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Our primary
vocation is the
call to Christian
discipleship rooted
in baptism.

TODAY'S PARISH LEADER

OPENING

*Pause for a moment and place yourself in
the presence of God.* READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-7

Your ministry is a vocation!

JENNIFER L.S. BADER

In the Catholic Church in the United States we are living in an unprecedented situation, in which the number of lay ministers in parishes is growing at a remarkable rate; we are looking backward on the 30,000 mark. Given this reality, the United States bishops in their 2005 document on lay ministry, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, called for more study of the connection between vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, to call) and lay ministry. Because lay ministry is a relatively new reality in the history of the church, this study cannot go on without intentional theological reflection by lay ministers. Vocation and lay ministry are very much lived realities. Thus I invite you to reflect on the connection between vocation and ministry in your own life and to consider some thoughts proposed here to see if they resonate with your own experience.

The meaning of the word "vocation" has changed over time. In traditional Catholic circles, the word "vocation" has often been used to describe the



call to priesthood and vowed religious life. In the world in which my mother grew up, one was expected to discern whether one had a vocation or not. If so, one went to seminary or joined a religious order. If not, one got married and continued living as a lay person.

The Second Vatican Council gave marriage the status of vocation, along with priesthood and religious life. This was, at the time, a great step forward, in that the church recognized the dignity of married life in a way not previously done in a tradition that valued priesthood and religious life over marriage and life in the world. By elevating marriage to the status of a vocation, the church recognized some important characteristics common to

priesthood, the life of vowed religious men and women, and married life.

- For one thing, they are permanent life choices.
- Second, they are paths to holiness; that is, they are ways of living out discipleship.
- Third, they involve vows of commitment in making life choices and making sacrifices to remain true to those life choices.

For the Council, these three elements served to define the nature of vocation.

However, at the same time, the Second Vatican Council spoke about the universal call to holiness of all the baptized. That seemed to link vocation more immediately and directly to Christian discipleship. This is an understanding of vocation more reminiscent of the very early church, when the choice to be a Christian was made as an adult and involved baptismal promises (vows of commitment), a permanent life

choice, and much personal sacrifice in a political society that often persecuted Christians.

Two ways to understand vocation

So it seems that, coming out of the Second Vatican Council, there could be two ways to go with our understanding of vocation and its connection to lay ministry in the church. If we focus on the first understanding of vocation—drawing out the implications of seeing marriage, vowed religious life, and priesthood as vocation—the question about lay ministry that arises is whether lay ministry actually qualifies as a vocation.

- Is lay ministry a permanent life choice?
- Is it a path to holiness?
- Does it involve making sacrifices to stay true to that life choice?

My guess is that if I were to ask a group of lay ministers these questions, I would get very few simple yes or no answers.

The second approach to considering the nature of vocation is to identify vocation with the universal call to holiness proper to all Christians by virtue of our baptism. In other words, we could understand our primary vocation as the call to Christian discipleship rooted in baptism. In this sense lay ministry can be designated as vocation to the extent that it is an expression of the minister's call to discipleship.

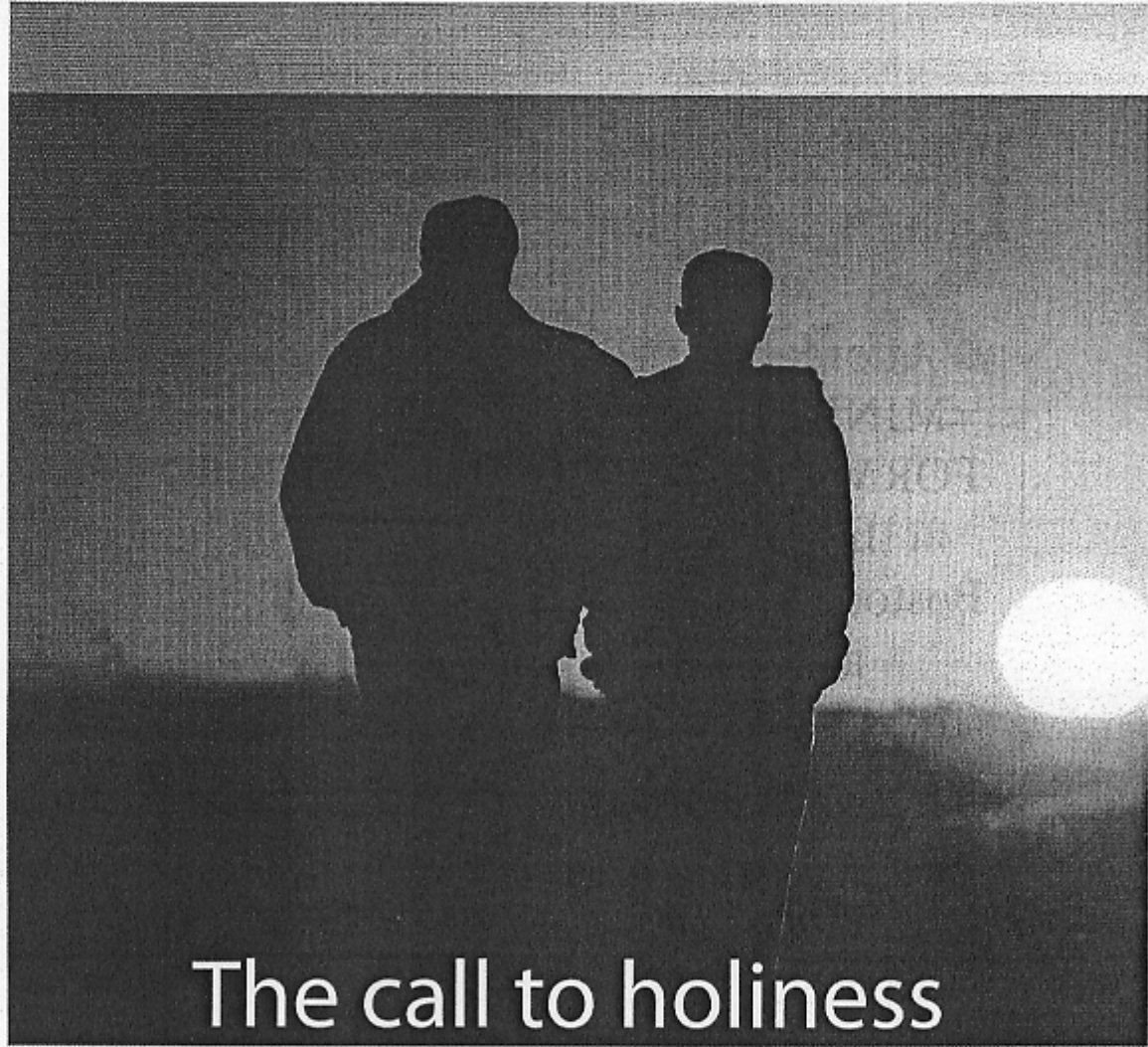
At first glance this may seem like a significant change in—even a re-definition of—our understanding of vocation. I'd like to suggest that it is not so radical. First, as I mentioned above, this understanding of vocation has its roots in the earliest Christian communities; from their example we embrace Christian discipleship as a life choice. This is true whether we were baptized as infants or adults. At some point in our lives, we need to choose it for ourselves. Second, this understanding of vocation as the universal call to holiness recognizes that Christian discipleship, as our response to God's call to holiness, is a path to holiness. Third, this is not an easy path. We live in a society and culture that is often opposed to

REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

- Reflect on the ministry or ministries with which you have been involved.
- Is there a sense in which you feel called to this ministry?
- In what way does your participation in this ministry enhance your faith and your commitment to the church?
- Does this ministry fit the gifts that you have?

the living out of gospel values. Christian discipleship involves both commitment and risk—and often making sacrifices to remain true to it.

Of course, this understanding of vocation moves away from an exclusive identification of marriage, priesthood, religious life—and lay ministry—with vocation. Instead these become ways of living out one's vocation to Christian discipleship. One might even call them secondary vocations—calls that are secondary to the universal call to holiness of all the baptized. In this way, these paths to holiness are still honored as vocations, but they are not considered the only vocations. Instead vocation is opened up to all Christians, regardless of their state of life, and multiple ways of living out that special call are honored. These multiple ways of living the universal call to holiness—these secondary vocations—are reflective of the gifts of each person and responsive to the needs of the church and the world. Fredrick Buechner's famous definition of vocation is that which "you need most to do, and...[what] the world most needs to have done....The place God calls you to is the place



The call to holiness

When we speak of the People of God,
we mean all the Christian faithful,
whether lay, ordained, or in religious life.

All are part of the church
and each has a certain role to play
in order to build up the community.
All share a common dignity and equality
under Christ,
who reveals Divine Love to us
completely.

Hence, diversity of ministry serves the
common good.

To bishops who succeed the apostles,
are given the roles of teaching,
sanctifying,
and servant leadership.

To lay people, is given a share in the
priestly,
prophetic,
and royal office of Christ...

When we say that lay people share
in the

"priestly office of Christ"

we mean that they are called to
holiness

in every aspect of life.

In their work and in their household life,
in play and recreation,
in raising children and serving
others,

all are called to be holy.

And especially when they celebrate the
Eucharist,

lay people consecrate the world,
that is, they make the world holy

because they live in Divine Love.

From The Growing Faith Project booklet 19: "Who Is the Church?" based on articles 871-945 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Visit growingfaithproject.com for a complete list of titles and topics.

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Thus within the vocation to Christian discipleship—the universal call to holiness—each of us is called to live and work in such a way that our gifts are honored and the world's needs are served. This call is unique to each person. In this definition, lay ministry would be a secondary vocation, that is, one very important way of living the baptismal call to Christian discipleship, as are priesthood, marriage, and religious life. But there are others, and all ways would be equally honored within the Christian community. The man who understands his vocation as bringing an awareness of justice and corporate responsibility to his work environment, the scientist who understands her discovery of the world that God has created as contributing to the advance of human progress, the parent who understands the joyous and challenging work of raising children as a contribution to their welfare and that of the church and the world, the lay minister whose gifts lie in adult faith formation or social justice ministry, and the priest who leads the community in worship—all are living their baptismal vocation to Christian discipleship.

Understanding vocation as tied to baptism has consequences regarding how we understand leadership and ministry in the church. It equalizes vocation in that it makes it inclusive of all the baptized. As religious educator Thomas Groome puts it, "Regardless of what people's particular vocation in life might be, we must reclaim 'vocation' as an inclusive term. The Holy Spirit calls and gifts every baptized person to employ his or her God-given talents with the conscious commitment of Christian faith for the realization of God's reign in the Church and the world." While ministry—ordained and lay—is important in its own

FOR YOUR OWN FAITH

→ In what ways does this essay enhance or challenge your understanding of vocation and of lay ministry? Does it make a difference if you understand your ministry as an expression of your vocation?

FOR YOUR MINISTRY

→ How do you encourage people to understand Christian discipleship as a vocation and invite them, when they are ready, to make that life choice, either implicitly or explicitly?

→ Do you and other ministers in your parish intentionally notice and point out gifts as they arise from members of the community? How do you help people to understand their unique gifts as signs of vocation in service to God and the community?

right, understanding vocation as tied to baptism means that the responsibility for leadership in the church and in the world is the responsibility of all of us.

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