

*Robert W. Evans*

## **Strengthening the Spirituality of Lay Ministers**

*When the apostles returned, they explained to him what they had done. He took them and withdrew in private to a town called Bethsaida. Luke 9:10*

As I have participated in ministry at my home parish and in the broader context of the Catholic Church in the United States, I have experienced ups and downs, contributed to successes and failures, and felt closer to and farther away from God. My spiritual life has involved many struggles to discern God's call and my response to that call. The three things that have consistently helped me to maintain my relationship with God are personal prayer, belonging to a small Christian community, and regular participation in my parish's liturgical life.

The work of ministry is demanding. It requires substantial reserves of physical, emotional, and spiritual energy. As with any of the helping professions, ministers must constantly strive to maintain the balance between their jobs, their "clients," and their own individual lives. Jesus knew the importance of taking time to restore his spiritual strength, and he invited his appointed ministers to do the same. This article will look at some examples of how the Roman Catholic Church is working to support the spiritual needs of its lay ministers and will offer suggestions for future directions to further strengthen this element of ecclesial lay ministry.

The foundation for any Christian's relationship with God is a strong prayer life nourished by diligent reading of sacred Scripture. While all practicing Christians should take time each day to talk and listen to God, it is especially important for ecclesial lay ministers who are called to play a more active role in building up the Reign of God. Pastors and others responsible for ministry teams can easily make it a routine practice to set aside the first fifteen minutes of each workday for prayer and Scripture. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has created a space on its website ([WWW.NCCBUSCC.ORG](http://WWW.NCCBUSCC.ORG)) with daily scripture readings and psalms from the Lectionary. The text is taken from *The New American Bible* and the site also provides a link to the electronic text of the entire Bible.

The prayer lives of ordained clergy and vowed religious have benefited significantly from spiritual directors who help directees deepen

their prayer experience, work through barriers and issues affecting their prayer life, and experiment with new forms of prayer. Increasingly, lay persons are also working with spiritual directors either during graduate studies or in support of their ministry placements. At Washington Theological Union lay students are encouraged to work with spiritual directors as part of their formation, and the school maintains a list of over thirty spiritual directors who have agreed to meet with students. Most directors work on a fee basis and this can often be a barrier for ecclesial ministers whose salaries often do not provide much room for discretionary spending. Dioceses and/or parishes might subsidize or absorb costs for spiritual direction for ecclesial lay ministers in order to support the spiritual health of the ministry team.

Ministers are also sustained in their work through regular participation in the sacramental life of their home parish. The Eucharist provides the spiritual nourishment essential to effective ministry. Ministers in parish settings are often torn between continuing their participation in their home parish and belonging to the parish where they work. Participation in liturgy within the communities they are serving helps to solidify the connection with parishioners and helps the minister to more easily identify and respond to the needs of the community. At the same time, ministers also need a space where they can worship and be nourished without the expectation that they are available to address pastoral needs seven days a week.

Throughout the world Catholics have found enormous spiritual benefit from coming together regularly in small Christian communities (SCCs) to reflect on Scripture, pray, share their faith, and deepen their relationship with God. Ecclesial lay ministers belonging to such communities receive substantial support and affirmation. At St. Rose of Lima parish in Gaithersburg, Maryland, most of the parish's staff of eight full or part time lay ministers and the church's pastor belong to faith sharing groups. By being "just a member," staff members affirm that they are able to relax and connect with God and the other members of their communities.

I have been a member of a small Christian Community for over nine years. During this period we have celebrated first communion, confirmation, graduation, and marriages within the community. We have supported one another through deaths of family members, marital separation and divorce, loss of jobs, and struggles with children. Through dialogue with Scripture, sharing our stories of faith in action, and prayer, we have supported one another in a wide variety of ministries. Our lives have grown together in ways that approach the intimacy of the first Christian house churches and the support from this community is a foundation for all of my ministerial work.

A retreat provides a unique opportunity to focus on issues of spirituality. Whether for a day, a weekend, a week or more, time spent away from regular responsibilities allows for an extended conversation with God, and exploration of issues specific to each ecclesial lay minister's duties. Retreat centers are beginning to recognize the need for specific programming for ministers. At Bon Secours Spiritual Center in Marriotsville, Maryland, Dr. Francis Van der Wall, the center's director, conducted a three-day retreat this spring focusing on the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The retreat was offered to priests and ministers, both vowed religious and ecclesial lay, to help interiorize the experience of Lent. The local church can help to increase the availability of programs specifically targeted at lay ministers by funding development of a retreat experience designed explicitly to meet the needs of the lay minister. This program could then be made available to all retreat facilities.

Dioceses often provide resources for formation and professional development of ordained clergy, and are beginning to expand their programs to meet the needs of ecclesial lay ministers as well. Marti Jewell, director of the Office of Ministry Spirituality in the Archdiocese of Louisville, noted that an Archdiocesan Leadership Institute has been established there for this purpose. The institute provides cross-role training and offers opportunities for parish staffs to come together and improve their teamwork as well as their spirituality. The institute has developed a three-day program to provide a shared experience and to nurture the Catholic identity of a ministry team. The archdiocese also sponsors prayer days for lay and ordained ministers.

The increasing numbers of ecclesial lay ministers and the prominent role that they are now playing in the life of the Church in the United States makes it critical that the Church provide appropriate support for their work. Providing resources for "spiritual wellness" is an important need that has not yet been fully addressed. Spiritual health is vital to prevent burnout and to being an effective minister. Each ministry supervisor together with each ecclesial lay minister should look carefully at what they are doing to meet their own spiritual needs and the needs of their team members.

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