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The Vocation of Today's Lay Minister: Perspectives of a Teacher and Researcher

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a significant change has been unfolding in Catholic ministry circles. Many roles once filled almost exclusively by priests, sisters and brothers are now held by lay people. In parishes, Directors of Religious Education, Youth Ministers, and increasingly Directors of Liturgy are laity; in our Catholic institutional ministries, the leaders of schools and colleges, health care institutions, and charities agencies are largely lay. In addition, many other roles, such as prison minister, campus minister, and hospital chaplain are held by laity. In the past, we said that the individuals who shared in the mission of the Church in such special ways had a vocation, a call from God, affirmed by the Church, to a state of life dedicated to service in the Church. What can we say of the laywomen and laymen who serve in these ways today? In this article we will explore their self-understanding of their "vocation," and understandings of vocation, both as a religious and a secular concept, viewing those developments in the context of our culture today, in order to pose an answer to that question, albeit a tentative one.

PERSPECTIVES OF A TEACHER

In the mid-1970s I was teaching a graduate course for parish ministers; a number of young lay men and women were in my class, as well as some vowed religious. As I came to know my students better, I learned more of what they were doing and what their hopes were. Some were already employed in church work, all planned to pursue such work for the indefinite future. They were idealistic, energetic, committed people. In one of those moments of insight I thought, "these are the young men and women who entered seminaries and convents when I was in school." This was a thought I would return to again.

A few years later I was teaching and supervising a number of young adults in a youth ministry internship program. Through classes, retreats and supervisory visits, I came to know these young men and women and their stories in some depth. From them I heard language stating, "I feel God wants me to do this" or "I am trying to discern whether God wants me to continue in ministry after the internship" or "my family does not understand that this is what I feel I must do" or "I see the needs of the youth so clearly and think as Church we must

respond.” Their articulation of vocation was clearer than that of the group a half-dozen years before. My original insight was strengthened.

In 1985, as part of doctoral work in theology I conducted a national study of lay people employed in parishes in a ministerial role at least twenty hours a week. (The survey said “employed in church work” because how people named what they did was part of the investigation.) A number of questions were designed based on my knowledge of the sense of vocation which informed the young adults I had known. The responses to the questions yield data which still today captures some of the ambivalence of lay ecclesial ministers when we speak of “vocation” (Fox).

One question asked what is the primary word they would use to describe their church work. Sixty percent chose the word ministry; 13 percent chose words associated with church mission—vocation, discipleship, apostolate. Ten percent chose profession, and 9 percent other words associated with secular work—position, job, role. Another question asked respondents to rank order seven choices, naming what gives them authority for their work in the Church. Baptism and confirmation ranked highest; 41 percent named it first, and 65 percent placed it among their top three choices. Professional training and competence ranked second, and vocation third. A similar question asked what gives a priest authority for his work in the Church. Here, vocation ranked highest; over one-third named it first, and 68 percent included it in their first three choices. Holy orders was ranked second, baptism and confirmation third, and seminary training fifth. We can conclude that vocation as a way of defining their own work was not primary for most respondents. And yet, in response to a similar question regarding priests, vocation was the defining factor—ranked higher even than Holy orders or baptism and confirmation.

Response to another question adds some interesting nuances to this. The survey asked, “if you plan to stay in professional salaried church work, what best states your reasons,” offering thirteen items to be rank ordered. The reasons ranked highest were: enjoy the work, feel called to this work and the work utilizes gifts God has given. Significantly lower than these reasons was the fourth reason which was to contribute to a need which must be addressed. All other reasons ranked much lower. These included items such as the challenge of the work, liking the people worked with, having been successful and needing the salary. Reflection on the reasons chosen calls attention to an implicit sense of vocation operative in why lay ministers do what they do. First, they enjoy it; joy is a fruit of the Spirit, and in discernment of vocation individuals are counseled to seek the way God speaks to their deepest desires. Second, though few say, “I have a vocation to ministry” most say “I feel called to this work.” Third, they affirm that the work uses

gifts they have. (Elsewhere in the questionnaire, when asked whether they had charisms or special gifts of grace for service in the Church 74 percent said yes, 20 percent unsure, and 6 percent no.) Finally, the perception of a need that must be addressed suggests a strong sense of *diakonia*, of service, a classic mark of vocation.

