Exceptional Ministers

Where Parish Life Coordinators Might Lead

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The ministerial reality of parish life coordinators challenges a theology built exclusively on a deductive, systematic, and static model of church order. Parish life coordinators invite us to imagine our theology of ministry from a more inductive, experimental, and dynamic perspective. This evolving way of serving calls us beyond the myth of an eternal church structure, toward greater honesty about our history and a freer way of responding to the demands of the present.

If, because of a lack of priests, the diocesan bishop has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care. (The Code of Canon Law, c. 517 §2)

Over the past twenty years, hundreds of parishes in dioceses all across the United States have witnessed the rise of a new role of ministerial leadership: the parish life coordinator. Called by a variety of different titles, this ministerial role belongs to those deacons, vowed religious, and laypersons who, according to canon 517 §2, are entrusted with the overall pastoral care of a parish in the absence of a resident priest-pastor. Their numbers are small relative to the overall phenomenon

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of lay ecclesial ministry. (There are fewer than 500 parish life coordinators among the more than 30,000 lay ministers working in U.S. parishes.) But their contribution is large. Personal experience and formal surveys show that parish life coordinators are meeting a real need, working in close collaboration with their bishops, and offering outstanding service within their communities. They are truly exceptional ministers.

Parish life coordinators are exceptional in another sense as well. They are an exception. According to canon law, parish life coordinators are an exception to the church’s ordinary ministerial order—granted in response to a particular need. This seems to be the clear implication of the opening clause of *Code of Canon Law* canon 517 §2 on the “lack” (*penuriam*) of priests. Attention to the debates surrounding the drafting of this canon confirms this interpretation. The phrase “extraordinary and temporary” was dropped from an earlier version of the code only because the commission found it redundant (Beal, 685). The logic implied by the canon is straightforward: Ordinarily, parishes are led by ordained priests. In some places and in some cases, there are not enough ordained priests. Thus parish life coordinators are authorized to “fill in.” They are an allowance, a variation on standard operating procedure, an extraordinary form of ministry. In this sense, parish life coordinators are exceptional ministers.

As I hope to explain below, I harbor a certain ambivalence about this “exceptional” status of the parish life coordinator. On the one hand, the beauty of exceptions in canon law is that they remind us of something that is so easy to forget: the law is flexible. Canon law is not a rigid set of rules forever set in stone. Rather, the law allows for considerable adaptation in order to meet the needs of the church. But on the other hand, to consider this particular role an exception raises difficult questions about the ministerial identity of the parish life coordinator. What does it mean for one’s ministerial self-understanding to be marked as an exception, an expedient, a “fill in” for another form of ministry, namely, that of the ordained priest? Unlike all other lay ecclesial ministers, whose work is clearly affirmed by the U.S. bishops as a gift of the Spirit, parish life coordinators find themselves in a more ambiguous position. The bishops’ document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* states simply: “Participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish, as described in the *Code of Canon Law*, canon 517 §2, is another example of lay ecclesial ministry, although it differs in kind from the other roles because it exists simply because of the shortage of priests” (USCCB, 11).
In her recent study, *Parish Life Coordinators: Profile of an Emerging Ministry*, Kathy Hendricks captures something of the difficult situation facing these ministers. She reports on the attitudes of a number of bishops interviewed about the phenomenon, who describe their overall positive experience with parish life coordinators (PLC), but call the role a less-than-ideal and temporary solution to the priest shortage—“a stopgap measure until a priest can be assigned to the parish as pastor.” Sensitive to the practical implications of such ambiguity, Hendricks acknowledges that this situation can be awkward “when a PLC’s expectations over job tenure clash with a bishop’s goal of assigning a priest-pastor in every parish” (Hendricks, 83).

Some might argue that there is no problem here. Surely parish life coordinators realize the situation going in. Do they really expect to permanently replace the priest-pastor? In an ideal world, the thinking goes, there would be no parish life coordinators. In an ideal world, every parish would be led by an ordained priest.

In other words, to call the parish life coordinator an exception is to imply an ideal. It is precisely this ideal that I want to explore. In doing so, I hope to complicate our taken-for-granted model of ministerial order. What are the theological assumptions behind the “exceptional” status of parish life coordinators? Where do these come from and how have they changed? How might we see our present situation in light of a longer history of ministerial adaptation and innovation? And does such a perspective offer a more positive appraisal of the role of parish life coordinator? In short: Is it possible to see in this role not a stopgap measure, but an opening to a new ministerial future?

