Two intriguing articles in the May 2006 issue of *New Theology Review* pertained in different ways to the theme of vocations in the church. In “International Priests in America,” Dean R. Hoge and Aniedi P. Okure summarized and reflected on their research into the trend of priests from other countries coming to minister in the United States. Research indicates that there are currently about 5,500 such priests and that they are coming to the United States at a rate of 380 to 400 per year. Hoge and Okure explored the various reasons for this phenomenon as well as the arguments for and against the missioning of priests from outside the United States to this country. One of the reasons adduced in its favor is that “America needs immigrant priests to fill in the gaps in its priest shortage” (Hoge and Okure, 16).

The second article was authored by Bríd Long and entitled “Lay Ecclesial Ministry in the Parish.” Long chronicled the emergence of lay ecclesial ministry in the United States, and she discussed the 2005 document of the United States Bishops, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*. She noted that the number of salaried lay ecclesial ministers serving in parishes in the United States exceeded 30,000 in 2005 (Long, 6). Long perceptively explained the way in which the bishops root lay ecclesial ministry in an ecclesiology of communion: “Lay ecclesial ministry has its source in the communion of the church, rooted in the loving communion of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (Long 2006, 7). Grounded in this ecclesiology of communion, the bishops emphasize the need for collaboration among all pastoral ministers: “An ecclesiology of communion looks upon different gifts and functions not as adversarial but as enriching and complementary. It appreciates the church’s unity as an expression of the mutual and reciprocal gifts brought into harmony by the Holy Spirit” (USCCB, 21).

In their reflections, these authors point to what is broadly termed “the vocations issue” in the church today. The study on international priests ministering in the United States examines a pastoral trend attributable, at least in part, to the decline in the number of ordained presbyters in this country. Such a decline also characterizes consecrated life and is often referred to as the “vocation shortage.” At the same time, the

---

*Robin Ryan, C.P., Ph.D., the director of the Catholics on Call vocation program, teaches systematic theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.*
essay by Long shows that there is a bur-
geoing number of dedicated lay women
and men who have undertaken important
roles of service and leadership within the
Catholic community. Thus, the reality of
ecclesial vocations within the U.S. Catholic
Church is actually more complex than is
often realized by people who pray for “an
increase of vocations.”

How do we invite and mentor a new
generation of Catholics who will be able
exercise ministerial leadership in our
church? This is a question that has focused
the attention of bishops, priests, religious,
and laity for a long time. In recent years, the
Lilly Endowment Incorporated, a founda-
tion that funds many nonprofit organiza-
tions, has encouraged graduate schools of
theology to strengthen their connections
with youth and young adults. Through its
creative initiatives and generous funding,
the Endowment is working to foster “a new
ecology of ministry” within the various
Christian churches. Its goal is to create a
vital and supportive ecclesial environment
in which young people can appropriate the
tradition of their faith and seriously consider
lives of service in the church. In November
2004, the Endowment awarded Catholic
Theological Union a five-year, two-million-
dollar grant as part of the Endowment’s
“Making Connections” initiative. The pro-
gram that CTU has inaugurated in response
to this initiative is entitled “Catholics on
Call.”

Catholics on Call is a national vocations
discovery initiative for young adults, ages
eighteen to thirty, who are considering a life
of service in the church as a lay ecclesial
minister, religious sister or brother, or priest.
those who minister to young adults.
A Catholics on Call website has been online
since August 2005 (www.catholicsoncall.
org). This site offers articles, reflections, and
discussion forums on themes of vocation
and ministry for young adults and pastoral
ministers. Each summer, Catholics on Call
conduets a Young Adults Conference for
men and women from around the country
who are considering service in the church
as a way of life. These young adults spend
a week at CTU and experience input by
expert presenters, peer group discussion,
shared prayer, and mentored reflection. This
summer experience is supplemented by
days of reflection during the year intended
to help participants integrate their experi-
ce of the summer conference into their
vocational discernment. Catholics on Call
also offers a Partners Conference each fall,
directed toward those who minister to young
adults. This conference provides a valuable
opportunity for vocation directors, campus
ministers, and young adult ministers to
dialogue about the concerns and needs of
contemporary young adults.

In a culture often labeled “secular,” and at
a time in which the Catholic Church in the
United States has been wounded by scandal,
are young adults at all interested in lives of
service to the church? The short answer
seems to be, yes. In the relatively brief dura-
tion of this initiative, those involved in
Catholics on Call have been impressed with
the level of interest and the quality of experi-
ce of young adults who have inquired
about the program. Reading the essays of
applicants to the Young Adults Conference
is a source of genuine inspiration, as these
narratives reveal a depth of faith and
generosity of service that is exemplary. Con-
versations with college campus ministers
and directors of domestic and international
volunteer programs confirm these impres-
sions. There is a significant number of
young adults today who are participating
in ecclesial service programs and who are
willing to consider such service as a way of
life.
These impressions are further confirmed by those who have undertaken systematic study of contemporary young adults, particularly of the so-called “millennial” generation (young adults born after 1980). In 2005 the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA reported a summary of the initial findings of a study entitled “A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose” (see www.spirituality.ucla.edu). This is an ongoing study designed to track the attitudes and beliefs of college students as they progress from their freshman to their junior year of college. In the late summer and early fall 2004, 112,232 freshmen attending 236 colleges and universities throughout the United States answered a six-page survey that addressed questions pertaining to spiritual matters. The results of this survey are complex, but among the more intriguing findings are the following: four in five of these students say they believe in the sacredness of life and have an interest in spirituality; more than three-fourths believe in God; more than two-thirds say they pray; and more than two in three indicate that their religious or spiritual beliefs provide them with strength, support and guidance; the majority of these college freshmen think that their colleges have a responsibility to help them develop emotionally and spiritually.

These and other studies seem to confirm the anecdotal observations of pastoral ministers who insist that contemporary young adults have vibrant spiritual desires and inclinations. They have a manifest interest in service to others and in collaboration with their peers in carrying out such service. It is important for older adults in the church, especially pastoral ministers, to tap into these desires and inclinations. We need to offer young adults the perspective and the skills that will enable them to discern their life choices from the vantage point of Christian faith. It is essential that we communicate to them the depth and breadth of our Catholic spiritual tradition. More experienced adult Catholics are challenged to become adept at “making the connections” between the questions and desires of these young adults and the resources available in our rich tradition.

In a church sometimes characterized by tensions between lay and ordained ministers, Catholics on Call is committed to inculcating an understanding of the communion of vocations. We wish to be purposefully inclusive of ordained and religious lifestyles and lay ecclesial ministry. The church is a communion of believers with one another and with Christ. The communion that the church reflects is the communion of the trinitarian Persons. The baptismal call to holiness shared by every member of the Body of Christ is more essential to our Christian identity than the distinctive forms of Christian life and service. The prominent ecclesiologist Susan Wood reminds us that baptism initiates a person as a member of the Christian community, and ministry arises from the community. Through baptism all of us, whatever our particular vocation, participate in the threefold office of Christ as priest, prophet, and king (Wood, 257). The reflection by the U.S. bishops on the action of the Holy Spirit in the church articulates well the communion of vocations within the church: the work of the Holy Spirit is to bring into harmony the mutual and reciprocal gifts of members who exercise a variety of forms of service within the church.

There is indeed a generation of younger Catholics within the United States who possess the gifts and the depth of faith needed to lead the church through the twenty-first century. It will be important for us who are “older adult” Catholics to continue to share our faith and ministerial experience with this younger generation and to invite them to consider lives of committed service in the church.
References