The responses to the survey suggest to me that lay ministers are able to say that they feel called to their ministry; as we listen to their motivations we can say that they exhibit signs of a valid call (joy, the gifts needed, and a sense of service). However, most do not say that they have a vocation.

PERSPECTIVES FROM RECENT RESEARCH

The most comprehensive studies of lay ecclesial ministers have been done by the National Pastoral Life Center, led by Philip Murnion. Although he did not look at the issue of vocation in his first study, some findings are relevant here. Ministers report that they feel quite close to God (1–2 on a scale of five), with nine out of ten saying this. Compared to five years before, they felt closer now. Furthermore, seven out of ten feel quite close to the Church, whereas somewhat fewer felt that way five years ago. While feeling close to God and the Church is not in itself a sign of vocation, the fact that the lay ecclesial ministers experience this closeness is a reasonable indication of living in congruence with God's call (Murnion, et. al., 29–30). A further sign is the general sense of happiness or satisfaction in their ministry. The study found strong evidence of this:

Probably the most important statement to make in this regard, however, is that the vast majority of these parish ministers find their ministry very satisfying. A few measures quickly tell this story:

Is the ministry satisfying? Yes—93.5 percent.

Does it give a sense of accomplishment? Yes—92 percent.

Is it spiritually rewarding? Yes—91.5 percent.

(Ibid., 97–98)

In another study conducted five years later, several findings bear more directly on our question. Half of the respondents (slightly more among the full-timers) affirm that they have experienced a call by God to a lifetime ministry in the Church. Almost three-quarters of the parish ministers believe that they are pursuing such a lifetime commitment. And, among those not pursuing a lifetime ministry, even a quarter of them felt a call by God. Furthermore, this more recent study found the measures of satisfaction in their ministry roles even a little more positive than was found five years earlier (Murnion and DeLambo, 39–40). "Parish ministry can clearly be called a wonderful experience for the

parish ministers. As we have noted, in their own lives they have grown closer to God, to the Church, and to the parish" (Ibid., 61). An additional indication of their satisfaction is their readiness or desire to continue in ministry. Four out of five of the parish ministers envision remaining in it for the foreseeable future (Ibid., 63).

In reflecting on the results of this study, the authors draw various conclusions. One bears directly on our topic:

There appear to be emerging not only new positions of ministry but also new commitments to ministry that will need to be formalized in new ways. Just as there once were eight orders in the church—bishop, priest, deacon, sub-deacon, acolyte, lector, porter and exorcist—developments in ministry now appear to require acknowledgment of new offices, or ministries. A further issue that arises is the apparent lack of symmetry between office and ministry in the present situation: certain men have the status of ordination as deacons even though their commitment to church ministry is limited and, for the most part, their involvement is part-time, while other ministers who are giving their full lives and time to ministry, and even serving in some instances as surrogates for pastors, are not in any order or office of ministry (Ibid., 69).

PERSPECTIVES OF LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS

National studies provide a profile of the group of ministers we are considering. In *Why We Serve: Personal Stories of Catholic Lay Ministers* we hear some of their personal reflections on vocation. Joyce Stewart, a laywoman, had worked for fifteen years as a director of religious education when she wrote:

I chose a career in ministry which I come to know as both my right and responsibility flowing from the gift of my baptism and my full membership in the Church. . . . The best place I can live out all this and respond to what I have come to know in so many ways as my vocation is by a full-time career of ministry in the Church. The community on its side . . . validates my ministry . . .

(T)here are some strong parallels between this experience and that of vocation as sacramentalized in holy orders. The major difference is, of course, the lack of explicit recognition by the Church of this ministry other than compensation. . . . Lay ministry is one of those functions which, for the most part, has had to name itself (40–41).

