

Margaret Costello and Ana M. Villamil

Celebrating Lay Ecclesial Ministry

On a warm May evening, about fifty people made their way along old cobbled streets toward an historic church. A service was about to begin that would reflect the enormity of the changes in ministry that are taking place in the Catholic Church. Beth was about to be commissioned as a lay minister for her parish. This service was to be a celebration of a new and wondrous gift of the Spirit to the Church: the gift of lay ecclesial ministry.

The assembly rose and joined in singing the opening hymn, "Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service." The presider, who was pastor of this parish, took his place in the sanctuary. The Liturgy of the Word included proclamations of Isa 6:1-8, Rom 5:15, and John 21:1-19 and, as responsorial psalm, "Here I Am, Lord." The homily engaged those assembled in a reflection on the question, "What is ministry?"

Following the homily, Beth who was seated in the first pew with her family walked to the microphone. On the previous evening, she had received a master of divinity degree from a Catholic school for ministry. The conferral of this degree marked the end of nine years of courses, almost one hundred credit hours. During these years, she juggled a family and a full-time position on the pastoral staff of this large urban parish, along with papers and exams.

At the microphone she began by talking of the call to ministry that she had experienced: how this call was unsought and, in fact, actively resisted. She recalled that once this call was embraced, it provided such integration with the rest of her life as wife, mother, sister, daughter, granddaughter, and grandmother. She expressed her gratitude to the parish that had nurtured her vocation and the pastor who had served as mentor and model. His confidence and joy in his own vocation had been the wellspring of his generous recognition and support of lay ministry.

In conclusion, with those present as witnesses, Beth made these solemn promises: "Baptized and confirmed in the Catholic tradition of the Christian Church, I consecrate my life to God as a disciple of Jesus Christ. In embracing a call to ministry that is rooted in our shared baptismal call to service,

— I promise to be generous with my love, my time and energy, and my worldly goods in service to the people of God.

- I promise to seek opportunities to serve God’s people, wherever I may live, for the rest of my life.
- I promise to do all that I can to contribute to a Church and a world which recognizes and celebrates the gifts of all people, especially those who are excluded or pushed to the margins for any reason.
- I promise to strive to change structures and symbol systems that limit our understanding of God, so that a new community may be born, a liberating community of all women and men characterized by mutuality with each other in which all may flourish.

I solemnly make these promises in the name of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world.

In thy light, may we see light.”

As she completed these solemn promises, her husband and children came forward to place a cross on a chain around her neck. This cross now serves as a sign of her commitment to compassionate companionship of the People of God.

At the reception afterwards, two members of the assembly compared their reactions. “It was such a moving service wasn’t it?” asked Tanya.

“Yes, it was,” Chris agreed. But it was also so different from when I was commissioned as a parish minister in my diocese last year. I wasn’t the only lay minister being commissioned that night. And it wasn’t even at my parish. The bishop invited all of us from the various parishes to the cathedral and then we had a diocesan-wide commissioning service.”

“So your pastor and your parishioners didn’t participate in the ceremony?” asked Tanya.

“They were there in the assembly, but the bishop emphasized that we were being commissioned by the entire diocese for service to the Church. What was your commissioning service like?” wondered Chris.

Tanya reminisced, “Well, it was nothing like either service. In fact, I’m not really sure that you can call it a commissioning service, although that is the name we gave it. It was right after our entire class finished the two-year diocesan ministry formation program. We had a service where we were all commissioned for future ministry in the Church and we all received certificates saying that we had successfully completed the diocesan lay ministry program. But, as you know, I didn’t have a ministry job yet and neither did about half of my classmates. Of course we were all doing some volunteer work, but it can be very difficult to switch professions. In fact, some of my colleagues are still working in other professions and are able to minister only on a

part-time, volunteer basis. So we weren't really commissioned to do something specific. Rather what was celebrated was that we had completed the program and had the skills and competence to be ministers in the name of the Church. Somehow, without having a specific job to which I was being commissioned, it really didn't feel like a commissioning service. I guess it felt more like a graduation service."

Tanya continued, "But, you know, I could have made every single one of the promises that Beth made tonight. They really were beautiful and they spoke the truth about what it is to be a lay ecclesial minister in the Church today. I wish I had the opportunity to publicly make promises like these in front of the parish community which I now serve."

One of the gifts of lay ministry in today's Church is the vast diversity of the lay ministers. Their journeys to ministry do not follow a simple pre-determined path. They come as newly graduated college students who enter a graduate program seeking to become professional lay ministers. They come as second career professionals who have experienced a call to ministry which they could not ignore. They come as retired people who are filled with the joy of being able to enter a profession where they feel that they are doing God's work. Sometimes they come to ministry almost by accident. Volunteer work in a parish increases in scope, as the pastor, staff and other parishioners ask more of them. Slowly, almost without their notice, what was once an occasional activity in their spare time has become an important and central part of their lives, and they realize that they truly are being called to this ministry.