**Dealing with Exceptions**

The problem with parish life coordinators is that they do not fit within one particular theological vision of church order. This theological vision is a vision endorsed by the magisterium and held by many theologians. It is a vision rooted in our sacramental theology and shaped by centuries of pastoral experience. It is a vision that links the ability to preside over the eucharistic community with the ability to preside over the eucharistic sacrifice. It is a vision that ties pastoring (at least in its fullest sense) to ordination.

For the theologian shaped by this vision (which, I hasten to add, cannot be easily dismissed), the simplest thing to do with parish life coordinators is to get rid of them. Parish life coordinators sever community leadership from eucharistic leadership. They split pastoring from ordination. They are an exception, and thus we ought to eliminate the exception. While this sounds harsh, it is actually a solution suggested at both ends of the ecclesiological spectrum.

At one extreme, the solution is to eliminate the parish life coordinator by terminating the position. Ignoring the clear accommodation made in canon law and
disregarding the prudence of many bishops who have appointed parish life coordinators, some commentators argue that “lay pastoring” is totally inappropriate. They see parish life coordinators as an example of laity stepping outside of their proper role of witnessing in the world—a clericalization of the laity that should be actively discouraged, resisted, and even prohibited. What the church needs to do, they argue, is to terminate these positions and redouble its efforts to recruit more seminarians and to pray for more vocations to the priesthood. The famous 1997 Vatican Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests (Congregation of the Clergy et al.) leans in this direction. Underscoring the extraordinary nature of parish life coordinators, the instruction states that, before activating canon 517 §2, all other possibilities must be exhausted—including assigning several parishes to one priest, using retired priests, or even reconsidering the age at which priests are allowed to retire in the first place.

At the other extreme, the solution is to eliminate parish life coordinators, not by terminating them, but by ordaining them. After all, some commentators argue, isn’t the priest shortage simply the result of the exclusion of women and married men from the ordained priesthood? Thirty years ago, Edward Schillebeeckx suggested that there is a difference between an authentic multiplicity of ministries, which arise out of new needs in the community, and an inauthentic multiplicity of ministries, which arise because access to the appropriate ministries (such as the presbyterate) are withheld from individuals and groups in the church (Schillebeeckx, 78). Some today would argue that the role of parish life coordinator is an example of an inauthentic multiplicity of ministries—a kind of duplicate ministry that has appeared not out of genuine needs or new ways of serving. Rather this ministry has appeared simply because access to priestly ordination is reserved to celibate men. Therefore, they argue, the easiest and most honest thing to do is to ordain as pastors the parish life coordinators already pastoring in the church.

These two positions are not equal options: one involves an overly restrictive interpretation of canon law, the other calls for a radical shift in current church discipline and doctrine. But what is interesting is how much these two sides share. Both positions are based on the assumption that the parish life coordinator is an exception. However, rather than take the exception seriously, both sides want to eliminate it. What the two sides share is the desire to carry on. They want to carry on with a certain theological vision of ministerial order. The only difference is that this ministerial order would be populated with different groups—one more inclusive than the other.
Ministry That Is Patristic and Pastoral

Neither position summarized above fully addresses the fundamental theological paradigm that guides the discussion of church order. If I were to name this paradigm concisely, I would call it a patristic and pastoral model of ministry. This is the vision of church order that so strongly links presiding over the community with presiding over the eucharist. It is the vision that insists that the pastor be a priest.

To speak of a patristic model of ministry is to evoke that golden age of church order in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. Very little is known about ministry before this period. What we do know suggests that those early years were a time of incredible flux in ministerial forms. By the early second century, certain important roles took shape, but local diversity remained the norm and offices continued to evolve. Over the course of the third century a more stable situation started to emerge, as canon, creed, and community leadership began to offer greater consistency to the faith. By the fourth century, with the imperial recognition of the church, a familiar pattern centered on a few important ministries finally took hold. This was a time—after centuries of persecution, but before the decline of the early medieval period—when brilliant bishops like Ambrose and Augustine, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom organized their churches, wrote rich theological treatises, and delivered deeply moving homilies. In their carefully preserved writings and in the various liturgical documents that have survived, we catch our best glimpse of ministerial order in the “early church.” Here—in its classic patristic form—ministry revolved around a single bishop in each local church, a shepherd surrounded by his council of presbyters, deacons, and a host of other ministers serving the Christian community. This ministerial order was symbolized beautifully when the whole local church gathered around the bishop at the table of the eucharistic celebration—a liturgy that drew the horizontal communion of the church into vertical communion with the triune God.

