

“The Tale of Three Trees and We”

National Symposium on Lay Ecclesial Ministry: Working in the Vineyard of the Lord
Tuesday, July 31, 2007
Saint John’s University
Collegeville, Minnesota

To the planners of this conference on *National Symposium on Lay Ecclesial Ministry: Working in the Vineyard of the Lord*, I offer my particular thanks for the invitation afforded me to kickoff these next days of heartfelt and hardy discussions on the continuing emerging roles of lay ecclesial ministers. In my roles as current Chairman of the Committee on the Laity of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and as the Bishop of the Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin, I am truly honored by the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you, all of you, who are in love with God and the Church. As an important aside, the Bishops’ Committee on the Laity will be meeting with representatives of a number of national lay and clergy organizations on Sunday, September 9. Sister Amy Hoey and Dr. Rick McCord and Sister Eileen McCann, who serve as staff for the Committee on the Laity, will be reporting on this symposium at that September gathering. It is indeed an inspiration to be with you, my sisters and brothers, Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord.

The scene: a forest. The occasion: an afternoon conversation between three trees.

One lazy, hazy summer afternoon, three trees mused on what their futures might hold - - what dream captured the fascination of what they might become.

The first tree said: “When I grow up I’d really like to be made into a cradle, to have the chance to give warmth and safety and protection to newborn babes. I would like my legacy in life to be that I fully supported life.”

The second tree spoke up: “Thanks for sharing your dream. Mine is a bit different. It is my hope that when I grow up I can become an ocean going ship, carrying hundreds of people from one shore to another, delivering cargos of the world’s goods from one shore to another especially to those in need.”

The third tree spoke up and said: “The both of you impress me much. Now let me share with you my dream. To be perfectly honest, when I grow up I don’t want to be made into anything. I simply want to be what I am today - - a tree. I simply want to point my leaves and limbs upward and remind others that there is a God - - a God in Heaven who loves all people in the world.”

Some months later, woodcutters came into the forest and looked at the first tree. Said the first woodcutter: “Before we cut down this tree what shall we make of it?” Another worker replied: “Let’s make it into a manger.” To which the first tree protested: “Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait just a minute! I’d really like to be made into a cradle. I want to embrace and keep warm and safe newborn babes. I want my legacy in life to be that I support life.” Despite the first tree’s protest, it was cut down and made into a manger and sold to an Innkeeper in Bethlehem. When the Savior of the world was born, He was placed in that very manger. The tree became a cradle, **the** cradle of life, that all the world would remember.

Some years later, the woodcutters came back among the trees and looked at the second tree. The first woodcutter said: “Any ideas what we should do with this tree?” The second woodcutter said: “Let’s cut it down and make it into a small fishing boat.” To which the second tree protested; “Wait a minute, wait a minute. Wait just a minute! All I ever dreamt was to become an ocean going ship carrying hundreds of people from one shore to the other, carrying useful cargos to those in need. I don’t want to be a small fishing boat!” Despite the second tree’s protest it was cut down and made into a small fishing boat. Later, a man by the name of Simon Peter bought the boat. When Jesus needed a pulpit, a place from which He could address the crowd on the seashore, the little fishing boat became his pulpit. From that little boat came the good news of God’s love that was meant to carry people from the shore of life to the shore of life hereafter; a small fishing boat carrying more good news than any ocean liner could carry goods.

Three years later, the woodcutters came back to the grove once again. The first woodcutter spoke up: “And what shall we do with this tree?” To which the second woodcutter said: “The Romans are paying good money for crosses these days. Let’s make this tree into a cross.” To which the third tree protested: “Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait just a minute - - I don’t want to be made into anything! I simply want to remain a tree. I want to lift my leaves and my limbs upward and remind others that there is a God in Heaven – a God who loves the world.” Despite the protests of the third tree it was cut down, made into a cross, and it was on that cross, the tree

of life, that the Savior of the world was crucified. To this day, that tree points to Heaven as a reminder of how deep is God's love.

The tale of the three trees points to the "we" - all of us gathered in this place and many more beside. The tale of the three trees is germane for our gathering on the important role of laity in the Church as Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord. This story points to God's call, its how, when, and where. "God calls. We respond."

Clearly, each one of the three trees in our tale had a particular goal in mind. The first wanted to be a cradle; the second wanted to be an ocean going ship; the third wanted to remain just a tree. God had a different purpose in mind; the first to become a manger; the second became a small fishing boat; and the third became the cross. Each tree and in different ways ended up serving Jesus, His Church, His people. Each one found fulfillment by **embracing** the Will of God, **not simply** giving into it. Each tree ended up working together, not separate from the other, nor against the other.

