

In the Name of the Church

Vocation and Authorization of Lay Ecclesial Ministry

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Introduction

Collegeville Ministry Seminar II

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Leadership scholar Ron Heifetz makes a helpful distinction between technical and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges are those for which we have the necessary know-how and that can be fixed by an expert. For instance, I go to the doctor not feeling well. She diagnoses strep throat, prescribes an antibiotic, and in a few days I am back to normal. All goes on as before. Of course, it is not always as easy as that. The diagnosis may be something like a faulty heart valve that needs to be replaced in highly complex surgery. Simple or complex, what they have in common is that I as a patient can turn my problem over to an expert who fixes it for me. This is technical work.

Adaptive work is very different. Here there is no expert with the technical skill or knowledge to fix it for me. I need to be more actively involved in the solution and perhaps even in diagnosing the problem. This is more like heart disease, where the solution involves behavior and lifestyle changes that I need to make or I will not get better. The doctor cannot fix it for me and I will not be going back to “normal.” I need to craft a new normal, a new way of life that allows me to be healthy and even thrive; a way of life in which I can do the things that are more important to me (like playing with my children, working, traveling) than the things I give up (bacon, donuts, not exercising). This is adaptive work. It is not easy. It typically involves changes we don’t want to make, the loss of some things we enjoyed, and sorting out what is more and what is less important in our lives. Typically we try to avoid that

work and do all we can to make our adaptive challenges technical ones that someone else can fix for us and that do not demand such changes (an antiobesity pill).¹

Heifetz's contention is that this distinction applies also to the challenges faced by organizations or communities and their leaders. Some organizational problems are technical in that "they have known solutions that can be implemented by current know-how. They can be resolved . . . through the organization's current structures, procedures and ways of doing things."² It may take considerable skill and effort but the problem can be solved without significant changes to the way we do things. We can get back to normal and continue as before. For example, some economic and employment problems can be fixed through technical adjustments to the money supply; some energy problems by doubling the fuel efficiency of our engines. These are highly technical fixes by skilled experts that, like taking a pill, require little of the rest of us and enable us to maintain our normal ways of doing things.

Other organizational problems, the truly challenging ones, do not lend themselves to a technical fix and cannot be solved by a more expert application of our current structures and ways of doing things. More of the same will not fix it no matter how well we do it. These problems require more fundamental, pervasive adaptation on the part of the whole organization or community. Adaptive problems, says Heifetz, typically arise when there is a gap between the mission, vision, and values of an organization and the circumstances it faces that "cannot be closed by the application of current technical know-how or routine behavior."³ The organization with its leaders must learn its way forward.⁴ Like the heart patient, the organization needs to develop new ways of doing things, new capacities, if it is to be healthy enough to achieve its mission. This kind of adaptation involves innovation, even experimentation and improvisation, in an iterative process: "Try something, see how it goes, learn from what happened, and then try something else."⁵ At the same time, says Heifetz, successful adaptation involves continuity. It builds on the past rather than jettisons it.⁶

Adaptive change thus requires a clear understanding of an organization's identity: of the difference between what truly defines the organization and what is more incidental. What defines us needs to continue. What does not define us can be changed without losing our identity, mission, or values. Significantly, this understanding of our identity is also part of the learning in adaptive situations. Indeed, it is typically the most significant, difficult, even painful learning as the reality of the situation

we face often demands a rethinking of our identity. If we really can't go on as before with technical fixes; what can we change, what can we not, and why? Adaptive change requires wise discernment and courageous action. It also needs to involve the whole organization.

The most common leadership failure, Heifetz maintains, is treating an adaptive challenge as if it were a technical one. This failure is made all the more understandable when we remember that the members of the organization, from bottom to top, deeply want the problems to be technical. We all want to give our problem to the experts, our leaders, and have them fix it for us—and do so at very little cost to our normal way of doing things (see US politics). Hard as it may be, when we resist the temptation to avoid adaptive work, organizations often discover opportunities to do more than merely cope with a problem. It can present opportunities to reclaim or discover a deeper identity that may have been obscured or become crusted over. It may open up new ways of doing things that enable the organization to thrive by developing capacities to meet the problem successfully and advance its values and purposes.

