



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women & Youth

Email us at flwymail@usccb.org

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Bishops approve lay ecclesial ministry guidelines

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**By Jerry Filteau
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WASHINGTON (CNS) -- The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 15 approved a major document giving guidelines on lay ecclesial ministry after some debate over use of the terms "minister" and "ministry" with regard to lay people serving the church.

The debate ended after Cardinal Avery Dulles, long one of the country's most noted Catholic theologians, rose to defend the usage in the text, saying the drafters "were very careful to see that the terminology is in accord with the documents of the Holy See and with a whole series of documents previously published by this conference."

The 82-page document, "Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord," needed approval by two-thirds of the entire membership of the conference, or 182 votes. It passed by a vote of 190-49 with five abstentions.

Bishop Dale J. Melczek of Gary, Ind., chairman of the bishops' Committee on the Laity, and Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., chairman of the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry, presented the document to the bishops.

Bishop Melczek described it as a "resource for guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry," a rapidly growing phenomenon in Catholic parishes across the country.

Bishop Kicanas stressed that "this document is not particular law. It does not lay down norms or prescriptions." Rather, he said, it seeks to give bishops guidance in overseeing the "faithful development" of the growing practice of employing lay ecclesial ministers in parishes and other church institutions.

The document says lay ecclesial ministry does not describe a new rank or vocation in the church; rather, it is a generic term for a variety of positions held by nonordained people who engage in substantial public leadership positions in church ministry, collaborating closely with the ordained leadership and under their authority.

It sets out guidelines for the appropriate human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation of those who are entrusted with such ministries. It also addresses the role of church authorities in certifying, authorizing and appointing lay ecclesial ministers.

It spells out the theology of lay ministry and the differences between ministry arising out of ordination and ministry arising out of the sacraments of initiation.

It says that according to the latest national study there are 30,632 lay ecclesial ministers who work at least 20 hours a week in paid positions in U.S. Catholic parishes and 2,163 more who do such work at least 20 hours a week on a volunteer basis. There are about 1.6 paid lay ecclesial ministers per U.S. parish and they now outnumber priests engaged in parish ministry.

According to the study more than 40 percent of lay ecclesial ministers in U.S. Catholic parishes are directors of religious education. About one-fourth are general pastoral associates, assisting the pastor in a wide variety of pastoral tasks. Youth ministry, music ministry and liturgical planning or coordination are among other common forms of lay ecclesial ministry found in U.S. parishes.

The National Association for Lay Ministry welcomed the document, saying it "takes an important step forward in recognizing and supporting the significant role these lay ecclesial ministers play in the Catholic Church. It publicly affirms their leadership, invites appropriate authorization for their ministry and clarifies their accountability within ecclesial structures."

During an initial presentation of the document Nov. 14 and again in the debate before voting on it Nov. 15, several bishops questioned the use of the term "lay ecclesial minister," suggesting a danger that Catholics may not understand clearly the difference between lay ministry and the ministry proper only to those who are ordained.

Bishop Robert J. Baker of Charleston, S.C., argued that the church would be better served if the term "ministry" were restricted to those who are ordained. He asked that "roles of service" replace "ministry" in the phrase "lay ecclesial ministry" throughout the document.

Bishop Melczek said describing certain lay activities in the church as ministries is grounded in official church documents.

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, N.Y., asked that the document be remanded to the committee with a request that it be reviewed by the Committee on Doctrine before coming to the bishops for a vote. He said he did not have a problem with the word "ministry," but with using "minister" to describe some lay people.

Archbishop John J. Myers of Newark, N.J., also urged that "the word 'minister' be used as little as possible except when (referring) to the ordained."

Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Rapid City, S.D., opposed returning the document to the committee, saying its use of minister and ministry followed the clear practice of the church and official church documents. He added that the drafting committee "has done yeoman service" in consulting extensively in developing the document.

Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk of Cincinnati pointed out that the members of the doctrine committee were involved in the consultations leading up to the text the bishops were considering. "We could consult ourselves into immobility," he said.

In a voice vote the bishops clearly rejected the proposal to return the document to committee.

The bishops also rejected a proposal by Bishop Allen H. Vigneron of Oakland, Calif., that the document be submitted to the Holy See and not be published until any changes suggested by the Vatican are incorporated. The committee rejected the suggestion as unnecessary, saying there was nothing in the document in the way of new teaching or legislation, norms or prescriptions that would require Vatican review or approval.

During the discussion Cardinal Dulles defended the use of "lay ministry" and "lay minister" as appropriate terms that have gained general acceptance throughout the United States and are warranted by church documents.

"I don't think the term 'ministry' is only used in the Catholic Church for the ordained, unless it's qualified -- like 'sacred ministry' or 'Petrine ministry' or something like that," he said. "I don't go around calling myself a minister, and I don't think most of us do, as is done in some Protestant churches."