Rick McCord traced his story through parish work as a D.R.E. to a diocesan staff position and eventually to a role as director of diocesan educational services. He said:

I have been a professional or career lay minister for more than ten years. I came to it, not unlike many of my contemporaries, almost directly from a seminary where I was close to concluding my studies for the priesthood. Due at least partly to these circumstances, I am aware of a certain continuous ministerial journey in my adult life. . . . I chose to minister in and for the institutional Church as a layman (51).

And sometimes the path traveled goes beyond intra-church ministry. David Ramey directs a large ministerial staff at a religious conference center.

I came to believe that a career commitment to lay ministry is a commitment to the development of human community beyond parochial and established parish settings. . . . My own understanding of why one may choose a lay ministry career has shifted to include a mission to a world of market places in need of some "good news." My current questions about lay ministry focus more on its symbolic power to serve as a reminder to others that they can and do make a difference by their part in the human community. This has challenged me to a vision and intentionality of lay ministry as a service to the world, through the Church perhaps, but not only in and for the Church (79).

PERSPECTIVES OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON LAY MINISTRY

In 1994 the NCCB Committee on the Laity established the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry; in 1995 the subcommittee began the Leadership for Lay Ecclesial Ministry Project. A total of ten bishops served on the committee. Their work is described in the article by Sr. Bríd Long in this journal; here, I wish to focus on one aspect of that work.

The Subcommittee convened various groups so as to grow in their understanding of lay ecclesial ministry and ministers. Two gatherings of representatives of various lay organizations and associations were particularly relevant to our topic. At these, the bishops listened to lay ecclesial ministers describe their experience of feeling called to do what they do, of believing that their ministry was what God invited them to, of experiencing themselves as ministers doing what God intended them to do. Their personal witness, in their words, out of their lived commitment, was powerful. In light of these conversations, the bishops on the committee began to realize that the lay ecclesial ministers have an experience of "vocation" and they explored how this could be understood within our existing categories of thought. Should this be seen as a new state of life in the Church, a new form of vocation? At one point they pondered whether to speak of a fourth vocation (in addition to those to priesthood, religious life, married life). At another point

they spoke simply of a call to discipleship. Over the course of a few meetings, members struggled with this issue. In the 1999 report concluding the work of the first subcommittee, *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions*, this is addressed in a number of ways:

Some, whom we are naming lay ecclesial ministers, are called to a ministry within the Church as a further specification and application of what all laity are called and equipped to do. This group of laity can be distinguished from the general body of all the lay faithful, not by reason of merit or rank, but by reason of a call to service made possible by certain gifts of the Holy Spirit, by the generous response of the person, and by an act of authorizing and sending by the proper ecclesiastical authority (cf. Luke 10:1) (16).

Lay ecclesial ministry can be understood as a response to a call from God to work alongside ordained ministers in the service of and within the ecclesial community (17).

Lay ecclesial ministry is experienced by many to be a call to ministry, a vocation. It is the role and responsibility of the entire Church (including the bishop and the local parish community) to foster, nurture, encourage, and help discern all vocations to ministry (20).

Special charisms of the Holy Spirit, which flow from the sacraments of initiation, equip lay ecclesial ministers for their special tasks within the Church (cf. LG, no. 12; AA, no. 3; Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11; Eph 4:7-13) (15).

The bishops' report affirms that lay ecclesial ministers have a vocation; this vocation is carefully linked to the vocation of all laity ("a further specification and application of what all laity are called and equipped to do") and yet is a particular call to service for which charisms are given "for their special tasks."

VOCATIONS AND VOCATION

The word "vocation" in Catholic circles often has the meaning "a vocation to priesthood or religious life." However, it is used in various other ways as well, which influences the question we are exploring here. Some of these variations have emerged recently in Catholic circles. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, published in 1912, has an entry "Vocation, Ecclesiastical and Religious." There is no other entry on the topic. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, published in 1967, has three headings: "Vocation, Religious and Clerical," "Vocation to Supernatural Life" and "Vocational Psychology." Surveying the literature from 1912 to 1967, one notes that it is in the 1940s that the secular categories of vocational education, vocational guidance and vocational psychology begin to occur in Catholic writing, and that it is in the 1950s that the idea of

“vocation” not specified as religious or clerical begins to be treated. Articles such as “Vocation of Work” and “Everybody Has a Vocation” appear. For the second half of the century, each of these three ways of understanding vocation continues to be explored, even until today.

