We are experiencing a vocation crisis in the Catholic Church at the same time as we see the fruits of the Second Vatican Council awakening in us a new realization that it is in the nature of the Church as the body of Christ to be endowed with “many different gifts,” “many different ways of serving,” and “many different forms of activity” (1 Cor 12:4-6). It has perhaps taken the decline in priestly and religious vocations to bring the Church to a clear consciousness that all are called to ministry through baptism. The gifts of the Spirit are, indeed, being poured out in unprecedented and unforeseen ways and thousands of lay Christians are heeding God’s call by choosing paths other than vows and orders to enter the ministry.

The words of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, “You go into my vineyard too” (Matt 20:4), have resounded through history as a call to ministry. But what form does the call take and how does it grow? A recent study of parishes and parish ministries describes the engagement of lay parish ministers as “a mixture of vocation—a sense of call by God, invitation—by the pastor or other member of the parish staff, attraction to the ministry itself—the varieties of ways to serve the parish community” (Murnion and DeLambo 1999, 42). These seem to be the main routes to parish ministry and pastoral leadership, not at all mutually exclusive but intertwined and interdependent.

First, I will explore the above three aspects of the call to lay pastoral leadership: vocation, invitation, attraction. Then I will examine some challenges that are particular to lay pastoral leadership in the Catholic context where more and more designated pastoral leaders are functioning without being ordained. Finally, I will suggest how theological schools may influence not only the preparation and education of lay pastoral leaders but also the awakening and fostering of the call itself.

**The Call to Lay Pastoral Leadership**

A new kind of pastoral leader, the lay ecclesial minister (*Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* 1995, 17), has emerged in recent years. The term lay ecclesial minister has come to mean the following: one who, as a fully initiated lay member of the
Church, is responding to the gifts and empowerment of the Holy Spirit received in baptism and confirmation; is responding to a felt call or invitation to participate in ministry; has received the necessary formation, education, and training to minister competently; brings personal competencies and gifts to ecclesial leadership exercised with community recognition and support; is entrusted with a formal and public role in ministry by competent ecclesiastical authority; has been installed in a ministry through the authority of the bishop or his representative; is committed to performing the ministry in a stable way; has the responsibility and the necessary authority for institutional leadership in a particular area of ministry with or without adequate remuneration (Lay Ecclesial Ministry 1999, 8). These new ministers are professionals who feel called to and are prepared for positions of pastoral leadership normally reserved to the ordained.

In 1980 and again in 1995, the U.S. Bishops issued four calls to lay Catholics: the call to holiness, to community, to mission and ministry, and to Christian maturity (Called and Gifted 1980; Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium 1995). The call to ministry is placed within the wider call of the human person before God or the Christian vocation, which is not first to a role or even to a ministry but to seek the face of God in holiness and fullness of life. A few examples suffice to remind us of how many vivid Bible stories illustrate that the story of all vocation begins with a call. The fishermen, Simon and Andrew, James and John, hear the call of Jesus as he walked by the lake shore, “Come after me and I will make you into fishers of people” (Mark 1:16-20). Matthew, sitting at his tollbooth, hears and heeds the command of Jesus, “Follow me” (Matt 9:9). The two disciples of John the Baptist are lured by the words of Jesus, “What do you want?” and “Come and see” (John 1:38-39). Vocation is essentially a gift of God; a call to life and holiness before God, a call that in the Christian faith finds its expression in the following of Jesus. Vocation is essentially linked to mission, to a participation in the divine work of transforming the world, and vocation requires lifelong conversion (Senior 2002, 765).

Vocation

Since the call to ministry finds its origin within the call of God to the human person made explicit in the call to follow Jesus Christ as disciples and friends, lay ecclesial ministers speak of their work as a calling, not merely a job, and believe God has called them to their ministry (Called and Gifted 1995, 17). The call to pastoral leadership is a call to be sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly role of Jesus Christ. Baptized into Christ, lay pastoral leaders are called to be united to him and to his sacrifice or self-emptying in their daily life and in ministry. As O’Meara notes, the Church is on a historical pilgrimage wending its way toward the realm into which Christ has entered, ahead of us, through his Calvary priesthood (O’Meara 1999, 41). Lay pastoral leaders enter into the prophetic role of Christ, accepting the Gospel in faith, proclaiming it in word and deed, teaching and preaching. They enter into the kingly role of Christ, spreading the kingdom in history, serving in justice and love, being pastors to the community as servant leaders. In sum, the pastoral leader is called to be a person of God’s word (prophet), of the sacraments (priest), a leader of God’s people (king), and to preside over a prophetic community, a Eucharistic community, and a ministerial community (Bernier 1992, 238–39).

Invitation

The call to pastoral ministry often comes through an invitation of the pastor, a mem-
ber of the parish staff, or someone within the parish community. It is confirmed in the appointment to a specific ministry of leadership within the Church, affirmed by the community. In a very real sense, ministers are called by God and by the Church community. Personal encouragement, personal relationships, and modeling by exemplary priests and ministers seem to be much more effective in awakening the call to pastoral leadership than media campaigns and advertising, which are reported to have little impact (Hoge 1987, 131).

