Changes in Ministry
A View from the Frontier

Robert Dalton

The author, an experienced observer of rural Catholicism, discusses the manifold consequences of the declining numbers of ordained ministers to serve in parish ministry. He suggests that the lack of access to regular eucharistic celebrations is but one small piece of the transformation which is happening within American Catholicism. The hope is that with proper pastoral planning a new, mission-centered Church will develop.

When Rip van Winkle awoke after twenty years of deep slumber, his village had changed and familiar landmarks were gone. Family and friends failed to recognize the bearded stranger. As a child, I failed to grasp the message of Washington Irving’s tale, which is a parable of leaving the past behind, no matter how painful the process may be, in order to face a new and promising future. The hero had slept through a revolution and the birth of a new nation. His familiar world was no more. His old companions had new values and a new agenda. They were trying to push back the frontier, settle the wilderness, and build a new nation. Rip van Winkle had much to absorb and many adjustments to make in a very short time. Like Rip, we can marvel at what has happened in the past twenty years as we slowly gain perspective on the tremendous changes in ministry in a new Church that is coming into being. Just as suddenly, we realize, like Rip, that we are living on the frontier, facing new challenges.

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My view of the Church in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century is focused by my own vocation as a priest and member of a Home Mission Community committed to “the most neglected” people of rural America where the Church is not yet effectively present. As a missionary I look at the Church from its boundaries, from the fringes. As a member of a religious community my bias is naturally with the missionary charism, which is called to push back the boundaries of the status quo.

Missionaries have a unique perspective because they live on the frontier of the Church and enjoy a view from the fringe. Being on the margin, it is easier to view life and to see the Church from the viewpoint of the marginalized. Today, the frontier of the Church is the open expanse of the heartland of the upper midwest with its declining population. Dwindling congregations, widely dispersed, fight for fiscal solvency and pray that they will continue to have ministry. Today, the frontier of the Church is often deep within the urban centers where Catholic parishes once flourished. Gothic monuments to the faith of the former residents stand empty while once-deserted storefronts shelter congregations of Pentecostals. Another borderland for our country and for our Church embraces the colonias of the Rio Grande Valley. This is a frontier of desperate poverty and government neglect. It is a region greatly in need of more missionary ministry. More proximate frontiers of missionary need to shout for our attention both in metropolitan areas and more remote rural communities.

The view from the frontier gives a different perspective from which to view the shortage of priests. A revolutionary change in ministry in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States has already taken place. Thus, care about the future must start from the recognition of the fact that the composition of pastoral ministry has already changed. Statistics show that, currently, an estimated thirty thousand lay ministers serve on parish staffs and about thirty-five thousand people are enrolled in lay ministry formation programs. Yet all is not well in parish life. More than six hundred parishes have closed in the last two years alone. Almost 2,250 parishes in the United States are functioning without a resident pastoral leader, ordained or lay, notes Virginia Stillwell elsewhere in this issue. Another troubling fact is that lay ministers are not being employed to serve poor parishes. Just as the Church has found ways in the past to fund
ministry in every parish, it must continue to find ways to address this question today (Fox, 224).

**The Cost**

Canon 517.2 of the *Code of Canon Law* authorizes a diocesan bishop to entrust participation in the pastoral care of a parish to a deacon or some other person who is not a priest when there is a *sacerdotum penuriam*, a scarcity of priests. The official English translation is a “dearth of priests,” a fascinating choice of an archaic word whose first dictionary meaning is not scarcity or want, but costliness or dearness. The translation may unconsciously point to the real issue, the cost or the price we are paying and will pay for the “dearth” of priests.

As it faces the still changing composition of pastoral ministry, the Church in the United States needs to calculate the costs of pastoral ministry for the future and devise a strategy to cover those costs. What could emerge is a new vision of Church and a new agenda for the new century. The cost, so far, has been borne primarily by inner-city and rural parishes. The wholesale closing or merging of parishes is leaving a vacuum of Catholic ministerial presence in areas of, arguably, the greatest spiritual and human need. Multiple parishes served by one pastor often means that these parishes offer very little pastoral presence or missionary outreach in the neighborhoods. There is little beyond sacramental ministry and a minimal maintenance of a Catholic presence.

What may be at stake is our very core identity as Church, stated clearly in Canon 781: “Since the entire Church is missionary by its nature and since the work of evangelization is to be viewed as a fundamental duty of the people of God, all the Christian faithful, conscious of their responsibilities in this area, are to assume their own role in missionary work.” The core problem resulting from retrenchment in urban neighborhoods and rural communities is often posed as a loss of Eucharist because of the lack of priests. Another casualty, however, is the awareness of being the people of God in this place and at this time, a people with a mission to be a sacrament of salvation in the local community. The loss of parish and the loss of community anywhere...
means that other essential elements of Church, such as evangelization and missionary presence, are missing or impoverished.

