



A LIVING FAITH

A monthly column on the lay vocation and lay formation

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Marking the Tenth Anniversary of “Co-Workers...”

CO-WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD expresses our strong desire for the fruitful collaboration of ordained and lay ministers who, in distinct but complementary ways, continue in the Church the saving mission of Christ for the world, his vineyard.

(U.S. Catholic Bishops, Introduction to “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord”)

This past month, as part of our diocesan **INSTITUTE OF LAY FORMATION** pilgrimage, some of our Institute alumni and students travelled to Saint John’s University and participated in an event reflecting on the tenth anniversary of the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ statement, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*.

Members of the National Association for Lay Ministry, a professional association for lay leaders involved in various areas of church ministry, also gathered at the end of May for their annual conference under the theme, “Celebrating 10 Years of *Co-Workers*.”

And, early this month, our U.S. Catholic Bishops will be meeting at a special gathering to mark this same anniversary, and “to reexamine the current ministerial landscape and explore the realities, challenges, and opportunities facing those in lay ecclesial ministry.”

So, what is this document, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, and what is its significance for our Church here in the United States? We will take this article, and perhaps another one or two, to examine this statement of our U.S. Catholic Bishops and what it teaches us about the lay vocation and the participation of the laity in the life and ministry of the Church.

The bishops assert the purpose of their statement in its first sentence: “*Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* is a resource for diocesan bishops and for all others who are responsible for guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry in the United States.” In other words, it’s a teaching document intended to guide our U.S. Church in its understanding and formation of lay people who are involved in ministry.

This document arises from the reality that there are now over 30,000 lay people who “work at least twenty hours per week in paid positions in parishes,” and another 2,000+ who do so as volunteers. And, there are many other thousands who serve “in the name of the Church in hospitals and health care settings, on college and university campuses, and in prisons, seaports, and airports” – and we might add in our Catholic schools as teachers and administrators.

Since the Second Vatican Council, which affirmed that the laity have an important role to play in the life and work of the Church, the presence of lay women and men in church ministries such as catechesis and sacramental preparation, liturgy, pastoral care, youth ministry, social justice, etc. has grown quite significantly.

Even at the time of the Council, this “new reality” in the Church was recognized: “Sharing in the function of Christ, priest, prophet and king, the laity have an active part of their own in the life and activity of the church. Their activity within the church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect.” (“Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity,” #10)

Co-Workers comes out of a history of our U.S. Bishops seeking to affirm and to guide this new and changing reality within the Church. Several documents are part of this history, beginning with, *Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity*, issued in 1980.

In it, the bishops state: “We are convinced that the laity are making an indispensable contribution to the experience of the People of God and that the full import of their contribution is still in a beginning form in the post-Vatican II Church.”

Fifteen years later, the bishops would update this reflection in the document, *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*, where they would again affirm the critical role of the laity in the life of the Church.

“The new evangelization will become a reality only if ordained and lay members of Christ’s faithful understand their roles and ministries as complementary, and their purposes joined to the one mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.... For our part we bishops cannot imagine ourselves entering a new millennium, embarked upon a new evangelization, unless we walk side by side with our lay sisters and brothers.”

Other documents and statements followed, with *Co-Workers* serving as the culmination of this reflection on the laity’s role in the Church. In the Introduction, the bishops acknowledge that “for several decades and in growing numbers, lay men and women have been undertaking a wide variety of roles in Church ministries.”

In light of this, they seek to offer this statement: 1) “as a pastoral and theological reflection” on lay ecclesial ministry; 2) as “an affirmation of those who serve in this way”; and 3) as “a synthesis of best thinking and practice.”

As a pastoral reflection, the statement “does not propose norms or establish particular law,” but rather “suggests concepts, goals, strategies, resources, and ideas to consider.” And, it intends to provide “a common frame of reference” to guide the development of lay ecclesial ministry “in ways that are faithful to the Church’s theological and doctrinal tradition and that respond to contemporary pastoral needs and situations.”

In our upcoming article(s), we will examine and explore the content of this statement in more detail. *Deo Gratias!*