Attraction

The call takes root in the fertile soil of the human heart and the concrete life of the human person. As people come to recognize their gifts and abilities, and experience a sense of call, they can be invited to be of service to others, to put their gifts at the service of God and of the community. Etymologically, notes O’Meara, charism or gift has tones of “graciousness, of generosity, of joyful liberality” (O’Meara 1999, 53). It is this graciousness of God that is at the source of the call to ministry and the focus of ministry. The minister’s compassion, other-centeredness, ability to teach, pray, be a healing presence, build community, all find a place within the rich variety of ministries available. Responding to the call implies a willingness to engage in the necessary preparation, acquiring degrees and developing competencies. Thus, gifts are honed, the person becomes more grounded spiritually, more informed theologically, more competent in a specific area of ministry or in general pastoral leadership.

Through ministry alongside others at the service of the community, the experience of call and response in all its richness must continue to grow and deepen throughout life. Since baptism is birth to new life in Christ, we can say that the call and attraction to ministry and pastoral leadership has something to do with the discovery of our identity in Christ, our way of following Christ. The ministry in a sense allows us to be and become what we are or are created to be (Murnion and DeLambo 1999, 39).

Challenges within the Catholic Context

In the Catholic community, questions about ordaining married men, ordaining women, allowing resigned priests to return to priestly work, and opening up the permanent diaconate to women have all been discussed and debated at length. Until such time as Church policy can change, perhaps not without an ecumenical council, we must continue to find other avenues to provide sufficient and adequate pastoral leadership for communities.

Increasingly, throughout the United States the Church seems to count on laypersons to fill and carry out formal positions of ministry. Lay pastoral coordinators are proving to be effective leaders in parishes without priests. They are part of the local community, they share in people’s lives, develop strong bonds with their parishioners, are pastorally present in times of joy and celebration as well as in times of need, suffering, and death. Since they cannot celebrate the Eucharist, priest pastors or visiting priests do so once or twice a month. On other weekends these lay ministers preside at Word and Communion services according to a prescribed ritual. The net effect, notes Dean Hoge, is a “separation of the pastoral leadership from Eucharistic leadership and a probable weakening of the sacramental nature of the Church” (Hoge 1987, 197). Indeed, Hoge claims that a Eucharistless Catholic community will in time become a non-Eucharist community scarcely distinguishable from many Protestant churches (Hoge 1987, 101). This is not to denigrate Protestant denominations but to
point out the long-term effect of a separation of pastoral leadership from eucharistic leadership where the sacramental nature of the Church is central.

A more recent study reports that there is still an “apparent lack of symmetry between office and ministry” in the present Catholic situation: certain men are ordained deacons even though their commitment to Church ministry is limited and their involvement often part time, while lay pastoral leaders are giving their full lives and time to pastoring churches without being in any order or office of ministry (Murnion and DeLambo 1999, 69). As we address the question of vocation to pastoral leadership, we must sooner or later resolve the above issues in a new way.

Theological Schools and the Call to Pastoral Ministry

In the past, families, pastors, and church congregations fostered the vocational longings of young people, and nearly every major church body had a feeder system that presented the ordained ministry as a high and noble calling for its young people, rejoiced when one of their own discerned a call to ministry, and proudly saw them off to the seminary (Briggs 2002, 8). This is no longer the norm; thus, finding new ways to encourage young people to respond to a call to priesthood or lay pastoral leadership is a major challenge. In fact, many are asking, “Why in the world would a talented young person commit to a life of low salary, low prestige, long hours, no weekends, and little room for advancement?” (Briggs 2002, 11).

In the face of such discouragement, theological schools find themselves with the task not only of educating priestly candidates and lay ministers who happen to present themselves but also of recruiting and attracting potential ministers, and even of awakening and accompanying their call to ministry. Kenneth Briggs reports several new initiatives being undertaken by schools, such as: bringing young people together for thought, study, and talk with pastors and professors who can provide a vision of pastoral leadership; providing opportunities for young people to speak with their peers about the call to ministry; raising the question of vocation to ministry as a live and viable option; inviting young people personally to explore a call to ministry; exploring ways for local parishes to connect with youth to speak about faith and ministry; visiting college campuses regularly to speak of vocation to ministry; building partnership with and accountability to local churches which agree to send ministers to be trained; combining attention to academic education, spiritual formation, and hands-on internships in ministry (Briggs 2002, 11–12).

In the Catholic context, schools have a unique opportunity to stress a collaborative style of education so that, from the beginning, ordained and non-ordained pastoral leaders are trained for active collaboration and equal partnership in ministry. For this purpose, schools need to develop and commit the necessary resources to
help lay people prepare for pastoral leadership and equip themselves with the necessary degrees and competencies.

Finally, although few enter into a profession today with an expectation of lifelong commitment, social institutions as complex as present-day parishes require stable, full-time, trained leadership (Hoge 1987, 184). Theological schools have a major role to play in ensuring such leadership for the future and I believe they must at the same time continue patiently to address the theological, canonical, pastoral, and moral challenges of how to provide ordained leaders for communities in which pastoral leadership normally requires ordination.

References


