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**The U.S. Bishops and Lay Ecclesial Ministry:
Responding to the Signs of the Times**

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I've been privileged to serve for almost twenty years on the Bishops' Conference staff and during that time have played a role in developing many pastoral documents. This one, entitled *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, has been one of the most interesting and satisfying projects for me. I say this not only because I've spent my entire professional adult life as a lay person in church ministries, but also because I think the bishops' lay ecclesial ministry project and the document it produced, as well as the continuing positive energies that spin off from it, provide a good example of how a national episcopal conference can function, in keeping with its proper scope and mandate, for the good of the Church in a particular country.

My place on this panel will be to offer some background for what my colleagues are going to say on the subject of "the bishop and the lay ecclesial minister." I think it's important to understand why and how the bishops, understood as a collective body, acted on this topic before delving into what they said or didn't say about the relationship between the diocesan bishop and the lay ecclesial minister.

Co-Workers in the Vineyard can trace its lineage in USCCB activity back to 1980 when the bishops wrote their first document on the laity entitled *Called and Gifted*. In it they described the various forms of lay participation that had been emerging in the Church after Vatican II, including the fact that some lay women and men "have prepared for professional

ministry in the Church.” They called these persons “ecclesial ministers” and welcomed this new development as a “gift to the Church.” As we know, the phenomenon of professional lay ministers had been growing from the early 1970’s until 1980 and, ever since then, it has increased and diversified significantly.

We also know that the development of lay ministry in the U.S. has been mostly a “bottom up” dynamic. No national decrees or decisions got it started. It was not the result of a national plan. Rather, over a period of time, parishes and then dioceses began to recognize how necessary and how right it was for lay women and men to be entrusted with responsibilities of ministerial leadership and so they began to hire people – beginning first with the roles of parish youth minister and director of religious education and then expanding to include many other jobs in parishes, dioceses, and other church institutions.

The first national study of parish lay ministers was sponsored by the Bishops Conference and published in 1990. It found that nearly 20,000 lay people were employed in parish pastoral roles. The bishops sponsored a replication of this study two more times at seven year intervals. By the time of the third study in 2005 the number of parish lay ecclesial ministers had grown to 30,000 and had spread to two-thirds of all U.S. parishes.

Taking account of this growth, in 1995 the Bishops’ Committee on the Laity decided to study the reality in greater depth, through various methods of consultation and research, and to recommend how the Conference as a body might exercise some leadership for it.

Four years later, in 1999, the Committee published an unofficial document (a kind of study paper) entitled *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions*. The purposes of this statement were to summarize the main things we had learned through the consultation and research, to show some accountability to those involved in the effort, and to test out in a

non-binding manner some ideas and proposals that might merit further work by the bishops. It was an interim document, a trial balloon.

All in all, enough momentum was generated to allow the Committee to get permission in 2002 to continue the work and move it to a new level. It helped that a group of seminary rectors asked us to produce a document that would outline the expectations the bishops had of those who were educating future lay ecclesial ministers in their graduate programs. And it also helped that the Lilly Endowment was willing to provide most of the funding! Three years later – again, after extensive consultation with bishops, priests, lay ministers, educators, theologians, and experts of all types (including the members of this panel) – the Committee completed and the Conference approved *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*.

I've sketched this historical overview to make a point about methodology and responsibility. From the beginning, the bishops' starting point was to observe and describe an emerging reality and to reflect on the questions posed by it – doing so in a theological context and in keeping with church teaching. It was an inductive method, based on an understanding that the Holy Spirit is always bringing forth new life in the Church. It was a process of discernment, in keeping with St. Paul's admonition to "test everything and keep what is good" (I Thess. 5:21).

I think the bishops' issuing of *Co-Workers* can be interpreted as a case of "keeping what is good" inasmuch as their document brings together the best thinking and practice currently in place. Providing this sort of resource as a service to dioceses throughout the country is an appropriate and expected responsibility of the Bishops Conference. It's an example of implementing one of the three goals which USCCB identified in its own mission

statement, namely, to “offer appropriate assistance to each bishop in fulfilling his particular ministry in the local church.”

Msgr. Philip Murnion once observed that the experience and practice of lay ministry was developing more rapidly than the Church’s ability to theologize about it and to integrate it into policies and structures. He thought that this situation was to be expected and was even beneficial. However, such a gap could not exist indefinitely. *Co-Workers* represents an attempt by the bishops at the national level to narrow the gap. In doing so, they exemplify another goal of the Conference, that is, to “act collaboratively and consistently on issues confronting the Church and society.” The bishops acknowledged, not only by publishing this document but also by the ten-year national project that preceded it, that lay ecclesial ministry had become a national reality, a characteristic of church life in the U.S. And so, *Co-Workers* is their collective, national response – a timely and necessary one that tries to introduce a new level of consistency in language, thought, and practice.

A third and final goal of the U.S. bishops’ conference is the task of fostering communion within the universal Church under the leadership of the pope. The bishops who worked on the lay ministry project, and on this document in particular, studied the experience of other countries and were in dialogue with bishops from other Conferences. They were always aware of the larger ecclesial environment in which debates, statements, and positions had focused attention on the meaning and use of such terms as ministry, minister, priesthood, laity, office, apostolate, secular, etc. Somewhat early in the process of our work, the Interdicasterial Instruction (known as *Ecclesiae de mysterio* or *On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests*) was published in November 1997.

Although the bishops never intended that *Co-Workers in the Vineyard* would be a direct response to the Instruction, they did nevertheless recognize that its way of responding to our situation and needs in this country had to be done in light of and in conformity with the intent of this document of the Holy See. With this in mind, *Co-Workers* constructs its theological foundation on the ecclesiology of communion and mission. Within this communion and in service of the mission there is ministry which is hierarchical, differentiated, ordered, and relational. Ordained and lay ministers have distinct identities and roles, each arising from a specific sacrament. Both in sketching out its theological rationale and in proposing strategies about formation and authorization, I think the bishops take a clear position in *Co-Workers* about the distinction between the ordained and the lay faithful and about the various possible expressions of their collaboration in pastoral activity. By its own admission, this is what the Instruction was concerned about regulating.

So by way of summary, I suggest that the U.S. bishops, acting as a Conference, on the subject of lay ecclesial ministry have expressed themselves theologically not only on the subject itself but also on their own collective role as bishops in relationship to it. They have done this by acting in accord with their official ecclesial mandate and also in keeping with a certain pastoral style refined over the years, that is characterized by discernment, collaboration, and subsidiarity, and that has served them and the Catholic Church well in our contemporary American culture.

Thank you.