What Heifetz and his colleagues write about the adaptive challenges and opportunities of organizations can be helpfully applied to the church.⁷ To be sure, the church is the people of God, the body of Christ, the sacramental presence of the Spirit in the world. This is an article of faith, part of our identity that cannot change in any adaptation. However, it is also an article of faith à la the Council of Chalcedon—and empirically demonstrable—that the church is a fully human organization with all the blessings, temptations, triumphs, and failures that characterize other human organizations. As such it can be instructive to consider the history of the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council as an extended period of adaptive change, with all the stresses that go with it. Without using the category per se, Susan Wood highlights the adaptive character of these changes: "The Second Vatican Council called for a theological and liturgical renewal emphasizing the Church as communion rather than as institution. The council called for a vision of the Church as sacramental rather than juridical. . . . This entails a fundamental change in the understanding of how sacred and secular realms relate to one another. It calls the laity out of passivity into active participation in the ministry of the Church, a call inherent in their baptism and in the example of Jesus of Nazareth."⁸

This has all the elements of an adaptive response to the challenge faced by the church in the (post)modern world, including a reclaiming or reaffirmation of its fundamental identity and mission with a different

way of being church in the world. This is far from a technical matter that the experts or leaders can “fix” for us. It requires the involvement of the entire organization, of all the baptized, to address the challenge of being church. All of us are responsible for the work of the church, not just the ordained. From Heifetz’s analysis of other organizations, it is hardly surprising that this would meet with resistance from some, excitement from others, and take time to sort out and learn our way into—a process that is still very much with us.

There is much we could learn from applying Heifetz’s analysis to any number of issues in the church and its history since the council. Our focus here, however, is on one particular issue: the development of lay ecclesial ministry in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. Ecclesiastically, there are two interrelated dynamics that have generated this adaptive challenge—and opportunity. The first is Vatican II’s empowering call of the baptized to full participation in the work of the church, noted by Wood. This has both increased our sense of what the church should be and do, including our expectations of the ministry of the church, and, as she goes on to note, has led some to come forward to participate in that ministry in a more professional way but without ordination. The second factor, which Wood also notes, is the dramatic decline in the number of priests. In Heifetz’s terms, these two factors create a gap between our mission and our circumstances. The ministry we need to carry out the mission of the church does not align with the number of priests available to do it. We need either to reduce our mission and ministry to fit the people available or to increase our communal capacity for ministry by finding new ways to bring in more people to do it. Our current structures and know-how are not sufficient to deal with the problem. A classic adaptive challenge.

Lay ecclesial ministry is an adaptive response to this challenge. Building on the theological and ecclesiological framework of Vatican II, it is an operational exploration of the idea that having all ministry done by priests is not as definitive of our identity as Catholics as we might have thought. When laypeople first began doing professional ministry in the church, it was not clear what all the implications might be of this move (which is not to suggest it is clear today) but we tried it. It was not a matter of implementing some program or theology of ministry. In most cases it was simply a matter of people seeing a need, feeling a call to meet it, and stepping forward. Why would we say no to that? So we found ourselves in the sort of innovative, experimental environment characteristic of adaptive change. To be sure, not all the experiments were successful

(they rarely are), but the diversity of forms and approaches made for a very creative environment, even if a bit chaotic. We were learning our way forward in just the sort of iterative process Heifetz describes: try something, learn from it, try again. Significantly, the “we” doing this learning was the whole church, not just the experts or those in authority. All of us had to sort out how we relate to laypeople doing ministry. How do we understand them and their place in the church? What is their authority? What can we rightfully expect from them—and they from us? How do we empower them to do this work while maintaining the distinctive role of the ordained? From the other side, what is the distinctive identity of the nonordained ecclesial minister in the context of the call of all the baptized to the work of the church? If everything is ministry and all are ministers, what is the place of lay ecclesial ministry? These questions quickly take us into large-scale, fundamental theological issues such as ecclesiology, discipleship, baptism, orders, parish life, and the status of the nonparochial ministries of the church such as chaplaincy, education, social services, and health care. This is not the stuff of a merely technical fix. We are learning our way together into a new way to do the ministry of the church.

This book, with its particular focus on the vocation and authorization of lay ecclesial ministers, is meant to be a contribution to that learning and the adaptive work of the church. While we hope it stands on its own as a coherent volume, it is best understood in the context of a web of initiatives to which it is explicitly and intentionally related. The most ecclesially significant and authoritative context for this work is the series of documents on lay ecclesial ministry that have been produced by the US bishops.⁹ Culminating in the publication of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* in 2005, these documents and their significance are reviewed here by H. Richard McCord in chapter 1. Significantly, the bishops resist the temptation to treat lay ecclesial ministry as a technical fix, a stopgap to keep things going until we get back to our “normal” ways of doing things, that is, with more priests. They are quite explicit in identifying lay ecclesial ministry as the work of the Holy Spirit to which we as a community must respond. Our work here on vocation and authorization is part of that response.