This patristic conception of ministry survived as a powerful ideal over the course of Christian history, even if it was rarely, if ever, enacted in the concrete. It is a vision that continues to exercise a powerful hold on the Catholic ecclesiological imagination—and for good reason. Not only does the model enjoy deep roots in our tradition, it is also the fundamental vision of ministry presented in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The link is not coincidental. The documents of Vatican II were influenced by—even written by—twentieth-century theological giants like Yves Congar, Henri De Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and others, who had dedicated their life’s work to recovering the great riches of the Christian tradition. Of these riches, no period shone more brightly for these scholars than the golden age of the early church. This appreciation is reflected in the council documents, which hold up the ideal of patristic church order as the fundamental framework for its discussion of ministry.
There is much to recommend in this patristic conception of church, a point brought to light since the council by the rediscovery of various forms of communion ecclesiology among the Christian churches. The concept of communion—drawn from the early church’s trinitarian and eucharistic sensibilities—has become a central and fruitful category in ecumenical dialogue. Through the work of Catholic theologians like Jean-Marie Tillard, Hervé-Marie Legrand, Joseph Komonchak, Susan Wood, and Richard Gaillardetz, this patristic vision opens out into creative ways of talking about ministerial relationships in the present. And yet—for all the value of this vision—it is important to remember that ministry moved on after the sixth century. New forms emerged over the centuries that might shed valuable light on our own time.

Ministry That Is Modern and Missionary

Instead of leaping from the early church to the church of today, it is helpful to spend a little time on the centuries in between. Over twenty years ago, the Jesuit historian John O’Malley made precisely this point. In an important—and too-often overlooked—article titled, “Priesthood, Ministry, and Religious Life: Some Historical and Historiographical Considerations,” O’Malley points toward the incredible ministerial diversity that marked the time between the patristic and the present. As his title implies, O’Malley’s argument focuses on priesthood and religious life over the centuries. But his insights offer a fresh way of thinking about the parish life coordinator today.

O’Malley begins his article with Vatican II’s teaching on the priesthood. He welcomes the council’s emphasis on the ministry of the priest, which he sees as a helpful corrective to the magisterium’s previous emphasis on the status or ontology of priesthood. According to Vatican II, priesthood is first and foremost a ministry; it is service for others in the person of Christ. But O’Malley asks: What is the precise nature of this ministry? According to Vatican II, O’Malley argues, the ministry of the priest follows a basically patristic pattern. It is: (1) a ministry by and large to the Christian faithful; (2) a ministry conceived of taking place within a stable community of faith; and (3) a ministry done in hierarchical union with the bishop (O’Malley, 224).

O’Malley points out that these three characteristics fit pretty well the ministry of diocesan priests today. But they do not fit so well the ministry of religious priests (priests living in a religious order or congregation). In fact, particularly in its emphasis on the priest’s relationship to the bishop, the council’s vision of priesthood actually contradicts the history, self-understanding, and canonical structures of religious order priests—a ministerial reality that evolved within a tradition of explicit exemption from episcopal oversight. There is significant ministerial diver-
During the thirteenth century, the kind of pervasive, grass-roots enthusiasm for “apostolic life” that characterized late medieval Europe burst forth into a new and lasting ministerial form: the friars. With the friars—the most well-known are the Dominicans and the Franciscans, but this movement also included the Carmelites, Augustinians, Servites, and many others—we find a new form of service emerging out of pastoral need and personal experience. We see diversity in ministry.

For example, the Dominicans were founded to confront the Albigensians, a heretical movement that the ministerial structures of the day were simply incapable of responding to effectively. The structures in place were not working. Something new was needed. And specific ministerial forms took shape to meet specific needs. Good teaching and good preaching were in short supply, so the Dominicans (the Order of Preachers) stressed education for their members. The opulence of the clergy was condemned by the Albigensians, so the vow of poverty was embraced, in part, in order that the Dominicans might get a hearing. Mobility was required to respond to a rapidly spreading movement, so the friars abandoned the monastery and successfully campaigned for freedom from the supervision of local bishops.

