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Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord **A Basic Overview**

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Last November the bishops, at their semi-annual meeting in Washington, approved what many consider to be a landmark document. It's called *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. It's a statement meant for you as leaders in church ministries and for others with whom you collaborate and serve.

I am grateful for this opportunity to offer a basic overview of *Co-Workers*, to discuss where it came from and why, and to offer suggestions about how it can become a positive, enriching force in your ministry.

I was asked to be brief and basic (and not boring). I hope to be all this and more! In the interest of getting down to basics, I've organized the presentation around not 3 but 4 R's (since you're an advanced group, for sure).

RESPONSE

The first and most basic thing to tell you is that *Co-Workers in the Vineyard* in a response – a leadership response by the bishops as a national body. The effort that produced this document began 10 years ago and, all during that period, the bishops were responding with study papers, research studies, and other interim statements. Even as far back as 25 years, the Bishops Conference were beginning to respond with a short statement entitled *Called and Gifted* in which the term “ecclesial ministers” was first applied to lay persons.

So *Co-Workers* is but one more step in an ongoing response that the bishops have been making to a new reality – known as lay ecclesial ministry – a reality that continues to unfold and develop in our Church.

There are two additional points about this response. First, it is not complete once and for all. It is merely the best articulation the bishops were able to agree upon at this point in our history. Second, the response does not belong to the bishops' alone. *Co-Workers*, as a document, is truly the product of many co-workers, like yourselves, who contributed ideas and expertise throughout a long process of consultation. So, even though the bishops are speaking in these pages, I hope you will find in them also an echo of your own experience and voice.

REALITIES

I've said that *Co-Workers* is a response – but to whom, to what? This question brings us to the second R: realities in the Church that have been developing for the past 40 years. Ten years ago these realities were the bishops' starting point for establishing a Subcommittee on Lay Ministry and launching a project that focused on their leadership for lay ministry. The same starting point is present in their new document. The first section is entitled “Describing and Responding to New Realities”.

What realities are we talking about? Many of them you know well because you're living in them and through them. They have shaped you and you have, in turn, influenced their direction. Think about these developments that

have emerged over the past 40 years since the close of the Second Vatican Council:

1) There is now a well-defined population of lay women and men who serve professionally in church ministry, mostly on a full-time basis, in parishes, dioceses, and other church institutions, in clearly-recognizable, public leadership positions, in close collaboration with ordained ministers, with necessary authorization from the hierarchy, and with the appropriate levels of education, formation, and overall professional competence to carry out their ministries. We call this population by the generic name of “lay ecclesial ministers”.

2) The lay ecclesial minister population continues to increase and, to some extent, also to diversify. Most of the research on these trends has been done with parish-based lay ecclesial ministers who now number more than 30,000.

3) In the past 40 years the U.S. Catholic population has grown by 20 million. With this growth has come an explosion of needs and expectations for ministry. For the most part, lay ecclesial ministers are not simply doing what priests once did, but are creating different forms of ministry and extending the Church’s outreach into new areas.

4) At the same time, by their entry into the ministerial community, lay ecclesial ministers have compensated for the decline in priests and religious over the past 40 years (26% for priests and 60% for women religious). Laity have been able to take on ministerial roles for many reasons – including the fact that theological education and other forms of ministerial formation have become

available to them in diocesan programs as well as by seminaries and universities. Currently, over 25,000 are enrolled in such programs.

5) Inspired by the Second Vatican Council, there has been a theological renewal in our understanding of church, mission, and ministry. Some of that renewal was made possible by a rediscovery and new appreciation of the charismatic, or gift-centered dimension of the church's life that comes from the Holy Spirit. We now customarily speak of people being gifted for lots of things, including church ministry. This goes equally for men and for women. We also customarily speak of people being called and responding to a call, including a call to ministry. These two theological realities have made it possible, in ways unknown before the Council, to imagine lay people not being ordained and yet still having a place in the Church's public ministry – because they are gifted and called.

RESOURCE

So, with all these realities unfolding, it seemed long overdue (even ten years ago) for the bishops as a national body to step up and take some leadership in a way that would not “quench the spirit” but rather would help lay ecclesial ministry to develop in ways that are faithful to the Church's teaching, in ways that connect with current pastoral needs, and in ways that seek harmony and collaboration within a larger ministerial community of ordained and lay co-workers.