Certainly, the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and the pre-Council work of the theologians who influenced those teachings (for example, Congar and Chenu) gave rise to the broader conceptualizations of vocation. The decision by the Council Fathers to reject the original schema for the Constitution on the Church, and to move instead to an articulation which started not with hierarchy but with the whole people of God, gave us a renewed understanding of the role of all Christians in the community. The centrality of baptism, the call of all to holiness, the beginning development of a theology of the laity, a positive valuation of the world, all have bearing on our present understanding of vocation as a broader category than only vocation to priesthood and religious life. It is helpful to look at the way various writers in the post-Council years reflect on vocation in this sense of the term.

The Human Vocation

One approach taken is to look at the nature of men and women as created to be in relationship with God. Representative of this view is Peter Riga who understands the human person as essentially called by God because of our very nature as transcendent beings, oriented at our root, so to speak, toward God. “Thus the being of man is inextricably involved and intertwined in the very being of God, who *calls* man to himself in myriad ways” (143). Christian life is founded on this possibility of being able to be called by God; God’s call, as the Bible shows, is continuous and dynamic.

Analysis of scriptural accounts of vocation provides another way of exploring the meaning of vocation. The call of God to the Israelite people, to enter into a covenant relationship, and the call of individuals—Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, the prophets—suggest the communal and personal dimensions of vocation. The New Testament further enriches our understanding of call. For example, Paul Lamarche uses the scriptural account of the call of Levi to explore the particular and general vocation of every Christian which, in its essence, is a call to a life in union with Christ the Savior. “What is demanded of every Christian is immediate, total absolute adherence. Christ must be preferred to everything else, loved more than anything else” (307). The fundamental vocation is to salvation through faith; particular vocations must be envisaged in relation to this. All Christians are called to be disciples of the Master, to follow in his footsteps, to learn his ways, to imitate his life.

Vocation: A Calling

The third approach to vocation is by way of focus on work; this is articulated in many ways, all of which can be seen as related to Luther's re-formulation of the concept vocation as connected to our calling in life. Einar Billing, a Lutheran writer explains: "When it began to dawn on Luther that just as certainly as the call to God's Kingdom seeks to lift us infinitely above everything that our everyday duties by themselves could give us, just that certainly the call does not take us away from these duties but more deeply into them, then work became calling, then the word calling took on its second meaning . . . 'calling' binds closely together the vocabulary of religion and everyday work" (2-3). Often it has been Protestant authors who have developed this understanding of vocation, inviting people to ponder the graced dimensions of their work. One volume of personal stories, *My Job and My Faith*, illustrates this relating of faith to daily work; the chapter titles are very telling. For example, a nurse—"To Walk with Each One," an architect—"That the World May be Fashioned Anew," a public relations representative—"Moral Dilemmas in the Wielding of Words" and a household helper—"Scrubbing Floors is Hard Work"—each understands his or her work as a calling with religious meaning.

Catholic teaching adds a dimension to Luther's thought, a valuation of work as "sharing in God's creative action, as imitating the life of Christ, and as building up the human and heavenly community of humanity" (Meyer, 93). The biblical understanding of the person as created in the image of God and in relationship with God through grace underlies this view, so that one can say "all that a Christian does is a collaborative work with God" (Ibid.). Work, then, is a concurrent human and divine activity, enabling us to act and work supernaturally. Meyer states, when persons strive "to work for love of God, by fulfilling God's divine will at work . . . (they sanctify themselves and their tasks) becoming more human and divine in the process" (106).