This last point—exemption from episcopal oversight—strikes O’Malley the historian. The earlier exemptions from episcopal oversight granted to monasteries
like Cluny were meant to safeguard the internal governance of those communities. The exemption granted to the Dominicans and the Franciscans was of a different sort. It was intended not only to protect the internal governance of these new orders; it was also intended to protect their ministry. In other words, what the friars successfully argued was that, in order to accomplish their ministry more effectively, they had to be free from the control of the bishop.

“From the viewpoint of church order,” O’Malley concludes, “this development is astounding” (236). We forget how radical this departure must have been at the time. Almost nothing that the mendicants did fit into the patristic model of pastoral ministry. What we see in the friars is an experimentation not only with new ministries, but also with new ministerial forms. There is a freedom and a flexibility here that we too often miss.

For O’Malley, a Jesuit, it is in the sixteenth century and through the Society of Jesus that this experimentation is taken to new heights. The early modern period, he argues, was not simply a reactionary time of Counter-Reformation. It was, in fact, one of the most explosive and expansive periods of ministerial innovation in the history of the church. It was a time of incredible creativity in ministry, a time when anything that seemed to “produce fruit” for the good of souls or for the mission of the church was pursued with energetic zeal and hard-headed pragmatism. We could say the same for the dozens and dozens of communities of active religious life founded since the sixteenth century—congregations of women marked by the same energetic creativity and ministerial flexibility. In the mendicants, in the Jesuits, in the sisters, O’Malley concludes, we discover a history of ministerial adaptation that stands in marked contrast to the more “normative” approach to church order that dominates so much of our present ecclesial consciousness. These new forms represent classic “exceptions” to the patristic vision of ministry.

O’Malley’s focused point is that priesthood is more internally diverse than Vatican II seems to imply. Alongside the patristic and pastoral tradition of priesthood—which emphasizes ministry to the Christian faithful, in a stable community, under the supervision of the bishop—there is another model. This other model is more missionary and modern—embodied in a priestly ministry oriented both to the faithful and to those outside the fold, one that moves beyond the stable community, and one that serves in relative independence from the local bishop.
In O’Malley’s focused point about priesthood, however, we find a larger lesson about ministerial diversity, experimentation, and change. We learn a more appreciative and open attitude toward the ministerial exception.

**The Promise of Parish Life Coordinators**

What might this history suggest about our present experience of the parish life coordinator—those deacons, religious, and laypeople who share in the exercise of the pastoral care of parishes? We have to be careful about drawing parallels between ministerial diversity in the sixteenth century and ministerial diversity today. Parish life coordinators are not a new religious order. And in their ministry we find not the new missionary impulse that marked the mendicants or the Jesuits, but rather a new form of participation in the pastoral care of parishes. Is this emerging model modern and pastoral? Postmodern and practical? Or is it opening up a form of ministerial order whose shape we still cannot see? It is not so much a question of a direct parallel between ministerial change in the past and ministerial change in the present. It is more a question of our stance, our theological posture: How do we see ourselves responding to exceptions in ministry?

If we operate out of a deductive and overly systematic conception of ministry, we will struggle with the exceptions. I see this tension in my own earlier work, where I struggled to find a place for parish life coordinators within a basically patristic model—preferring to see the parish life coordinator not as a new form of ministry, but as an old form (namely, presbyter-pastor) that, due to disciplinary restrictions, was limited in fully exercising the ministry of community leadership. Unable to take seriously the exception to the patristic model, I cited Schillebeeckx’s distinction between an authentic and an inauthentic multiplicity of ministries and gently suggested, “From some future vantage point the nonordained role of pastoral coordinator may appear as an inauthentic multiplication of the ministry of community leader” (Hahnenberg, 240). The logic of the model seemed to force a choice: If presiding over the community has to be linked to presiding over the Eucharist, then either you have to terminate or you have to ordain the parish life coordinator. But such a conclusion presumes a certain normative form or idealized vision of ministry that—it now seems to me—ignores a long history of ministerial innovation and diversity. The mendicants and the sisters did not simply fit into an earlier conception of church order. They engaged existing forms, adapting and transforming a rich ministerial legacy, stretching it in creative and complementary ways, bringing into existence something genuinely new. The *exceptions* made in earlier eras—freedom from episcopal oversight, religious community without choir, nuns serving outside the convent—gave birth to new and lasting ministerial forms. Might not the same thing be happening today?
Clearly our choices for responding to the reality of parish life coordinators are not as stark as the extreme options I summarized at the beginning of this essay. Most of church life is lived not at the ends, but in the middle. The vast majority of theologians, church leaders, and ministers recognize that the role of parish life coordinator exists as a legitimate pastoral tool, extended by canon law to address a pressing pastoral need. Where there is debate, the debate revolves around how we interpret that need. If canon 517 §2 speaks of a “lack of priests,” our disagreements often reflect different judgments about what counts as a “lack” and what other strategies ought to be considered. What seems widely shared, however, is the assumption that the role of parish life coordinator represents an extraordinary form of ministry, an exception to the norm. And when this role is understood as an exception, it is hard to escape the conclusion articulated by those bishops who speak positively of parish life coordinators, but call it a less-than-ideal and temporary solution—a stopgap measure until more priests can be found.

