

The Baptized Leading the Baptized

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Using material gleaned from her own research interviews, the author examines the concerns expressed by the Vatican instruction on lay leadership of parishes. She dispels some of the worries and argues for a more optimistic reading of the situation: We may be witnessing the early stages of practical reforms that establish a collaborative and vital partnership of lay and ordained ministries.

In response to the limited number of priests available many bishops are delegating qualified laypersons to lead parishes in their dioceses. In 2001, 627 U.S. parishes were led by laypersons, and more than half the dioceses say they will substantially increase that number within ten years. Official permission for such appointments came in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*. In the event of “a lack of priests” Canon 517.2 allows bishops to entrust “the pastoral care of a parish” to a “person who is not a priest.”

In 1997, however, a Vatican instruction issued jointly by eight congregations expressed serious concerns about this practice and cautioned bishops to utilize every other means to address the priest shortage before appointing lay parish leaders (“Instruction,” Practical Provision 4.1). Are these apprehensions valid? Does the delegation of lay people to lead parishes create more pastoral and theological problems than it solves?

This essay sheds the light of pastoral practice on these questions. After summarizing the concerns expressed by the Holy See, we will explore the pastoral

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experience of eleven lay people currently leading parishes in the U.S. and three of their diocesan coordinators. Quotes from interviews with them, cited in italics, will form the basis for our analysis. (These interviews, conducted by the author, took place in March and April 2001.) The work of Ronald Heifetz will provide a framework for interpreting their experiences. Those interviewed demonstrate that this ministry is fostering a spirit of collaboration among equals that is invigorating the common priesthood of all the baptized.

The Instruction

The “Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained in the Sacred Ministry of Priests” states its goal regarding lay parish leadership:

The object of this document is to outline specific directives to ensure the effective collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in such circumstances while safeguarding the integrity of the pastoral ministry of priests. It should also be understood that these clarifications and distinctions do not stem from a concern to defend clerical privileges but from the need to be obedient to the will of Christ and to respect the constitutive form which he indelibly impressed on his Church (Conclusion).

The instruction emphasizes that this is a “transitory,” extraordinary sharing in pastoral care in response to an emergency—not a proper, permanent, ordinary exercise of the priesthood of the baptized (Theological Principles, 2). The document addresses the formation, moral character, titles, and functions of lay leaders. It raises concerns about

- safeguarding “the nature and mission of sacred ministry and the vocation and secular character of the lay faithful” (Foreword);
- the need to “ensure a proper seminary training” (Theological Principles, 3);
- “respect for that distinction and complementarity of functions which are vital for ecclesial communion” (Theological Principles, 4);
- lay ministry “being perceived and lived as an undue aspiration to the ordained ministry or as a progressive erosion of its specific nature” (Practical Provisions, 1.2);
- and lay people exercising liturgical and preaching functions (Practical Provisions, 2, 3, 6–11).

Analysis of Pastoral Experience

The Interviewees

The interviewees exemplify the broad spectrum of lay people leading parishes today. They range in experience from a first-year intern to a twenty-year veteran and in age from twenty-five to sixty-five, with the majority being late middle-aged. Three are laymen, four are laywomen, and four are women religious. Their parishes vary from a tiny mission church to a suburban parish of 2200 households. Of the three diocesan coordinators one is a layman, one is a diocesan priest, and one is a woman religious. One religious order and eleven dioceses from the southern and midwestern regions of the United States are represented.

“Adequate Formation”

The instruction on collaboration calls for appointees to demonstrate “adequate formation” and “exemplary moral life” (Practical Provisions, 13). All but one of those interviewed have earned graduate degrees in theology or divinity. Most have received spiritual formation in seminary, theology programs, or religious life. They average over twenty years’ experience in ministry. Half have been institutional or corporate administrators. Their training varies, with two of their dioceses requiring year-long internships under the outgoing pastor and regular gatherings for education and support. They seek ongoing education, spiritual formation, and emotional support. Their life stories reflect integrity and deep commitment to the Church. Their education, formation, and personal maturity more than meet the standards set by the instruction.

Reason for Appointment

The instruction echoes Canon 517.2 in restricting this ministry to cases where there is a real shortage of priests. Yet other factors can influence the decision. One diocese appoints lay leaders to the smallest parishes, allowing priest-pastors to serve the largest possible number of people. In another, diocesan leaders consult with parishes to match the real needs of parishes, regardless of size, with the gifts of those available, both lay and ordained. Another rotates lay leaders through all the parishes in the diocese. Policies such as these are intended to avoid creating “second class” parishes, to keep lay parish leaders in the mainstream of diocesan life, and to break the stereotype that the appointment of a lay leader is the last step before parish closure. While the decision to appoint lay parish leaders springs from a shortage of priests, the reason for any particular appointment is always unique.