More specifically, this collection of essays is part of a series of initiatives organized by Saint John’s School of Theology-Seminary in Collegeville, Minnesota. These initiatives are reviewed by Jeffrey Kaster with a particular focus on the connection between the symposium of 2011 and the theological essays in this volume. Here I will simply map out

the major events to help locate the essays and points of convergence. Theologically, the most immediate progenitor for this book is *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood: Theologies of Lay and Ordained Ministry*. That volume was the fruit of Collegeville Ministry Seminar I, a group of ten theologians led by Susan Wood who worked together from 2001 to 2003 on fundamental questions related to the theology of lay and ordained ministry. In addition to their essays, the seminar produced seven points of convergence agreed to by all the members. Central to this work and giving it its title is the argument that “both lay and ordained ministry represent an ordering of the baptismal priesthood of all the faithful.”¹⁰ The points of convergence in the present volume begin with an affirmation and restatement of these seven points.¹¹ The connection is also evident in their final point: “These principles call us to an ongoing ecclesial discernment and a fresh articulation of an ordering of ministries (e.g., installation, commissioning) in the Church in order to recognize emerging ministries and changes in church practice.”¹²

The work of this volume is an intentional response to that call to ongoing ecclesial discernment. It also follows the method of *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood* by bringing together, thanks to the support of an anonymous foundation, the nine authors in this book to work on the theology of vocation and authorization in what we called the Collegeville Ministry Seminar II. The work began in 2009 and culminated in the symposium held in August of 2011 in Collegeville, after which the essays were given a final revision for publication here.

As Kaster explains, there were two events between these two seminars that generated the topic and shaped the way the second seminar worked on that topic: the publication of *Co-Workers* and the 2007 symposium on lay ecclesial ministry in Collegeville. Originally conceived to consider the statewide certification process for lay ecclesial ministers adopted by the six dioceses of Minnesota, the 2007 symposium was reshaped in collaboration with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth (USCCB-LMFLY) to address the initial reception and implementation of *Co-Workers*. To that end a network of sixteen cosponsors was built with practitioners, academics, and bishops participating in the work of the 2007 symposium.¹³

At the close of the 2007 symposium, Archbishop Gregory Aymond stated in his summative remarks that “there are two very important issues that need theological research and dialogue. First . . . is the theology of vocation in ministry. . . . The second . . . is authorizing people

in ministry. . . . As we go forward with lay ecclesial ministry, we must continue to do conversation, prayer, and reflection around those issues.” What does it mean to be called to this work? Can we speak of it as a vocation as we do the priesthood, religious life, or marriage? How can we not-when so many lay ministers clearly articulate their work as a vocation and a calling? What does it mean to be authorized for this ministry? How does that authorization happen and by whom? It is not ordination but it seems it is also not the same as hiring a janitor, for example, even if that janitor sees his or her work as a form of ministerial service to the community. The bishops through the agency of the LMFLY secretariat asked Saint John’s to continue its work on lay ecclesial ministry with a focus on such questions and the theology of vocation and authorization that would enable us to answer them responsibly.

The current volume is the fruit of that work. In consultation with staff of the secretariat (Sr. Amy Hoey, Sr. Eileen McCann, McCord) and individual bishops who worked with the seminar (Aymond, Michael Hoepfner, Blase Cupich), we convened a group of theologians in 2009, drafted a framework for our work, and determined the particular research topics to be addressed. It was clear the seminar needed to do foundational, conceptual work on the meaning of vocation (Edward Hahnenberg) and authorization (Wood) for lay ecclesial ministers and that we needed to explore the biblical roots of the call to lay ecclesial ministry (Charles Bobertz). We also determined that it would be educative to learn from our more recent history, hence Hosffman Ospino’s essay on the early conversations about the identity of the director of religious education (DRE), arguably the first lay ecclesial ministers after Vatican II. It is not inconsequential that a consideration of the DRE as something of a case study in lay ecclesial ministry opens up connections with the ministry of catechist so important in many Hispanic/Latino communities. It was critical that the seminar also include a consideration of ritual in authorization (Zeni Fox and Graziano Marcheschi), as well as an exploration of the canonical issues and resources related to the authorization of lay ecclesial ministers (Lynda Robitaille). Ritual and canon law are essential ingredients in Roman Catholic life and thinking. This is how ideas acquire public standing and staying power. Any ideas, any theology, of the vocation and authorization of lay ecclesial ministers will become institutionally embodied in the life of community if they make their way into ritual and canon law. As framework for all this we included the essays by McCord on the documents of the US bishops on lay ecclesial ministry and Kaster on the activities surrounding these

essays, as well as the keynote address by Francis Cardinal George on the meaning of “ecclesial” in lay ecclesial ministry, specifically the relation of the bishop to the lay ecclesial minister.

