

CTSA 2007 – Bishops in the Church

The Bishop and the Lay Ecclesial Minister

“By Whose Authority? Lay Ecclesial Ministry and Questions of Authorization”

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One of the central aims of the document, “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord” is to offer a theology of ministry that would be helpful in promoting collaboration among priests, deacons, and laity in ministry. This aim of crafting a more inclusive theology of ministry is important because, as Rick McCord mentioned in his paper, we have a praxis of lay ecclesial ministry that is often years ahead of our theology. Happily, this document is a major step in the right direction. The theology of ministry that is outlined in “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord” will, no doubt, shape our American Catholic conversation about ministry for years to come.

Lay ministry, in this document, is understood as being grounded in a theology of communion. This theology is rooted in the inner life of the Trinity itself and is defined by the dynamic relationships among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This communion of relationships, or *communio*, is one God in three persons, distinct according to their relationships to each other, yet one in nature. Baptism plunges us into this *communio*, uniting us in a profound way with God and one another. The Church is itself, then, a communion. We, though many, are one in Christ, one in his mission of announcing the kingdom of God and transforming the world with the power of the Holy Spirit.

From this foundation of *communio*, diverse charisms, roles, and functions are not in competition, but rather are complementary within the mission of the Church. Every gift and manifestation of the Spirit is given for the building up of the Body of Christ. It is within this communion ecclesiology that the document, “Co-Workers”, understands distinctions in ministry. These distinctions are not a ranking of importance or merit or holiness. Rather, distinctions in ministry, based on an ecclesiology of communion, can reveal the nature of the Church itself, which is an organic and ordered communion made up of diverse parts. It is precisely this communion that makes possible and necessary the collaboration between lay and ordained ministers.

Okay, so far, so good. But what does this look like on the ground? How do we live out this rosy picture of *communio*? As my title suggests, I am interested in raising some questions about authorization and lay ministry for our discussion. Who authorizes lay ecclesial ministers? Why do they need to be authorized? How does authorization happen? My reason for focusing on the theme of authorization is that it highlights the role of the Bishop. Any model of authorization will, in some way, reflect a theology of the Bishop’s role regarding ministries.

Before it addresses the issue of authorizations, “Co-Workers” makes a clear distinction between ordained ministry and lay ecclesial ministry. Distinctions in ministry are necessary and good. But the challenge is to explain how are they theologically understood and practically applied. “Co-Workers” makes a distinction between lay ministry flowing from Baptism and ordained ministry flowing from Holy Orders.

Ordained ministry is called pastoral ministry, whereas lay ministry is described by “Co-Workers” simply as a way of assisting this pastoral ministry of the ordained priest.

Ordained ministry is called special and apostolic, but lay ministry is described as simply a way for the lay ecclesial minister to place his or her gifts at the service of assisting the pastor. This is collaboration for the sake of mission, according to “Co-Workers”.

Here’s what the document “Co-Workers” has to say about the distinctions in the reality of ministry in the Church:

This primary distinction lies between the ministry of the lay faithful and the ministry of the ordained, which is a *special apostolic calling*. Both are rooted in the sacramental initiation, but the pastoral ministry of the ordained is empowered in a *unique and essential* way by the sacrament of holy orders. (USCCB, “Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord”, pp.20-21)

“Co-Workers” affirms a special apostolic calling to ordained ministry. And, unlike lay ministry, the ordained ministry is empowered in a unique and essential way. It is the sacrament of Holy Orders that empowers it. The document “Co-Workers” goes on to explain why it is unique and essential. It is an explanation based on the ontology of the sacramental character of Holy Orders and the very constitution of the Church itself.

This recognition of the unique role of the ordained ... is a distinction based on the sacramental character given by the Holy Spirit that configures the recipient to Christ the Head and on the particular relationship of service that Holy Orders brings about between ecclesial ministry and the community. The ordained ministry is *uniquely constitutive* of the Church in a given place. All other ministries function *in relation to it*. (“Co-Workers”, p.21)

Lay ministry is not constitutive of the Church and it functions in relation to ordained ministry by way of assistance. Lay ecclesial ministries do not share a special apostolic

calling because they are not empowered by the sacrament of Holy Orders. Therefore, the authorization to exercise lay ecclesial ministry must be different from that of the ordained priest. How so? What role does the bishop play in these authorizations for lay ecclesial ministry?

Ed Hahnenberg's erudite paper raised the issues surrounding the Bishop as either source or center of ministries. In each of these models, authorization is understood differently. If the Bishop is the source or font of ministry, then the ordained participate in the bishop's ministry. At ordination, the Bishop shares the fullness of his sacrament of Orders with the presbyters. The apostolic ministry of the Bishop is then exercised in the pastoral ministry of the ordained. This model is the Bishop as source or conduit of ministry.

If, on the other hand, the Bishop is the center of ministries, then presbyters depend on the Bishop not for their ministerial power (which comes from Christ) but rather they depend on him for the *exercise* of their power. In this model, the Bishop orders ministries and the exercise of their power. This theological vision sees the Bishop as the center of the ministerial life of the diocese promoting and coordinating ministries. The Bishop, in this model, is not the source which creates ministries.