Delegation or Vocation

Are lay parish leaders living out their ordinary vocation to the common priesthood or performing extraordinary tasks proper to those in the ordained priesthood?

While those interviewed stress the first, the instruction on collaboration emphasizes the second.

Both seem significant. Those interviewed say their ministry represents a flowering of their ordinary baptismal vocation and that they *don't feel the call to ordination*. While they are responding to an internal *call in service to God and people* and exercising the gifts of the Spirit, the U.S. bishops say that they are living out their vocation as baptized Christians (Committee on the Laity, 16). And yet, there is an external call involved as well. Their bishops temporarily delegate them to central, powerful positions ordinarily held by priests. Thus they certainly are functioning extraordinarily.

What links vocation and delegation most intimately in this ministry may be the “collaboration” emphasized by the instruction. Lay leaders are delegated to exercise their own baptismal vocation in collaboration with the vocations of the clergy—to “participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish” (Canon 517.2)—not to replace priests. A mature, formed baptismal vocation equips them, and a bishop’s delegation authorizes them to labor in genuine communion with the ordained.

Title, Role, Authority

Many different titles are used for this ministry in the U.S.—six in this study group alone. Finding a title has proved troublesome since the instruction makes clear: “It is unlawful for the non-ordained faithful to assume titles such as ‘pastor,’ ‘chaplain,’ ‘coordinator,’ ‘moderator,’ or other such similar titles which can confuse their role and that of the Pastor, who is always a Bishop or priest” (Practical Provisions, 1.3). Even so, priests who work with lay leaders commonly refer parishioners to them by saying, “*Ask your pastor*”; some lay leaders describe themselves as *lay pastors*. Yet those interviewed perceive no confusion between their role and that of a priest, no matter what titles are used.

Neither do their official titles help them clarify their role or claim authority in the parish. Their central role is to provide a *pastoral presence*, to be *the one who calls, initiates, invites, and delegates*. They do *everything a pastor does except the sacraments*. Those who had formal installation rituals consider them valuable in communicating their role and authority as the bishop’s official delegate in the parish. Such rituals are recommended by the U.S. bishops to express “the relationship of the bishop to the lay ecclesial minister” (Committee on the Laity, 42).

The diocesan canonical moderator can also affirm *the authority of the pastoral coordinator in conversations with the parish. And good sacramental ministers try to refer people with questions to their pastoral coordinators*. One priest *always prays in the Eucharistic Prayer for the parish’s lay leader*. Such clerical support gives lay leaders *greater acceptance in the community*. But ultimately *the pastoral coordinators themselves have a lot to do with the authority they are given*.

Lay Leadership and Ordination

By and large those interviewed do not perceive their lack of ordination as inhibiting their ability to lead. After an initial period of resistance, the lay leaders *won over* the parishioners in spite of their lay status. *They began to trust the leaders and now they can't do enough* for them. The period of resistance was less difficult when *the ground had been plowed*—that is, when the parish had participated in the appointment process, worked with a lay leader before, or already known the person who was appointed. In two cases, conflict with the sacramental ministers *polarized the people so they didn't know who to listen to*. Some said that their lack of ordination bothered a few parishioners who soon found other parishes to join.

Perhaps since lay ecclesial ministers are so common in the United States, Catholics have become comfortable receiving pastoral care from a variety of persons besides priests. *There are many faces to "pastoring" God has gifted lots of different people with leadership skills*. This recognition serves to increase appreciation for the gifts and responsibilities of the baptized. Will it progressively erode the distinct nature of ordained ministry?

A significant number of clergy see it as very problematic and undermining the authority and credibility of the priesthood. However, a diocesan coordinator says lay leaders prompt a healthy reexamination of the identity of priesthood. *I don't think I was ordained to administrate and worry about broken steam pipes*. Another coordinator believes that the clergy's self-understanding is being challenged. A priest might think: *"I entered the priesthood with an image of myself as pastor. I may not be a pastor, but just a sacramental minister. I can't image that."* *Part of it is imagining how they can exercise their prophetic and royal vocations outside of "pastoring"* *It is re-imagining church in a shared ministry model*.

Liturgical Concerns

The instruction expresses concern about lay parish leaders overstepping their liturgical limits. This does not seem to be the case among the people interviewed. The seven who preach do so with permission from their bishops and the blessing of the sacramental ministers. When people "confess" to them, they encourage sacramental penance as soon as possible. Only four have been unable to find a priest to be present at a deathbed. *They do everything possible to locate a priest for them*. If there is no priest available they *provide the best pastoral care* they can. *Most people seem very grateful*. In only one case was a dying person anointed at a family's insistence, with the explanation that it was not the sacrament of the sick. All of the lay leaders say that people find comfort in receiving the Eucharist and praying the prayers for the sick. *They find that God does minister through them even when sacraments are not available*.