The issues, then, are not only the cost of the availability of priest personnel or the cost of maintaining expensive property. We must also raise a number of other questions: What does it mean to be Church in this place? What level of presence and ministry is appropriate here? How can the Church be missionary in this place and what form can the fundamental duty of evangelization take for the people? How can the reign of God be proclaimed among these human and spiritual needs? Commenting on the priest’s task to preach the gospel of God to all, the archbishop of Denver notes that it is no accident that churches that have lost their missionary zeal or softened the authority of Scripture are in decline, since faith that is not shared dies. In fact, for him, “maintenance mode” Christianity does not exist (Chaput, 82). For me, the operative question is how to maintain a ministry of both Word and Eucharist, Church and kingdom. The discussion surrounding the scarcity of priests has focused too narrowly on the availability of Eucharist. Crucial to Catholic life as this issue is, the Church needs to focus also on the parish as the center of ministry, outreach, and spiritual development.

I experience new hope for pastoral ministry when I visit a suburban Atlanta parish about twice a year for Sunday liturgy. The parish bulletin lists two deacons and eight paid professional ministers who help the two priests, one of whom is from Latin America, in this growing parish of more than a thousand families. Six councils or committees and forty ministries are listed, with the names of the contact persons involved. The parish has recruited and empowered its talented membership to expand the meaning of ministry and the expectations of parish life. In this typical large southern parish, lay ministry is restructuring the parish, reshaping Roman Catholic life, and fostering a new, emerging spiritual theology.

However, in contrast, there is another reality in the south where vast areas are without any Catholic presence or ministry. Many Sundays I am in small mission churches or storefront chapels where Mass is rarely offered more than twice a month. Faith is often vibrant in these mission congregations, but financial and human resources are extremely limited. Among the challenges for the Catholic
Church in the United States is awareness of the growing crisis facing our inner city and rural congregations. Awareness may renew the missionary potential which is latent within our larger congregations. A renewed missionary spirit may lead to a solidarity within dioceses, and among dioceses, leading to real sharing of resources. The challenging agenda for parishes which are flourishing is to renew missionary awareness, foster solidarity beyond parish and diocesan boundaries, and promote stewardship of their gifts of finances and lay ministry to be shared with those congregations struggling for survival.

**Formation**

Canon 231 clearly stipulates that “lay persons who devote themselves permanently or temporarily to some special service of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation which is required to fulfill their function properly.” A whole new infrastructure has been created in the last twenty years for training lay ministers. More than three hundred programs are now sponsored by dioceses, seminaries, colleges, and universities, offering a variety of degree and certificate opportunities. A question arises, however, about whether such a proliferation of programs guarantees quality preparation and the best use of limited resources. Even with this massive commitment to training for lay ministry, vast rural areas of the south and west are without the Catholic institutions to make these programs readily available. One notable response to the great need is Loyola University of New Orleans Extension Program, popularly known as LIMEX, and used by many dioceses in the region.

Extension courses, online learning, and other innovations may help alleviate the need for professional training in rural dioceses, which lack other resources. Washington Theological Union is in the early stages of developing an internship program for rural lay ministers. With the aid of a grant from the SC Ministry Foundation, this graduate school enables both students and recent alumni to experience rural pastoral ministry with supervision and guidance. At the same time, the school contributes to the ongoing theological and pastoral education of those already experienced in rural ministry.

Documents on priestly formation insist that the preparation of future priests must include spiritual and human development as well as intellectual and pastoral formation. The same principle is true for preparation for lay ministry. There is a great need for spiritual directors in the missionary areas of our country, especially directors sensitive to the nuances of spiritual growth within the challenges of lay ministry. Competency Based Certification Standards, published by the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM), are in place for the professional formation of lay ministers, but greater attention still needs to be given to a lifelong formation in lay spirituality for lay ministry.
The cost of professional degrees is often beyond the means of lay people who receive the call to ministry as a second career, and who still have family responsibilities. Some lay ministers, as they begin parish ministry, are heavily in debt upon completion of their degree program. Currently, over nine million dollars has been committed to scholarships for lay ministry formation programs. Even greater efforts need to be made to provide scholarship funds and endowments to ensure a stable future for these programs. Continued service within a sponsoring diocese or parish is a key criterion for a lay person’s eligibility for financial assistance. While understandable from the perspective of donors, this leaves the most needy parishes and dioceses, who lack financial aid programs, limited in their ability to attract adequate, professionally trained lay ministers.

