The Fourth Sunday of Easter is officially designated as “Vocation Sunday,” the day on which homilists are to encourage the faithful to pray for vocations. Though I cannot base my surmise on any wide survey, I suspect that in most Catholic parishes the vocations that the faithful will be exhorted to pray for are to the priesthood and the religious life. Yet, in the United States today, more than thirty thousand lay Catholics are engaged in what the bishops are calling “lay ecclesial ministry,” and three fourths of those lay people feel that they have received a vocation for this ministry, along with a charism that enables them to fulfill it. These facts suggest the questions that I intend to discuss in this column. What are these lay Catholics doing? Why is it being called “lay ecclesial ministry”? Is it appropriate to speak of lay people receiving a “vocation” to ecclesial ministry? Is such a vocation rightly seen as a charism?

What are these Lay Catholics Doing?

The following are examples of the titles that they might have: pastoral associate, director of religious education, liturgy director, youth minister, social justice director. The services that are being called “lay ecclesial ministry” involve roles of responsibility and leadership for which people have been professionally prepared, and which call for a stable commitment on their part. They are quite different from the kinds of services that are performed, even regularly and faithfully, by ushers, readers, extraordinary ministers of the eucharist, or members of the parish choir.

Why is it called “Lay Ecclesial Ministry”?

It is called lay ministry because it has a sufficient sacramental foundation in Baptism and Confirmation, and does not require Holy Orders. In this context, the term “lay” is used in the canonical sense, according to which religious women, who make up about two-fifths of those taking part in this ministry, are lay persons. They bring to their ministry the special gifts that flow from their religious consecration and life in community, just as other lay persons bring the insights and expertise that are the fruit of their secular experience, and, in many cases, of their married life.

It is called ecclesial ministry because it is directed toward the building up and pastoral care of an ecclesial community, and because the lay ministers are publicly com-
missioned to this service by their bishop or parish priest. In this ministry on behalf of a parish or diocese, they are at the same time contributing to the effectiveness of the Church in its wider mission of promoting the reign of God in the world.

Is It Appropriate to Speak of Vocations to Lay Ecclesial Ministry?

My answer to this question is based on the correspondence between the factors that lead a man to seek ordination to the priesthood and lead a bishop to ordain him, and the factors that lead lay persons to make a stable commitment to lay ecclesial ministry, and that lead a bishop or parish priest to commission them for it.

One can expect the following factors to enter into a genuine vocation to the priesthood in the Catholic Church of the Latin rite. An unmarried man who is attracted to the life and ministry of priests has a sense that this is what God is calling him to do with his life. He believes he has the requisite gifts of nature and grace for such a life and ministry. He freely chooses to accept this call, along with the obligation to a lifetime of chaste celibacy that it entails. After he is judged qualified for it, he is accepted into a program of preparation for the priesthood. His vocation is tested and judged at intervals during the time of preparation, and at its successful completion, a bishop calls him to the priesthood and ordains him.

Since well over half of those engaged in lay ecclesial ministry are women, I shall describe the factors that typically lead a woman to make a stable commitment to this ministry. In doing this, I shall make use of an essay that Mary Elsbernd contributed to the volume entitled: Revisiting the Idea of Vocation. Theological Explorations. She directs the Master of Divinity (M. Div.) program in the Institute of Pastoral Studies (IPS) at Loyola University, Chicago. While the M.Div. is generally seen as the professional degree for ordained ministry, those who apply for admission to the M.Div. program in the IPS at Loyola University are preparing to engage in lay ministry. A personal essay is a required part of the admission process. Mary Elsbernd has made a study of the essays submitted by the first one hundred students to be accepted and enrolled in this program since its inception in 1989. Here are some of her findings.

Seventy-seven of these students are women, twenty-three are men. In their personal essays, eighty-five described their application to the program as a response to a “call” from God. Male and female applicants seemed equally at home with the vocabulary of call. Elsbernd described what she called five “areas of meaning” in the applicants’ understanding of their call. The call was felt as coming from a source beyond themselves; it was not based on mere self-interest, but looked to the good of others; it broke with conventional wisdom about career advancement and social status based on income; it was based on a conviction that their gifts from creation and baptism should be used to benefit the community; it included a sense of divine affirmation of their decision to prepare for ministry.

For these applicants, the decision to follow their call meant undertaking three years of study for the M.Div. degree, an obvious sign of the seriousness of their commitment to engage in ministry. Eighty-nine of the one hundred had obtained the degree by May 2003, and almost all of them are now professional ministers in the Church or its sponsored institutions. Not all such lay ministers have the M.Div., but they have all completed an extended program of formation, provided either by a diocese or by a Catholic college or university.

As a man’s call to the priesthood has to be confirmed by a bishop who calls him to
ordination, so also a woman’s personal call to lay ecclesial ministry has to be confirmed by a bishop or parish priest who appoints her to a ministry for which he judges her qualified. In the first case, the bishop confers the sacrament of Holy Orders, which qualifies the man for ordained ministry; in the second case he gives a public commissioning, which authorizes the woman to engage in ministry on behalf of the Church.

On the basis of the correspondence between the factors that have entered into the preparation of the two candidates for ecclesial ministry, I would draw the conclusion that just as we should no longer restrict the word ministry to the ordained, so we should no longer restrict the word vocation to the call to the priesthood or the religious life.

Is a Vocation to Lay Ecclesial Ministry a Charism?

To answer this question I shall begin by quoting the passage in which Vatican II explains what is meant by charisms:

It is not only through the sacraments and Church ministries that the same Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the People of God and enriches it with virtues. Allotting His gifts “to everyone according as he will” (1 Cor 12:11), He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks or offices advantageous for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church, according to the words of the Apostle: “The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit” (1 Cor 12:7). These charismatic gifts, whether they be the most outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation, for they are exceedingly suitable and useful for the needs of the Church (LG 12).

If one now reflects on what we have seen is involved in vocations to ordained and lay ecclesial ministry, I do not see how one could fail to recognize how perfectly such vocations correspond to what Vatican II meant by charisms. The notion of charisms as “special graces” that the Spirit “distributes,” to those whom He chooses, applies not only to vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, but to vocations to lay ecclesial ministry as well. It is true that all lay persons are called by their baptism to participate in the Church’s overall mission of promoting the reign of God in the world, but obviously for most of them baptismal grace does not include a gift that makes them ready and willing to make a stable commitment to ministry on behalf of the ecclesial community. The very fact that the Church urges us to pray for vocations implies the recognition that these are “special graces” that the Church cannot count on as if they were the normal effects of Christian initiation. My conclusion is that vocations to lay ecclesial ministry are charismatic gifts for which we ought to pray, just as we pray for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life.

Reference