Challenges

Lay parish leaders experience challenges unique to their situations. Their jobs are insecure, subject to diocesan personnel policies in which they have *no voice*. Although they attend presbyteral gatherings, they *need to work hard to stand up and be counted, to be heard*. And exclusion from clergy networks of communication makes it difficult for them to maintain connections with the diocesan church.

While they find most sacramental ministers supportive and easy to work with, some priests *find it hard not to be the pastor, agenda setter, etc. The inadequacy of their background keeps them from understanding the change in their role*. The U.S. bishops' subcommittee on lay ministry found similar concerns. Bishops asked how they could "prepare and educate priests for greater involvement of the laity" and how to "convince our people (perhaps priests) that lay ministry is not second-class ministry" (Committee on the Laity, 45–46, parenthetical insert in original).

The key challenge for this ministry appears to be lay/clergy collaboration. One diocesan coordinator emphasized the need for *a real spirit of collaboration to avoid "turfdom," because that is not only a clerical thing. Pastoral leaders need to work as a team. . . . A spirit of service to the people and the Lord is needed*. But such "effective collaboration" will require constant cultivation by lay parish leaders, clergy, and diocesan leadership if the Church is to weed out every scandalous sprout of division or "clerical privileges" still rooted in our relational patterns, ecclesiology, and organizational systems.

Fruits of Lay Leadership

Lay parish leadership is bearing fruit for the parishes, dioceses, and priests affected by this ministry. In her extensive study of parishes with lay leaders, *They Call Her Pastor*, Ruth Wallace found "increased participation of the parishioners and a growing spirit of solidarity within the parish" (Wallace, 81). Those interviewed here confirm Wallace's findings and agree with her that the most significant factor in empowering their congregations is their lay perspective which allows them to collaborate with parishioners as equals (Wallace, 67, 71). They say:

- *I connected to them on their own terms; it was an equal exchange.*
- *I might be more accessible personally than a priest, perhaps as a woman or as a layperson. I put some leadership back into the parish that had been taken away. It is vitally important with a lay leader of a parish to have the people of the parish as involved as possible. They don't see you as very different from themselves.*
- *I am good at working with people so they feel they are involved and it is their parish. I am just here to help them. I try not to let myself get in the way of the people who are doing all the things they should be doing*

With no resident priest-pastor, there is no one to place on a pedestal, no one to expect to do our thinking and our work for us. Parishioners are challenged to exercise their gifts and take responsibility for the life of their parish.

Some interviewees feel they are motivating their dioceses to involve the laity more fully in diocesan liturgies, communication, consultation, and discernment processes. This reflects the U.S. bishops' recommendation for "the appropriate incorporation of lay ecclesial ministers within the consultative structures of the diocese, particularly those lay ministers who are also parish life coordinators (appointed according to canon 517.2)" (Committee on the Laity, 43).

They also believe they are having an impact on their *brother priests*. They are *in a good position to break down walls between clergy and lay through their intimate interaction with priests*. Although some have felt pressured to *prove their orthodoxy*, they sense that *over the years they have gained respect with the clergy*. *The more we share at deanery and regional gatherings, the more similarity and partnership the priests see*. Most feel they help the clergy to respect the baptized, learn methods of empowerment, re-examine their own priestly vocations, and embrace collaboration on parish and diocesan levels.

Regrettable or Providential?

The instruction on collaboration envisions lay leadership of parishes as a temporary necessity to be avoided if possible. Yet those interviewed *affirm the life-giving Spirit at work* in the pastoral care, the empowering of the laity, the increased collaboration between clergy and laity, and the reshaping of diocesan systems that this ministry is bringing about:

- *I believe it is a movement of the Holy Spirit to return the Church to being a Church of the people.*
- *Our bishop said it was the work of the Holy Spirit—as lay people were being encouraged to use the gifts they have for the service of the community it would help people better understand the ordained as well as the priesthood of the faithful—the complementarity of gifts. I believe that.*
- *We have created something that helps us realize that we are one, with one mission. Our status shouldn't come first. Baptism is our call to ministry.*

A Framework for Interpretation

Leadership and Authority

Ronald Heifetz's *Leadership without Easy Answers* provides a construct for understanding the success of lay parish leaders. Heifetz explains how one can lead from a position of authority or without any authority. Authority is given to

one formally designated to lead a group, as the ordained are authorized to lead the faithful. But those without formal authority also influence groups in which they interact. Lay parish leaders are leading in situations where they have authority and in those where they have no authority at all.