An important preliminary perspective to pull into focus is the indispensable fact that ministry - - all ministry - - both lay ecclesial and ordained ecclesial ministry is a result of God's call through, within, and for the Church. Ministry, all ministry, is intended for the glory of God and for the salvation of the people of God. Neither form of ministry is dispensable; both are intended by God. The first through the Sacred Seal of Baptism; the second through the Sacred Seal of Holy Orders. Both ministries, lay ecclesial and ordained ecclesial, if they are to be true to their unique character must work hand in hand. Each must never compete against the other. Each must respect each other in essence and degree. Each must be embraced by the other - - never simply tolerated or merely accepted - - as both are intended by Jesus through the Church to reflect, maintain and build up the Church through her four marks: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.

To view the intimate marriage between lay ecclesial ministry and ordained ecclesial ministry, I invite you to join with me in looking at "*Co-Workers*" and its ongoing direction from three perspectives: (1) theological; (2) historical; and (3) pastoral.

First, The Theological Underpinnings

In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark and in Luke's Second Gospel better known as the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus gives the charge to His disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations." With this charge, Jesus placed profound trust in His disciples then and now. He passes on the responsibility to do His work. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the Church is born. The disciples are empowered to continue the work of Jesus through word and deed. They are to spread the Good News for the glory and honor of God and for the service of His people.

For the better part of twenty centuries, the Church, the people of God, through Word and Sacrament have been challenged by the Word of God and strengthened by the Sacraments to be the Body of Christ.

In turn, the Church, the Body of Christ, is called to reflect the Christ in **His** *Communio* – **His** *Missio*, **His** *Covenant*.

To speak of God is to speak of the Trinity, a relationship which is *Communio*. It is the loving communion of persons - - Father, Son and Spirit. God as Father turns love outward in creation; God as Son lives life selflessly in His act of salvation; the Spirit as God empowers love actively in inspiration.

The Church is created by the Trinity to be *Communio*. The Church is meant to be relational to the Trinity and for others. This is expressed in and through the Church beginning with the Sacraments of Initiation. In Baptism, the follower of Jesus is empowered, with a sharing in the life of the Holy Spirit with gifts that are both hierarchical and charismatic. Jesus Himself never intended the reality of hierarchy to be a negative reality but rather, a necessary pathway through which Jesus shares His power with His followers.

The *Communio* of Jesus, the *Communio* of the Church, leads to *Missio*, an overall mission of all the faithful, lay and ordained, in the sanctification of the world. The groundbreaking document of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, reopened the eyes of the Church to specific types of ecclesial ministry. Laity are called in different ways "to more immediate cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy. Like those men and women who

helped the Apostle Paul in the gospel, they bring much in the Lord. They have, moreover, the capacity of being appointed by the hierarchy to some ecclesiastical offices with the view to a spiritual end.” (LG 33)

The late Pope John Paul II highlighted the marriage between *Communio* and *Missio* when he wrote the contemporary theology of the laity, *Christifidelis Laici*: “Communion and Mission are profoundly connected with each other; they interpenetrate and imply each other to the point that communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in Communion.” (32)

Finally, the *Communio* and *Missio* of Jesus and His Body, the Church, are brought to an ecclesial marriage of Covenant. *Covenant*, as we are all aware, is a bond of love between God and His people. Lay ecclesial ministry traces its sacramental roots to the proper understanding of the Sacraments of Initiation in which God’s people are incorporated into the Body of Christ. Through baptism, all Christians share in the priestly office of Jesus. Although the baptismal priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood of the ordained share in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ, they differ not only in degree but in essence. I repeat, they differ not only in degree but in essence. Some important points to consider:

- both the baptized and the ordained are called to be co-workers;
- both the baptized and the ordained must look upon each others’ essential contribution to the mission of Jesus not as adversarial but as enriching and complimentary;
- the documents of Vatican II, especially *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* make a distinction between the ministry of the baptized and the ministry of the ordained;
- “*Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*” invites the baptized and the ordained to stop competing with one another, to stop diminishing one another and to get on with the work of the Church.
- Co-workers reminds all of us of our need to join our hands and hearts in the work of Jesus;
- Cardinal Avery Dulles, the noted U.S. theologian warned against the two “isms”, clericalism and laicism. According to Cardinal Dulles clericalism overemphasizes the value of ordination with the result that the active power conferred by baptism, confirmation and matrimony are unduly minimized; and laicism so emphasizes baptism as to imagine that it confers all rights and powers in the Church so that ordination would not be understood as giving any new sacramental or hierarchical power.