With these goals in mind, the Subcommittee on Lay Ministry decided to write *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* and to offer it as a resource to

bishops and to the field in general. It is a resource document, not a normative, or legislative, or policy document. It is theologically grounded, but it's not a formal theological treatise nor is it even a teaching document in the strict sense of the word. It does not intend to be *prescriptive*, but rather *descriptive*.

Here is what the bishops say about their document, its purposes, and the outline of its content:

“We offer this document as a pastoral and theological reflection on the reality of lay ecclesial ministry, as an affirmation of those who serve in this way, and as a synthesis of best thinking and practice. The following components provide the structure of the document:

- 1) theological foundations for lay ecclesial ministry
- 2) discernment and suitability for lay ecclesial ministry
- 3) formation of lay ecclesial ministers
- 4) authorization of lay ecclesial ministers
- 5) policies and practices in the ministerial workplace

We intend *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* to be a common frame of reference for ensuring that the development of lay ecclesial ministry continues in ways that are faithful to the Church's theological and doctrinal tradition and that respond to contemporary pastoral needs and situations... It suggests concepts, goals, strategies, resources, and ideas to consider. It invites local adaptation, application, and implementation to achieve consistency where possible and to encourage diversity where appropriate. It calls Church leaders, ordained and lay,

to become more intentional and effective in ordering and integrating lay ecclesial ministers within the ministerial life and structures of our dioceses.

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” (pp. 5-6).

RENEWAL

Co-Workers in the Vineyard is a presentation of resources drawn from best thinking and practice, to be sure. But it’s more than that. In the passage I just quoted from the Bishops, they say they want the Church to become more intentional and effective about integrating lay ecclesial ministers into the total ministry of the Church and then ordering these ministries in such a way as to achieve greater collaboration between ordained and lay ministers for the sake of our mission. What they’re calling for is a renewal in ministry – and this is our fourth R. Renewal is the hoped-for outcome that arises from the other three R’s that have caused us to respond to realities by offering a leadership resource.

Co-Workers is a message about the renewal in ministry that is possible when lay ecclesial ministers are properly understood and effectively integrated into the Church’s life. As we know, renewal is always a process. And so, I want to suggest that there’s a process going on now, that *Co-Workers* supports that process, and that using the document in our church communities will keep the process moving forward in a positive way.

The process has three related parts: first, to name; second, to claim; and third, to sustain lay ecclesial ministry. These are the tasks that *Co-Workers in the Vineyard* wants to help the Church achieve, beginning with the bishops and including all of you who are local and national leaders and their collaborators.

The very text of *Co-Workers* itself gives us some insight into what each of these tasks means: to name, claim, and sustain. Some examples will help.

To name. Naming means recognizing and acknowledging. It means distinguishing the identity of one person or thing from another. Naming is the beginning of a relationship and a commitment.

Co-Workers gives the name “lay ecclesial ministers” to a whole group of lay persons. The term is meant to describe a variety of people who have distinct job titles, such as youth minister. Nowhere in the text do the bishops say definitively who should be considered a lay ecclesial minister. This decision is left to the local bishop if he should choose to go in that direction. However, *Co-Workers* does provide four characteristics of people who could be considered lay ecclesial ministers. The four characteristics are:

- 1) the person has received the authorization of the hierarchy to serve publicly in the local church;
- 2) the person exercises leadership in a particular area of ministry;
- 3) the person works in close collaboration with the pastoral ministry of the ordained;
- 4) the person has received the necessary preparation and formation appropriate to the level of responsibilities assigned to her or him.

These four characteristics are enough to distinguish the parish youth minister from the volunteer chaperone or to distinguish the parish director of religious education from the second grade catechist or to distinguish the parish pastoral associate from the extraordinary minister of holy communion. Notice that the four characteristics are not concerned with whether the person is paid or volunteer, full time or part time, with a masters degree or not. The important point is that the person is identified with the leadership structure of the community and he or she shares or participates in the pastoral responsibility which belongs properly to the ordained.

As you can imagine, it was not an easy task for the bishops to devise the term “lay ecclesial minister” and to hold on to it in the face of challenges. Some have objected that simply creating the term is the equivalent of “clericalizing the laity” and establishing an elite group who appear to have received an “eighth sacrament”!