Within the parishes they serve, they tend to be granted the authority to lead. Yet they are not the leaders their parishes expect. Because they are not ordained, parishioners do not presume that they will provide “direction, protection and order” as authority figures are expected to do (Heifetz, 69). Lay leaders have the freedom to lead in new ways—a freedom seldom afforded the clergy. They can say, “I don’t know,” and “What will we do?”—a strategy that is encouraging parishioners to claim responsibility for their parishes.

With the presbyterate, lay parish leaders have no real authority. In these situations they “lead” by gradually developing trusted relationships with individual priests, by modeling effective collaboration, and by advocating for issues and constituencies that might otherwise be forgotten. Although they have no decision-making authority in church structures, their presence, their example and their voice are influencing the clerical system.

“Adaptive Challenges”

Heifetz also delineates between “technical problems” and “adaptive challenges” (Heifetz, 8). Leadership, Heifetz asserts, consists not in fixing problems but in mobilizing the group to respond together to the challenges they face. In the Church, the official strategy seems to be to fix technical problems: place lay leaders in parishes to solve the temporary priest shortage; restrict the titles and functions of lay ministers to end uncertainty over priestly identity. Experience indicates, however, that neither problem is being solved by these technical fixes. Heifetz would argue that these techniques simply mask the real adaptive challenges and delay the Church’s response.

This study suggests that the Church is encountering an enduring adaptive challenge: We have yet to fully embrace the common priesthood of all the baptized. To meet this challenge lay leaders are acting as role models for the laity and enabling them to take responsibility for the mission of the Church.

In the process a second adaptive challenge is arising. An empowered laity must re-envision its relationship with the clergy. These lay leaders show us that the most appropriate and fruitful relationship between lay and ordained faithful today is one of genuine collaboration. Many resist this change. Yet the church “family” has grown up. As mature, capable adults, laypersons are being challenged to relate to their “fathers” differently than as children.

A third adaptive challenge presents itself to the ordained. By identifying as equals with parishioners, lay parish leaders are breaking old patterns of work avoidance in the Church. The instruction on collaboration encourages priests, too, to embrace their oneness with the laity: “The priest is exhorted . . . to grow

in awareness of the deep communion uniting him to the People of God in order to awaken and deepen co-responsibility in the one common mission of salvation . . .” (Theological Principles 1). Thus it seems that “proper seminary training” and ongoing priestly formation should nurture the baptismal identity and vocation that the clergy share with the whole people of God. Exploring the commonalities among all the baptized may do as much to clarify the character of ordination and empower the baptismal priesthood as focusing on the distinctions between lay and ordained faithful.

Unanswered Questions

The anecdotal experience of these lay parish leaders raises important questions for pastoral practice and theology.

- Can the ordained preserve the integrity of their priestly, prophetic, and royal ministry while functioning as sacramental ministers in lay-led parishes? How?
- The limited availability of priests is having an impact on the Church’s sacramental practice. How will these changes affect sacramental theology?
- How might the Church alter the accustomed relational patterns between clergy and laity that inhibit Catholics from fully embracing the common priesthood of the faithful?
- How would a broader usage of the word “pastor” affect our theology of ordination and baptism? Perhaps as long as we say that only the ordained can function as pastors we will continue to believe that the baptized can only function as sheep.

Conclusions

This study offers encouragement in the face of the concerns that have been expressed about laypersons leading parishes. Those interviewed believe the “nature of the common priesthood of the faithful” is not being obscured but revealed. Rather than “progressive erosion” there seems to be clarification of the distinct ministry of the ordained. Pastoral caution is being exercised in liturgical and preaching functions. Lay leaders seek “effective collaboration” with the clergy, in spite of diocesan systems and human inclinations that sometimes obstruct their efforts. Most do not have an “undue aspiration to the ordained ministry”; rather, they emphasize their common identity with the baptized in order to enable all the faithful to “be obedient to the will of Christ.”

The fundamental strategy of these lay leaders is to collaborate as equals with all the faithful—lay and ordained. Such collaboration does not seek to overthrow “the constitutive form which [Christ] indelibly impressed on his Church.” Nor does it let a vision of “clerical privileges” inhibit lay and ordained faithful from working in true “ecclesial communion.” Collaboration among equals enfleshes the vision of the Church as a sacrament of communion. It requires systems that nurture mutual respect for one another’s gifts and mature leaders whose fully formed Christian identity, trust in the Spirit, and fidelity to the Church enable them to focus together on fostering the priestly vocation that all the faithful hold in common.

Pope John Paul II has challenged parishes to “renew parish life in the image of the Church herself as a communion benefiting from the complementary gifts and charisms of all her members” (Coriden, 122). Through the ministry of lay parish leaders, however “transitory” it may be, the Spirit is inviting us into a relationship of communion between clergy and laity in order to fully unfold the baptismal grace of all Christians. When lay and ordained leaders can truly collaborate as equals, the Church will harvest the fully ripened fruit of the baptized leading the baptized.

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