In this overview, the focus has been on the idea of vocation in general. It is worth noting that in the course of the last fifty years, there has been ongoing attention to this theme. In recent years, vocation as calling has received the greatest attention. Certainly, the teaching of The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (for example, lay people "do not separate their union with Christ from their ordinary life, but through the very performance of their tasks, which are God's will for them, actually promote the growth of their union with him," art. 4) and of Pope John II (especially his *Laborem exercens*) have contributed to the interest in this area. Often, the earlier more explicit attention to our fundamental vocation is implicit in explorations of vocation and our work. It is also notable that in recent years the more specified topic of ecclesiasti-

cal vocation has received the greatest amount of attention by far; and yet, by contrast, vocation to religious life has received modest attention.

Vocation: Ecclesiastical and Religious

One aspect of the reflection on ecclesiastical and religious vocation bears on our concerns here. The 1912 *Encyclopedia* states: "A vocation which is by many persons called exterior thus comes to be added to the interior vocation; and this exterior vocation is defined as the admission of a candidate in due form by competent authority." The 1967 *Encyclopedia* presents three theories of vocation. The first emphasizes external dimensions: "only those have vocations to the religious life or priesthood who are called by legitimate authority." The second emphasizes the internal aspect, recognizing vocation when "there exists a strong and permanent supernatural attraction or an impulse felt in the depths of the soul excluding doubt as to its authenticity." The third sees the inner movement or inclination as primary: "This grace would seem to be the formal element of vocation rather than the call of legitimate ecclesiastical authority, which, though required, is merely a confirmation of the genuineness of the interior call." The author concludes, "the last seems to be the most correct" (Schleck).

CULTURAL FACTORS

Fluidity of Work and Social Structure

One of the truisms of our time is that young people growing up today will probably change the nature of their work—not the place of employment, but the work itself—seven times in the course of their adult lives. This is often contrasted with a picture of their grandparents' lives, where the grandfather worked for the same firm, or in the same industry, all of his adult life, retiring to receive his pension. Granted the limitations of each profile, they do portray the greater instability of today's work world.

Reaching further back in time, to the European world that has so influenced our Church, a further sense of stability is glimpsed. Societies were highly structured; members belonged to distinct, non-changing groups: peasants, landed gentry, nobility, for example. In this world, ecclesiastical and religious vocations were described as a state of life, a stable commitment, made forever. In the United States today, indeed, in industrialized societies, the social structure which was the context for such an understanding of states in life no longer exists.

Differentiation of Tasks

Another relevant dimension of United States society is the vast changes that have occurred in the past 150 years, as we moved from an

agricultural to an industrial to a service and increasingly to a technological culture. As fewer people were needed to provide for the sheer survival of families and the society itself, increasing numbers of service roles appeared. Tasks once performed by vowed religious—for example, care of the sick, service of the poor—increasingly were undertaken by state and government agencies, and now even for-profit groups. Concurrently, the numbers of service jobs were multiplying exponentially.

Furthermore, throughout the work world, greater and greater specialization has occurred. Whereas once a nurse and a doctor tended the sick, today practical nurses, technicians, social workers, dieticians and more serve in hospitals—with still other specializations involved in the myriad forms of out-of-hospital care. Within this context, a variety of new, specialized roles have arisen within the church community, for example, hospital chaplains and parish youth ministers. The roles call for varied gifts and diverse skills, and different educational requirements.

Search for Meaningful Work

As the variety of work has increased, there has been much interest in finding the *right* job, of discerning one's gifts and interests and matching them with work which is meaningful. Such bestsellers as *Do What You Love*, *The Money Will Follow* and *What Color Is Your Parachute?* are just two titles among the many to be found in the library or bookstore. It is interesting to peruse these volumes and note in them what we could call the language of discernment: what are your life goals, what are your gifts, what contribution do you want to make, what makes you happy? Writers counsel: take a voyage of self-discovery, break out of boxes, discover the Zen of the career search. Richard Bolles is explicit in his religious language:

(T)he job hunt offers a chance to make some fundamental changes in our whole life. . . . It gives us a chance to ponder and reflect, to extend our mental horizons, to go deeper into the sub-soil of our soul. It gives us a chance to wrestle with the question, 'Why am I here on Earth?'. . . . We want to find that special joy, 'that no one can take from us,' which comes from having a sense of Mission in our life. . . . the concept of Mission lands us inevitably in the lap of God. . . . (241–42).