My question is this: Would we have said the same thing about St. Dominic and his friars, or about St. Ignatius and his companions—that their “exceptional” ministry was a “less-than-ideal and temporary solution” to the needs of the church at the time? What if we were to imagine ourselves in the thirteenth century, facing enormous challenges, challenges that the ministerial structures of the time simply could not handle. Would we look at the Franciscans and the Dominicans and say that “from some future vantage point,” all of this “may appear as an inauthentic multiplication of ministry”?

Returning to the present—or better, looking ahead to the future, looking ahead seven hundred or eight hundred years from now—might we not hope that the role of the parish life coordinator will appear to the church not to have been an inauthentic multiplication of ministry, but an authentic diversification of our ministerial life? Could we come to see that—like the mendicants, like the Jesuits, like the active women’s communities—this ministry emerged in response to new needs in the church, that it brought into being new ways of ministering that earlier models never anticipated, new forms of Christian service that would bring a great grace to the church and the world?

The ministerial reality unleashed by canon 517 §2 challenges a theology built exclusively on a deductive, systematic, and static model of church order. It invites us to imagine our theology of ministry from a more inductive, experimental and
dynamic perspective. This evolving way of serving calls us beyond the myth of an eternal church structure, toward greater honesty about our history and a freer way of responding to the demands of the present.

O’Malley ends his 1988 article on priesthood and religious life by pointing toward a more practical and dynamic vision: “Do we not need, therefore, especially to recover the pragmatic approach to ministry that current historiography is showing happily characterized our past, but that today seems to be ever more effectively smothered by the ‘normative’ or by some idealized model? The abstract ideal can deliver death as well as life.” He concludes, “It is not our ‘fidelity’ that today needs testing, but our creativity” (O’Malley, 257). As we look out at the enormous challenges facing our world and our church today, the real danger will probably not be the danger of new ideas. The real danger is more likely to be the danger of no ideas. Responding to the reality of parish life coordinators invites us as a church to join that great Catholic tradition of ministerial experimentation—to be prudent, but not to be afraid of where all of this might lead.

Behind this dynamic and historical vision lies an ecclesiology, a vision of church rooted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council—namely, the vision of the church as the pilgrim People of God.

The image of the People of God has been embraced in the postconciliar period as a way to stress the equality of all believers, an equality rooted in our common baptismal dignity. That is the great claim of Lumen Gentium’s chapter 2: What unites us is stronger and more primary than what divides us. But the great claim of LG, chapter 7, is that this people is on pilgrimage. We are on the way, oriented in history toward an eschatological end. This eschatological vision reminds us that the church is always changing, always growing, always seeking out new ways of responding in faith to the Gospel. And while human history is not a simple story of linear progress, an inevitable march from success to success; still, Christianity holds out hope that all of this is leaning forward into the reign of God, that evil and ennui will not triumph over goodness and life, that the darkness will not swallow up the light.

I wonder, then, if there is not some deep truth buried in the words of those conflicted bishops who see parish life coordinators as good, but temporary. Maybe the role of parish life coordinator is temporary. Maybe the role is temporary—not
because these ministers will all be replaced by new priests coming from who knows where. Maybe it is temporary because parish life coordinators will be the ones helping all of us move into something new—a new form of ministerial life, a new way of being church, a new way of serving the future reign of God.

References


