have become too inward and too narrowly concerned with their own subsistence. Conversely, it argues that those issues related to the laity's proper responsibility, the life of the world and its evangelization, go mostly unattended. But this, after all, is where most men's lives are engaged and focused. Can one conclude then that the presence/absence of laymen in local church life presents a reliable criterion for measuring the degree to which parishes address social concerns, life in public, and Catholic responsibility for the common good?

On this point, it is worth noting that Paul VI's Ministeria quaedam, which was an important step in opening up the church's ministry to laity, implies that, ideally, service within the church should always have its corollary in some form of service outside the church. In citing the absence of men in lay ministry, the report implies that in many parishes, this link has either been broken or has never been established. Again, New Parish Ministers argues that this failure to make the parish a context where the relationship between contemporary life and faith is a matter of ongoing reflection and dialogue merits serious consideration and positive action on the part of the whole church.

While New Parish Ministers presents a study of ministry as practiced by the U.S. Catholic community, it also yields important insights for ecclesiology. My purpose has been to identify some of these and, in doing so, to recommend the value of empirical studies like this one to the theologian. At the same time, I would argue that there is much more to be gleaned in this report and would encourage other theologians to give it the benefit of their own careful scrutiny.

Thomas J. Murphy

SHARED MINISTRY

If there is one word that describes the life of the Roman Catholic Church over the past three decades, it is the word "change." Such change is obvious in the efforts made to connect what the church teaches with the daily lives of people, as the church confronts a world experiencing new advances in every field of human endeavor. Change especially touches peoples' lives in the worship that brings people together. That worship recognizes the full, active, and conscious participation of all people in liturgical celebrations.

However, one of the most profound changes taking place in the church is the development of new parish ministries, those ministries religious and lay people offer to the parish community. What was once the exclusive responsibility of the ordained priest has become a shared ministry that has given the church a new vitality.

New Trends in Parish Life

New Parish Ministers, the recent study conducted by the National Pastoral Life Center, reveals much about this significant development within the church, a develop-

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