Like the first seminar, the authors here did independent research and came together on several occasions to critique and learn from each other’s work. Our hope is that this gives the collection of essays coherence as part of an organic project, a real conversation. The authors also produced their own points of convergence on vocation and authorization that were agreed to by all the members of the seminar.

The second seminar went beyond the first, however, in its collaboration with practitioners, which brings us to the final formative element of this volume: the 2011 Collegeville National Symposium on Lay Ecclesial Ministry. Thanks to the support of the Lilly Endowment, we were able to organize a second symposium focusing on vocation and authorization. Building on our experience with the 2007 symposium, we put together a network of forty-four cosponsors, mostly national ministry organizations with some universities, schools of theology, and bishops committees.¹⁴ The symposium was designed from the start to interact with the seminar, so at the 2010 planning meeting the authors presented drafts of their essays for review and critique by sixty-five representatives of the cosponsoring organizations and three bishops. The authors revised their essays and what all thought were final drafts were distributed to the 230 participants in advance of the symposium.

When we came together for the symposium, something remarkable happened. Instead of the typical unidirectional flow of information and ideas from academics to practitioners, theorists to implementers, there was genuine dialogue. As Kaster details, the authors learned from their engagement with the practitioners. Though they thought their research was done, they decided to revise their essays again in light of what they had learned. Thus the essays in this volume are shaped not only by scholarly engagement with theological literature and official documents, as one would expect, but also by discussion with the other members of the seminar and by sustained dialogue and *theological* engagement with practitioners.

Not to be overlooked in this dialogue is the engagement of the bishops throughout the process. As noted, the two symposia and the second seminar were undertaken in explicit collaboration with the USCCB Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth. The Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church and the Commission on Certification and Accreditation were also cosponsors of the 2011 symposium.

In addition, a number of individual bishops were participants in the conversation at various times, meeting with the seminar, participating fully in the symposia and planning meetings, serving on panels, offering summative reflections on what they heard at each symposium, and delivering keynote addresses.

This sustained, intentional listening and collaboration is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the work of the seminar and the essays in this volume. It is also, if I may say so, the part of it we are most proud of. We at Saint John’s think of it as a very Benedictine way of doing theology by listening and hospitable dialogue. It respects expertise, experience, and authority; yields good theology; and contributes to the critical adaptive work of the church. The development of lay ecclesial ministry and, even more, of a way of being church and carrying out our mission and ministry consistent with it is not a technical problem to be taken care of by the experts. It is an adaptive challenge and opportunity in which the whole community is learning its way forward in an iterative process. We try some things, learn from them, and move forward. It is critical to this learning, to our theological work, that we involve practitioners in the reflection as well as the experimentation. The involvement of practitioners is not just about more effective implementation of the experts’ ideas. It is about making the learning more true and the ideas better. It is about deepening our theological understanding of how God is at work in the church and the world. Ultimately, we hope it makes the community more faithful disciples and better equipped to be and do what it is called to.

The points of convergence are an important example of this collaborative work. Originally drafted to reflect a consensus among the authors, they too were revised in light of the dialogue at the symposium. In the end, the eight points in this volume were endorsed by over three-fourths of the participants. As such they represent a consensus not only of a group of academic theologians but also of representatives of forty-four national ministry organizations and schools. While the process of adaptation to the changing circumstances of ministry needs to be innovative and experimental, it also learns. Some basic principles, definitions, and practices emerge. We need to solidify our learning by establishing them as a foundation if we are to continue to grow. Otherwise we keep going over the same issues again and again to everyone’s frustration—a far too familiar experience in discussions of lay ecclesial ministry.

To avoid that, we need to establish a foundation, get the concrete poured, let it set, and then build on it. We cannot keep digging it up, remixing the concrete, adjusting the forms, and pouring it again. Could

it be better? Undoubtedly. But if we waited for the perfect foundation, we would all be homeless. So it is with the theology of vocation and authorization for lay ecclesial ministry. We can actually answer some questions: What distinguishes lay ecclesial ministry from other work of the baptized? Leadership and authorization. Is lay ecclesial ministry a vocation? Yes. Who authorizes the lay ecclesial minister? The bishop. We have learned some things. We have built a good foundation. It is time to come to a shared, operative recognition of that foundation so we can stop repouring the foundation and get on with the work of building on it. After all, the foundation is only the beginning, not the building.