**Diocesan Structures**

Bishop Matthew Clark of the diocese of Rochester made an important contribution to my vision of lay ecclesial ministry, or professional lay ministry, when he used the term diocesan ministerium in a talk at the Washington Theological Union (Clark, 676–81). All those who exercise an official ministry in the local church form part of the ministerium of that diocese, just as all ordained priests of the diocese form its presbyterate. It is a term which could have major personal and structural implications. When we speak of a ministerium, we immediately have to expand systems of communications and consultation. Recognition of lay ministry takes on a new importance by this inclusion in diocesan structures. This official inclusion in the ministry plan and vision of the diocese could be a powerful antidote for the experience of isolation and lack of security expressed by many lay ecclesial ministers.

If Bishop Clark’s proposed model of a diocesan ministerium becomes the operative model, it could mark a new era of professional equity for lay ecclesial ministers. Membership in the diocesan ministerium could mean equal access to professional development benefits, such as continuing education, retreats, spiritual direction opportunities, and sabbaticals. Lay ministers often feel insecure because they are dependent on the decisions of individual pastors or pastoral councils. Recognition as professional members of the ministerium should mean access to the standard human resource policies and practices of the diocese, including the job security that comes from contracts, job descriptions, standard evaluation and grievance procedures.

**Looking Back**

Just over the horizon of current memory, the Catholic Church in the rural south was almost nonexistent. In the fall 1989 issue of *The U.S. Catholic Historian,*
we find a statistical table for the seven small town parishes in Georgia in 1940. The Albany parish covered nineteen thousand square miles in the south, and the parish of Athens included over thirteen thousand square miles in the northern part of the state. Nine priests in six parishes attempted valiantly to cover ninety “stations” in the rural areas of the biggest state east of the Mississippi River. The smaller stations would have Mass once a month on a weekday. Many Catholics drifted away from the Church because of the infrequent contact with the sacraments. Even today, about thirty-five counties in the diocese of Savannah are without the presence of the Catholic Church.

The same pattern was repeated throughout the South. I have in my office a framed copy of a poster announcing the Mass schedule for the mountains of western North Carolina for 1947. The locations were school auditoriums, hotels, American Legion Halls, and a number of private homes. Most of the locations had Mass once a month and sometimes as infrequently as every fifth Sunday, four times a year. Fifty years later, these towns have flourishing parishes because of the initiative of those staunch lay pioneers and the heroic efforts of circuit riding priests. As the available priests become fewer and older, they rightly fear that they will again be called upon to be circuit riders, without roots or a real connection to the people they serve.

The few priests of the south were tireless in their mission efforts in those earlier days. What a different situation the Catholic Church in the rural areas of the south and west would be in today if it had the opportunity to have professionally trained lay people organizing and leading those communities, as envisioned now in Canon 517.2.

Looking Ahead

The last three decades have brought unparalleled growth in lay leadership in Catholic institutions. Parochial schools, hospitals, colleges, and Catholic social services are now predominantly lay led and staffed. Increasingly, we will need to draw upon this experience as the day-to-day pastoral care of more parishes is entrusted to lay leadership. A similar transition in mission work is now underway. We have moved from an era of mission volunteers to laity becoming the primary agents of home mission work.

About ten years ago, after several years of discussion and planning, my community, the Glenmary Home Missioners, decided to open new missions with Lay Pastoral Coordinators. From previous experience, we knew that we did not need to close mission churches because we no longer had the priests to staff them. Lay people and women religious shared our vision of reaching out to the poor and neglected of the area. They now lead the people each week in prayer, Christian celebration, and outreach. With skill and dedication, they teach the local people of our

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mission areas about Catholic Christianity and lead those interested in conversion to the Catholic faith. It was a logical step to entrust lay coordinators with the initial step of the mission process, to establish and nurture new mission congregations. In the Dioceses of Birmingham, Jackson, and Knoxville, lay pastoral coordinators have located and gathered the few Catholics living in isolated rural counties to form new faith communities where Catholic ministry was not previously present.

A few new mission congregations are the tangible result of this initiative. Perhaps the greatest result is a small core group of talented, diligent, successful, and happy lay missioners to rural America. The long-range vision would say that the charism and mission vision of the Glenmary Missioners is being preserved and passed on despite the scarcity of new members for the original community. Only the passing of time will show whether this effort is successful. In my perspective, one of the primary tasks of a religious community today is to pass on its apostolic charism and spirituality to a new generation of lay workers.