Clearly, this approach to seeking work is the theme in Catholic literature, referred to above, of vocational education, guidance and psychology. One can see in it links to Luther's work, and to the Catholic premise that the glory of God is the human person fully alive.

VOCATION AND THE LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTER

Do lay ecclesial ministers have a vocation to their ministry in the Church? Obviously, the answer depends on the definition of vocation. When viewed with the classical understanding focused on ecclesiastical and religious vocation, the answer would seem to be no. Although there is a sense of an inner call, as so many lay ecclesial ministers say, the call is not affirmed by legitimate authority. Some might say, as Joyce Stewart seems to, quoted above, that in hiring her the community validates her call. However, there is not an explicit, weighed decision about vocation in the hiring process.

When viewed from the standpoint of our human vocation, one would certainly say that lay ecclesial ministers have a call, and that, judging by classic signs for the discernment of spirits, they seem to have responded to God's initiative by directing their lives in a way congruent with God's desire for them, and for the good of others. Finally, when viewed from the perspective of vocation as calling, profession, a doing of meaningful work, in light of the great satisfaction in their ministry which these lay men and women report, one would surely say that they are following their call.

Are these answers sufficient as a way of responding to a new experience in the life of the Church? Or, do we need to seek new formulations to account for this reality? What are the values which must be guarded as we reflect on these questions?

Certainly, the broadening of the concept of vocation which has occurred in recent decades is valuable. It is a means for inviting deeper awareness by all Christians of their radical connection to God who invites each of us into relationship and into a sharing in God's creative action. It encourages a valuing of the contribution made by every person to the human community through the work each does, and motivation to seek one's calling, and to do good work. Many lay ecclesial ministers resist conceptualizations of their place in the Church which in any way separates them from other Christians. Perhaps this resistance reflects a desire to guard these understandings of vocation: all are called, all work is potentially holy, all callings are significant, and are to be valued by the community. The heightened awareness of vocation described by lay ecclesial ministers exists so as to model to many how their experience of God's call can be discerned more deeply. David Ramey, as quoted above, speaks of lay ministry's "symbolic power to serve as a reminder to others that they can and do make a difference by their part in the human community" (79).

But is there something in the classical understanding of vocation which should be applied to these new ministers in the Church? Is "the call of legitimate ecclesiastical authority" needed, or desirable, as

“a confirmation of the genuineness of the interior call?” Are these ministers called to a particular place in the Church? As noted above, the Bishops’ Subcommittee affirmed that it is the role of “the bishop and the local parish community to foster, nurture, encourage, and help discern all vocations to ministry.” How is this to be done? They also note that lay ecclesial ministers “can be distinguished from the general body of all the lay faithful . . . by an act of authorizing and sending by the proper ecclesiastical authority.” How is this being done? What is the relationship between authorization for ministry and discernment of vocation? In an age marked by great fluidity in regard to work and in the place of living and working, and by increasing differentiation of work tasks, can we understand lay ecclesial ministers as an adaptation in ministry relevant to our age, complementing more traditional forms of ministry? And how would authentication of vocation be structured in the face of the “instability” and variety of ministries?

Clearly, there is much collective discernment we must do as a community in order to begin to answer these questions. The task is especially important for our bishops who are charged with responsibility for discerning the genuineness and proper use of charisms, “not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good” (*Constitution on the Church*, #12).

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Even if seminaries were once again filled to overflowing and convents packed with sisters, there would still remain the need for cultivating, developing and sustaining the full flourishing of ministries that we have witnessed in the church since the Second Vatican Council. In the wake of the council, we have arrived at a clearer recognition that it is in the nature of the church to be endowed with many gifts, and that these gifts are the basis for the vocation to the priesthood, the diaconate and the religious life as well as for the many ministries rooted in the call of baptism.

—Roger Cardinal Mahony
"As I Have Done for You"
a pastoral letter on ministry