The challenge of this diversity of paths is that there is no simple or correct way to celebrate lay ministry. Yet given the ritualistic nature of the Catholic faith, how can we not celebrate this gift in a public manner?

Beth, Tanya and Chris all share a common experience of having their call to ministry publicly recognized and affirmed by the faith community. But the differences in their commissioning services show just how new this ritual is. In our Church today, there is no single, official rite for commissioning lay ministers. Therefore, each diocese or each parish or each ministry program decides how, or even if, to commission its own lay ministers.

Many questions need to be examined. Should lay ministers be commissioned at their place of employment as they begin their new ministry or should they be commissioned at the end of their academic and formation program? Ideally, a commissioning service indicates that this person before us is being given the responsibility of ministering here, in this specific role, in the name of our Church. Yet, some commissioning services indicate that this person before us has the competence, the skills, and the formation to be called to minister by a future

church employer. This is more properly the role of a graduation or certification ceremony. Ideally, one should be commissioned “to” something. A commissioning should not so much mark the end of a program than the beginning of a new phase of ministry. But with the diversity of paths taken by lay ministers, creativity is required in publicly recognizing and affirming each person’s call to ministry.

Another series of questions involves: who should do the commissioning and, more specifically, what is the proper relationship between the lay minister and the ordained ministers? It is easy to agree that a diocesan lay minister should be commissioned by the bishop. But what of a parish lay minister? Would it be better for the pastor and the parish community to do the commissioning service in their own parish? Or would it be better for the bishop to recognize and commission all lay ministers within his diocese? In addition to an employer-employee relationship between the pastor and the lay minister, should there also be some type of relationship between the lay minister and the bishop who is the one ultimately responsible for all ministry in the diocese?

The U.S. Bishops’ Subcommittee on Lay Ministry in its 1999 report *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions* agreed with the importance of these questions. They noted that “The relationship of the lay ecclesial minister to the bishop emerged as one of the central themes in subcommittee discussions. It is a relationship desired by the lay ministers themselves as an expression of their role within the local church. There is also a concern that, on occasion, some lay ministers develop and minister from a too parochial view of the church.” They concluded that “The nature of this relationship of the bishop and the lay ecclesial ministers—its theological and practical implications—is one that requires further exploration and attention. How this relationship is expressed and ritualized is another issue that needs attention” (44).

Both Chris and Tanya have been commissioned by their respective bishops, so they at least are aware of each other. Chris’s bishop commissioned her for a specific ministry, so there is an intentional relationship where the bishop affirmed Chris’s call to this ministry. Tanya’s bishop commissioned her for lay ministry in general. So theoretically, he may not even know that she is now employed in one of his parishes. In Beth’s situation the bishop may not even know Beth exists, much less that she is a minister in one of his parishes.

Ideally, there should be a two-way relationship between the bishop and every minister, whether lay or ordained, in his diocese. Relationships entail accountability and support; they call for responsibility and collaboration. Yet, are these relationships realistic given today’s statistics? The number of lay ministers is increasing exponentially. According to a recent report, in just five short years from 1992 to 1997, the number of lay ecclesial ministers employed at least half-time at the parish level

rose 35 percent from 21,569 to 29,146. Given this trend, how can the relationship between a bishop and the lay ecclesial ministers in his diocese best be structured? Again, creativity can lead to some helpful options. In one diocese the bishop has created a Lay Ecclesial Ministers Council consisting of twelve members who will address issues such as recognition and support for lay ecclesial ministers (Murnion and DeLambo: 4).

What about the promises that Beth made at the commissioning service? Should every lay minister be invited to make promises? Should the promises be to the local parish, to the diocese, to the entire Church or to God? Are the promises for a specific time period (e.g., while the lay minister is in that position) or should they be for life, like Beth's promises were? And what does the Church, represented by either the parish or diocese, promise in return? Certainly, given today's organizational structure, the Church cannot promise to always employ the lay minister nor even to always affirm or support the gifts of that lay minister. Yet, what theological and moral responsibility does the Church have in affirming and supporting a lay ecclesial minister's response to his or her call to ministry?

As Chris and Tanya were pondering these questions, six-year-old Jeremy came running up to them.

"What did you think of your grandmother's commissioning service, Jeremy?" asked Chris.

"That was neat," responded Jeremy as his head bobbed up and down. "When I grow up, I want to be commissioned, too!" he exclaimed with a big smile on his face.

Only the Spirit knows what will be the shape of Jeremy's commissioning service many years from now.

REFERENCES

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Margaret Costello, M.Div. (Washington Theological Union, 1999) is the director of liturgy from Washington Theological Union.

Ana M. Villamil, M.Div. (Washington Theological Union, 1999) is the associate director for the Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.