Through the theological realities of *Communio*, *Missio* and *Covenant*, through the rightful appreciation of the unique and essential nature of both lay ecclesial ministry and ordained ecclesial ministry, the Church can live up to her divine calling.

Now Briefly to the Historical Perspective

One of the most powerful women of the first half of the twentieth century was hardly known by the public. For more than thirty years, Grace Tully was the personal secretary of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, first when he served as governor of the State of New York and then throughout his service as President of the United States. Especially during the White House years when Grace worked overtime, Mrs. Roosevelt would invite Grace to the private quarters of the White House for dinner. There was always an extra chair at the table where Grace could break bread with the First Couple. Grace would note that the Roosevelt hospitality would make all the difference in her life.

The involvement of laity likewise makes all the difference in the Church and long before Vatican II. Beginning with Jesus, continuing through the apostles, especially Saint Paul, lay people are noted as being faithful co-workers. The annals of the Saints also happily reflect that many lay persons over the two thousand year history of Christianity were faithful co-workers. Beginning in the twentieth century, with lay apostolate movements, the importance of lay ecclesial ministry has re-emerged to receive its necessary, proper and vibrant spotlight, confirmed in the “*Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*” document of 2005.

And finally, the Pastoral Perspective.

Some years ago I was on a plane to give a talk in Orlando, Florida. Sitting in front of me was a young man, approximately six years old. He had never been on a plane before. He looked out the window as the plane began its ascent and as it did so, he exclaimed, “Mom, I can see all the way to Texas.” The young boy certainly had vision!

As we find ourselves in these early formative years of the Third Millennium, the vision of the Church must look to a greater cooperation and collaboration between the laity and the clergy. The Co-Workers document helps to ground that direction.

In a recent talk by our good friend, Bishop Gerry Kicanas, the Bishop of Tucson, Arizona and one of the main architects of the co-workers document, Bishop Kicanas reviews five essential points that speak to the importance of that vision:

1. Lay leaders matter. The Church needs you. The Church needs your perspective. The Church needs your cooperation with the ordained.
2. The harvest needs co-workers pulling together working along side one another.
3. Effective and affective lay ecclesial ministers are a part of life long formation.
4. Lay ministers need and deserve official recognition.
5. As Church we need to develop workplace environments where lay ministers are respected, recognized, fulfilled and satisfied.

As I reflect on Bishop Kicanas' five points it is important that we as Church endorse them as we grow the Church in this Third Millennium of Christianity.

1. Lay ministers do matter. I find it particularly offensive when anyone refers to lay ecclesial ministry as a reaction to the diminishing numbers of priests. Lay ecclesial ministry is not a stop gap measure. Rather, it is a growing the Church from the rich soil of *Communio, Missio, and Covenant*. Lay Ecclesial Ministries flow directly from incorporation into the Church through the Sacrament of Initiation. The call as Lay Ecclesial Ministers comes from God through the Church.
2. Co-workers must work together. It is imperative that we respect fully the differences among us personally and ecclesially. As John Paul II urged so many times, there is great need to work against the clericalization of the laity and the laicization of the clergy. Otherwise, we weaken the strength of each other and muddy the waters of sound theology.
3. The essential partnering of human formation, spiritual formation, intellectual formation, and pastoral formation grounds lay ecclesial ministry and its important contribution to the Church.
4. Official recognition of lay ecclesial ministry is essential for the Church. The public recognition of the gifts of lay ecclesial ministers is an essential component of who the Church is. And finally,

5. On the one hand, justice in the workplace requires that within the Community that is Church, lay ecclesial ministers be recognized and respected. On the other hand it is also a matter of justice that all ecclesial ministry both lay and ordained embrace God's Will and remain ever loyal to the Church.

Conclusion

In the opening story of the Parable of the Trees, each had a dream; God intervened the dream. In the Body of Christ that is the Church, God too has a dream and He calls us. That dream is ministry. "God calls. We respond."

Like the boy on the plane, "*Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*" helps us together, ordained ecclesial ministers and lay ecclesial ministers to be drawn to, excited by and **fulfilled** in the vision that Jesus has for His Church and mandated by His trust in us to advance His mission as "*Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord.*"

Thank you and may God bless us always and in all ways.