Ed Hahnenberg ended his paper with the provocative proposal that we avoid a new theological over-emphasis on the role of the Bishop as the source of all ministries. He admits, of course, that the documents of Vatican II do contain theological commitments

that support the vision of the Bishop as source or font of all ministries. But he offers a refreshing perspective on the work of the Council which makes possible the vision of the Bishop as center of the ministerial life of the diocese – promoting and coordinating rather than creating and controlling all ministries.

Well, how does the document “Co-Workers” explain the authorization of lay ministry?

On pages 54-60, we find Part II, section C, entitled “Authorization for Lay Ecclesial Ministry”. On page 54 the document states that some members of the Christian lay faithful are “entrusted with certain offices and roles connected to the ministry of the ordained pastors... They are authorized by ecclesial authorities to carry out certain ministerial responsibilities in public service of the local church.” Here the view is that the Bishop entrusts and authorizes the lay ecclesial ministers. Certain offices, roles, and ministerial responsibilities are entrusted to these ecclesial lay ministers. But notice that they are roles and offices that belong properly to the ordained. That is, these ministerial responsibilities really are connected to the ministry of those in Holy Orders, and the Bishop is simply making a decision to entrust some of them to lay ecclesial ministers. Does this mean that the Bishop is the source or the center for these ministries?

The document defines authorization on pg. 54 this way: “Authorization is the process by which properly prepared lay men and women are *given responsibilities* for ecclesial ministry by competent Church authority.” What does it mean for the Bishop to give responsibilities to these lay ministers? The document spells out four elements of

authorization which seem to present a very functionalist approach to lay ministry – that is, what the laity can “do” as a result of authorization.

This process includes the following elements: acknowledgement of the competence of an individual for a specific ministerial role; appointment of an individual to a specific position, along with a delineation of the obligations, responsibilities, and authority of that position; and finally an announcement of the appointment to the community that will be served by the lay ecclesial minister. (“Co-Workers, p. 54)

These four practical steps of acknowledgement of competence, appointment to a position, delineation of responsibilities, and announcement of the appointment all presume the role of the Bishop. Again, my question for us is: does this explanation of authorization present the Bishop as the font or the center of ministries? Are lay ecclesial ministers participating in the ministry of the Bishop, or is authorization here just a matter of ordering lay ministry within the larger ministerial community which includes presbyters?

“Co-Workers” goes on to discuss the ritualization of authorization. Blessings and rituals are suggested as ways to publicly highlight the new roles that lay ecclesial ministers take in the community. Blessings, commissionings, and rituals are ways to instruct the community and spiritually edify the lay ecclesial minister. The document states: “A public ceremony or Liturgy for the conferral of an office emphasizes the relationship of the diocesan bishop with the lay ecclesial minister and the community to be served.” (p.59) However, it then states that these public rituals are not to give the impression that it is the rite itself that confers the appointment to ministry. That is, there should not be an impression that this is some sort of quasi-ordination. There is no sacramental character conferred, no ontological change in the ecclesial lay minister as a result of any ritual or blessing. There is no special apostolic calling or formal entrance into the ministry of the

apostles that Bishops and presbyters share. The authorization actually happens apart from any ritual or blessing. Authorization seems to be a kind of juridical appointment and the ritual or blessing is simply for community instruction or the personal spiritual edification of the lay ecclesial minister.

The way that this document presents authorization seems to be that of the Bishop as source or font. The lay ecclesial ministers are authorized in a practical, canonical way, to fulfill certain roles and functions that properly belong to the pastoral ministry of the ordained. It seems to be an administrative authorization by the bishop which can be ritualized, but not sacramentalized. This model of authorization makes clear that lay ministers simply assist, cooperate, or collaborate in the pastoral ministry of the ordained. Ecclesial lay ministers function only in relation to the ministry of the ordained. They are entrusted with offices and roles connected to the ministry of those in Holy Orders. I would suggest, then, in our discussion, that in its section on authorization, “Co-Workers” presents a vision of the Bishop as source and font of ministry. First, the Bishop is presented as the font of the ministry of the ordained, and then some of these responsibilities of the ordained are entrusted to lay ecclesial ministers by way of the Bishop’s administrative authorization.

Finally, we might ask what questions of Church governance this model of authorization raises. What is implied in terms of *conferral of power* with this authorization process of the lay ecclesial minister? Does the ecclesial lay minister exercise the power of Church

governance? And if so, does this re-enforce the view of Bishop as source or not? These are open questions that I hope we can discuss together today.

In conclusion, let me say that this document is a huge step forward in the ongoing challenge of crafting a theology of lay ministry. As is often noted, we have a praxis that is years ahead of our theology. But this document is, in my opinion, the most helpful magisterial statement thus far on the thorny issues surrounding this powerful manifestation of the Spirit in the Church today known as lay ecclesial ministry.

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