Co-Workers is a major contribution to establishing that foundation. It identifies some fixed points that make further conversation possible. The work of the theologians and practitioners reflected in this volume, particularly the points of convergence endorsed by such a wide cross-section of those working in and on lay ecclesial ministry, is meant to augment the theology of *Co-Workers*. Our hope is that the consensus that has emerged can help further solidify the foundation, establish some agreed upon fixed points that enable us to move forward together in the continuing adaptive work of building the church's capacity for ministry.

As I consider the multiple initiatives converging in the publication of these essays and, even more so, the development of lay ecclesial ministry in the years since the council and the work we have yet to do, I am reminded of the story of the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10. The context is a dispute in the church (yes, even then) about whether Gentiles could be baptized. The answer seems so obvious to us baptized Gentiles that it may be hard to imagine the difficulties around what was arguably the most momentous decision in the history of the church. Indeed, if anything was obvious in the first century it was that Gentiles should *not* be baptized. After all, Jesus was a Jew. All the disciples were Jews. Jesus spoke to Gentiles and could have called them to be his followers had he wanted to, but he did not. Everyone who had ever been baptized was a Jew. What could be clearer than that baptizing Gentiles was against the will of Christ and tradition? This was a profound identity issue and it was clear their identity was Jewish.

Enter Cornelius the Gentile. One afternoon he had a vision in which an angel told him to send for Peter. Meanwhile, Peter was having his own vision that "what God has made clean, you must not call profane." Luke tells us that even after hearing this three times, Peter was still "greatly puzzled" (vv. 15, 17, NRSV). It was against everything he knew as the

will of God. Nevertheless, he went to Cornelius, explaining that he was violating the law against visiting Gentiles because "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean" (v. 28, NRSV).

Peter then proclaimed the Gospel to Cornelius and his household. "While [he] was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word." Not surprisingly, "the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. . . . Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized" (vv. 44-48, NRSV). A decision endorsed, after a good bit of controversy, at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

What does this have to do with our work here on the vocation and authorization of lay ecclesial ministers and the broader adaptive challenges around ministry in the Catholic Church? In both cases, the Spirit is acting, moving ahead of us in ways we did not, and perhaps could not, foresee. We struggle to keep up—to understand, respond, and adapt our practices and structures to what the Spirit is already doing. This is true of our individual lives as disciples. It is also true of our life as an institution. Like the Spirit's coming to Cornelius, the phenomenon of lay ministry stretches our categories and raises significant theological, as well as structural, questions. Our work here is meant to contribute to our collective efforts to think through those questions and adapt our structures and practices in response to the work of the Spirit.

How will ministry be done in the twenty-first century? Like Peter, we may be more than a little puzzled as we see ever fewer priests. Yet we go forward, confident that the Spirit is active in the church—even if in ways we did not expect. Thus it has always been. Figuring out the proper institutional response to the call of the Spirit is the great opportunity in the adaptive work we are about as church.

Notes

1. Heifetz introduces this idea and its implications for organizations and leadership in *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994). He develops its implications for the life of the leader in *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, with Marty Linsky (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002); and offers

more concrete tips on implementing it in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, with Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009). See specifically *Without Easy Answers*, 22–27, 35, 73–76, 87; *On the Line*, 13–20, 55–62; *Practice*, 2–3, 14–23, 69–87. Zeni Fox uses Heifetz’s reflection on leadership explicitly in her consideration of lay ecclesial ministers as leaders in her chapter in this volume, pp. 193–94.

2. Heifetz, *Practice*, 19.

3. Heifetz, *Without Easy Answers*, 35.

4. *Ibid.*, 87.

5. Heifetz, *Practice*, 10.

6. *Ibid.*, 15.

7. Though I am confident that most of the adaptive challenges faced by the Roman Catholic Church in the last fifty years have been or are being faced in their own way, *mutatis mutandis*, by other Christian churches, our focus here and throughout this volume is on the Roman Catholic Church with its particular organizational form and dynamics.

8. “Introduction: The Collegeville Ministry Seminar,” in *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood: Theologies of Lay and Ordained Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), vii.

9. These documents are *Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity* (1980), *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium* (1995), and *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (2005).

10. Wood, *Ordering*, x.

11. See conclusion below, pp. 209–10.

12. Wood, *Ordering*, 264.

13 For a list of cosponsors, see chap. 2, p. 31, n. 14.

14. For a listing of the cosponsors, see appendix, pp. 217–18.