Looking Beyond Canon 517.2

Major efforts have been made in recent years to extend opportunities for Spanish language lay ministry programs. Nationally, only about 4 percent of lay parish ministers are Hispanic, according to a 1999 study by the National Pastoral Life Center (Murnion and DeLambo, 24). The rapidly growing Hispanic population demands creative responses. Seven states of the deep south, namely, North Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina, Virginia, and Alabama, have seen an increase of the Hispanic population ranging from a high of almost 400 percent to a “low” of over 200 percent in the 1990s. These are Home Mission States with limited resources. They also face phenomenal growth because of Catholic migration to the “sunbelt” from traditionally more Catholic parts of the country. At the same time, they are being served by a decreasing number of priests.

Given this great missionary opportunity and need, could one response to the Hispanic and other ethnic and language groups be the implementation of Canon 785? The canon states:

Catechists are to be employed in carrying out missionary work: catechists are those lay members of the Christian faithful who have been duly instructed, who stand out by reason of their Christian manner of life, and who devote themselves to expounding the gospel teaching and organizing liturgical functions and works of charity under the supervision of a missionary.

This suggestion is in no way meant to minimize the need for professionally trained ministers to our rapidly growing Hispanic, Haitian, or other immigrant
populations. I write from my experience as a missionary in a rural Alabama County where the Hispanic population grew by 2,400 percent during the 1990s. My strategy included developing lay leadership. More than one hundred men and women attended Cursillo weekends sponsored in Spanish by the Diocese of Birmingham. Through Cursillo, there were both dramatic personal conversion experiences and a new awareness of what it means to be Church together. Follow-up sessions in small groups fostered an ease with praying aloud in public. The diocese then sponsored the RENEW program in its Spanish version, RENACER. A new level of comfort in sharing faith with others was a result for the 125 people involved.

The Diocese of Birmingham also sponsored a School of Ministry (Escuela de Ministerio), a two-year weekend process conducted by South Eastern Pastoral Institute (SEPI) from Miami. More than two hundred people from this small community completed the program. Enthusiasm, love for the Church, emerging and recognized leadership abilities were combining to create a prayerful and evangelizing community. No one had a college education and almost none had a secondary level education, but eucharistic ministers, lectors, musicians, youth ministers, and ministers to the sick emerged, took initiative, and became responsible for their community. Each Sunday morning lay led Bible-study strained the capacity of the small parish hall but strengthened the people to respond to a perceived threat from Pentecostal evangelists.

From confidence and some basic skills came evangelism. Entirely through lay initiative, Latino lay evangelism teams from California and North Carolina filled our local community center. Remarkably, our local people realized that they could do the same thing. They organized Pescadores de Hombres (Fishers of Men) for home visitation and they organized their own evangelism team of musicians and speakers to witness to their faith to a crowded community center.

In our own way, we fulfilled the mandate of Canon 785.1: “Catechists are to be educated in schools destined for this purpose or, where such schools are lacking, under the supervision of missionaries.” We did not designate anyone with the title of “catechist,” but is it not a logical extension of our experience with Canon 517.2 to now appropriate Canon 785 to the missionary needs of our immigrant populations, our remote rural missionary regions, or our once again missionary inner-city neighborhoods?

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One of the primary tasks of a religious community today is to pass on its apostolic charism and spirituality to a new generation of lay workers.
The role of catechist as envisioned by canon law is a natural missionary development for people migrating from countries where a severe lack of priests has been a reality of church life for as long as people remember. Many of the people in the parish in Alabama came from rural areas of Mexico or Guatemala where a priest would be present only a few times a year. In that situation, faith was kept alive by lay leaders and by the abuelas (grandmothers) who preserved the faith tradition at the home altars and with the devotional life of popular religion. The culture in the United States does not support that faith tradition, and popular devotion is not often fostered by an extended family. Active proselytism by other religious groups becomes a real threat, especially when new converts to these religious traditions are quickly empowered with roles of leadership responsibility.

**Conclusion**

The growing "dearth of priests" which the Catholic Church is experiencing in the United States may prove to be a time of awareness that our country is becoming a missionary land once again. That awareness, along with the realization that thousands of people are responding generously to a vocation to lay ministry, may provide the incentive to implement the canonical solutions already available to us. Missionary awareness could also free our imagination to celebrate the ritual of Sunday Worship in the Absence of a Priest with greater freedom to be culturally sensitive and creative. Awareness leads to challenge, which just might foster greater solidarity and sharing between our more prosperous and our more needy parishes. My hope is that we see our present pastoral situation in context of the promise of the book of Revelation: “Behold I make all things new” (21:5).

**References**


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