



A LIVING FAITH

A monthly column on the lay vocation and lay formation

by Todd Graff, Director of Lay Formation (September, 2015)

MARKING THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF “CO-WORKERS...” (III)

[B]y their baptismal incorporation into the Body of Christ, lay persons are also equipped with gifts and graces to build up the Church from within, in cooperation with the hierarchy and under its direction.

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

In 2005, our U.S. Catholic Bishops issued a statement on lay ministry entitled, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*. To mark its tenth anniversary, I am offering a series of reflections on the statement in order to share something of its message as it relates to the role of lay women and men within the life of the Church.

In the June issue, I described the purpose of the statement and provided a brief description of its history and context within the recent teachings of our U.S. bishops. In the August issue, I examined the content of the document as it relates to the broader call of the laity to live out the Church’s mission in the world. And, in this column, I would like to reflect on the bishops’ message concerning the role of the laity in the ministry of the Church.

It is important to recall from last month’s column that the laity’s primary vocation is to proclaim and give witness to the gospel in the world – i.e., in their families, neighborhoods, work places, and communities. This is what distinguishes the role of the laity in the Church’s mission from the role of the religious and the ordained.

However, lay women and men do have a role within the Church’s ecclesial ministry as well. This was affirmed by the Second Vatican Council, which stated that “the laity have an active part of their own in the life and activity of the Church.”

Blessed Pope Paul VI expanded on the Council’s teaching by declaring that “[m]inistries may be committed to lay Christians [and] are no longer regarded as reserved to candidates for the sacrament of orders.” In affirming a proper role for the laity within the Church’s ministry, he described how lay people “can also feel called, or in fact be called, to cooperate with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community, for the sake of its growth and life.”

In his statement reflecting on the Church’s mission at the dawn of the new millennium, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Saint Pope John Paul II also called on the laity to play an active role in ministry:

[T]he Church of the Third Millennium will need to encourage all the baptized and confirmed to be aware of their active responsibility in the Church's life. Together with the ordained ministry, other ministries, whether formally instituted or simply recognized, can flourish for the good of the whole community, sustaining it in all its many needs: from catechesis to liturgy, from education of the young to the widest array of charitable works. (#46)

This, then, provides a helpful context for understanding the teaching of our U.S. bishops in “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord” on lay ministry.

The bishops note that one of the ways that lay people “work toward the transformation of the world” is by “working in the Church and focusing on the building of ecclesial communion.” They acknowledge and affirm the growing presence of lay men and women in the Church’s ministry, stating that such ecclesial service is a “path of Christian discipleship” and a “sign of the Holy Spirit’s movement in the lives of our sisters and brothers.”

Most lay people serve the Church in this way “on a limited and voluntary basis” – e.g., as liturgical ministers, catechists, pastoral council members, pastoral care visitors, etc., and by serving in programs relating to youth ministry, sacramental preparation, and social justice.

But, there are also lay people who serve the Church in a more professional capacity, whether on a part-time or full-time basis. The document refers to “lay ecclesial ministers” who are in leadership positions within the Church and have been authorized by the hierarchy for their service. In parish life, such lay ecclesial ministers might include “the pastoral associate, parish catechetical leader, youth ministry leader, school principal, and director of liturgy or pastoral music.”

Such lay ecclesial ministers should have “a special level of professional competence,” as well as academic preparation and formation, which are appropriate for their position of leadership and area of ecclesial service.

In summary, the bishops state:

- that lay ministry “has emerged and taken shape in our country through the working of the Holy Spirit”; and
- that “lay men and women have responded generously to renewed awareness of the implications of their Baptism and to the needs of their Church communities.”

But, the bishops also acknowledge that “the Church’s experience of lay participation in Christ’s ministry is still maturing,” and so they pledge to “expand our study and dialogue concerning lay ministry.”

And so let’s celebrate 10 years of “Co-Workers,” and keep the conversation alive. *Deo Gratias!*

In the Church, there is diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors, Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing in his name and by his power. Lay people too, sharing in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, play their part in the mission of the whole people of God in the church and in the world.

(Second Vatican Council, “Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity,” #2)