The bishops say explicitly that they have no such intention and, furthermore, they go to some length to say exactly what they mean by lay, by ecclesial, and by minister and how all three terms make a necessary contribution to the name, lay ecclesial minister.

Because the bishops took realities rather than abstract categories as their starting point, and because chief among those realities is a group of people sharing similar characteristics, the bishops felt it necessary to give that group a name in order to be able to speak in a coherent, helpful way. So, to the question

“what’s in a name?” we must reply “quite a lot” and sometimes even more than meets the eye!

To claim. Claiming goes a step beyond naming. It involves affirming and legitimizing. To claim is to bring someone into a deeper relationship, to make that person part of a larger whole. It’s a further mark of commitment.

Co-Workers in the Vineyard devotes a substantial section to what is called “understanding the realities in light of theology and church teaching”. This section immediately follows the section that describes the characteristics of lay ecclesial ministry and the experience of it in our church. Here the bishops place the experience of lay ecclesial ministry in a larger context and show how it can be understood as consistent with an ecclesiology of communion and mission which is rooted in the trinitarian mystery of God’s love. In this way, the bishops are reaching out to claim lay ecclesial ministry and to say that it’s consistent with our tradition as a church.

There are two other ways in which *Co-Workers* makes progress in claiming lay ecclesial ministers. The first way can be seen in the chapter entitled “Pathways to Lay Ecclesial Ministry”. In this section the bishops discuss such issues as promoting lay ecclesial ministry as a choice (particularly for young people), ways of helping people discern whether they are called to this kind of service, and some criteria for determining the suitability of candidates. Even to imagine doing these things, much less to actually build them into church structures, shows the desire to “claim”, that is, for the institution to take steps toward welcoming and integrating lay ecclesial ministers.

A second way in which the document shows how to claim lay ecclesial ministry is the extensive treatment it gives to formation for ministry. This chapter discusses formation using the very same categories or “pillars” that are used by other church documents that deal with priesthood and diaconate – namely, human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation. The chapter regards a full, integrated formation program not as an option but as a necessary condition of serving as a lay ecclesial minister. Without proper formation, lay ecclesial ministers would always be viewed as second class citizens, not to be taken seriously. But with proper formation comes competence which leads to legitimation which leads to fuller integration into the larger community of ministers.

To sustain. Sustaining is the third stage of a process that begins with naming and claiming. It involves the deepening of relationships among ministers and the further development of processes and structures that will promote both the distinctiveness and the commonality of all the ministers. Sustaining means to make even more progress toward institutionalizing and integrating lay ecclesial ministry within the life of the Church.

In order for any of this to happen, the bishop must carry out his proper responsibility as the one who “orders” all the ministries of a local church. *Co-Workers* puts it this way: “By reason of his ministry it is the role of the bishop, often through the pastor, to give oversight (episcopate) to order these new ministerial relationships within his diocese and to affirm and guide the use of those gifts that lay ecclesial ministers bring...” (p. 23).

Lay ecclesial ministers are the “new kids on the block” when it comes to church ministry. They do not stand on a foundation of centuries of theology and pastoral practice, as do bishops, priests, and deacons. So it is critically important that there be some ordering or organizing of relationships between the newcomers and those who are already in place.

Authorization is the starting point for ordering. *Co-Workers* has a chapter on this topic that situates the responsibility for authorizing lay ecclesial ministers with the bishop or his delegate, that describes some components of authorization (such as certification), and that urges the use of blessing and ritual at different points in the authorization process so that it truly becomes a public, ecclesial act. The message is clear in this section and throughout the entire text of *Co-Workers*, namely, that no one is a lay ecclesial minister without being called and authorized as such by proper church authority. How the call becomes public and exactly how the authorization takes place and what implications flow from it are all questions that need further study and experience.

Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord does not speak the final word on these matters or on many others. It is a response to what we have experienced so far. It challenges us and gives us some tools to go deeper into process of naming, claiming, and sustaining lay ecclesial ministers as true and valuable co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord who are now taking their unique and complementary place alongside their sisters in the consecrated life and their brothers in the ordained ministry.

Different gifts, the same Spirit. Different members, same body. Different roles, same mission. Different gifts, the same Lord for all!