

Catholicism takes laity off the sidelines

Diane Scharper | Jun. 16, 2010

Bishop's book calls for more support, education for lay ministers

FORWARD IN HOPE: SAYING AMEN TO LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTRY

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Ave Maria Press, \$11.95

Many Roman Catholics think of lay ministry as a phenomenon that started with the Second Vatican Council. Not true, says Bishop Matthew H. Clark of Rochester, N.Y., in his new book, *Forward in Hope: Saying Amen to Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. The concept has been with the church from its beginning.

In the first two centuries after the death of Jesus, Clark explains, no distinctions existed among Christians. Some offices were taken over from those performed in the synagogue. But generally, there was a very loose structure when it came to who would perform various jobs. The idea was to sustain and build up the church -- not to stir up competition.



Nor does the New Testament ascribe certain tasks to a particular hierarchy of those

who had known Jesus. While the New Testament mentions ministries like preaching, healing, discerning, teaching and helping those in need, it suggests that these actions were rooted in baptism and in the Spirit -- not in being ordained (1 Corinthians 12:4-13). As such, these ministries were expected of, and open to, all followers of Christ.

Generally, Christian communities tried to respond to needs as they emerged and as they were guided by the gifts of the Spirit. There were no vocations that determined what service would be rendered by whom. In addition, ministries were connected to the concerns of particular communities and were shaped by the needs of these various groups.

But as the church grew, Clark writes, the need for a centralized management grew. The church had to adapt to political concerns, to conflicts within the church, and to threats from the outside. Gradually, the model that dominated our own experiences of church ministry took over. With the ecclesiastical hierarchy doing all the work, laypeople could comfortably watch from the sidelines.

Something was wrong with this scenario, Clark says. It made no sense to think of a large group of lay Christians living "an almost passive religious existence" while priests and nuns were charged with doing all the work of the church. Religious did everything from teaching school, to saying Mass, to administering the sacraments, to visiting the sick, to making policies and decisions. The laity merely had to attend Sunday Mass and put a dollar in the collection plate.

Researching history, sacred scripture, Vatican II documents, papal encyclicals and bishops' letters as well as observations from laypeople working in church ministry, Clark offers an engaging and thoughtful discussion of the role of lay ministers -- past, present, and to come. His bottom line: Laypeople need to roll up their sleeves and get to work if they're not already doing so. No more moaning about the lack of religious vocations. Yes, the shortage of priests and nuns makes the laity's contributions a necessity. But that's missing the point. Ours isn't (and never has been) just a church for priests, brothers and nuns. Jesus Christ came to save everyone.

Clark presents his own experience with lay ministers as well as the ministers' own testimonies. This section of the book is most enlightening and should be required reading for all Catholics. Unfortunately the ministers' comments are each limited to a page or so. Since one of Clark's purposes is to encourage more people to become lay ministers, he might want to expand the testimonials.

Currently there are more than 30,000 lay ministers serving the church, he says, with another 16,000 in training -- nearly five times the number of men preparing for ordination. Yet many don't like the idea of laity ministering to them. Many also think laypeople are not qualified to serve in a ministerial role. Although two out of three U.S. parishes have paid lay ministers on staff, many ministers feel unappreciated. Some complain about having spent Saturday afternoons washing the pastor's car. Others complain about a lack of respect from other laypeople. As Charlotte Bruney, one minister profiled by Clark, puts it: "I find that Roman Catholics have limited imagination when it comes to thinking of anyone other than a priest coming to minister to them."

Some, like Rose Davis, have a more positive experience: "In a way that surprised me at first, I have experienced ministry to be very much like parenting." Davis believes church ministry is an integral part of her identity just as is her vocation of wife and mother. Still others, like Patrick Fox, take a sober, thought-provoking approach to the job: "This church is as strong or weak as each person. Some of those weak and strong people are called to be lay ecclesial ministers."

Overall, most say the job is rewarding, especially since many feel called by the Holy Spirit. Lay ministers work as directors of religious education, as pastoral associates, and as youth, music and liturgical ministers. Even so, they worry about key articles of faith -- like the centrality of the Eucharist -- that some feel are in jeopardy because of the lack of priests. Prayer services cannot take the place of the Mass.

Taking his theme -- and title -- from Pope John Paul II, who exhorted Catholics to go forward in hope, Clark agrees with the Holy Father that we need the eyes to see the work of Jesus Christ and the heart to become his instruments. But, he adds -- and this is one of his central points -- it is imperative that we provide ministers with the education they must have to work as qualified professionals. Like other professionals, lay ministers need skills that require advanced training. As he sees it, that means at least a bachelor's degree in religious studies. Most of the positions in Clark's diocese require a master's degree. Mindless yes men and small group pizza parties won't cut it in the church of the 21st century.

[Diane Scharper is the author of *Radiant: Prayer/Poems* (Cathedral Foundation Press) and other books. She teaches English at Towson University in Maryland.]

To read an excerpt of Bishop Clark's book *Forward in Hope: Saying Amen to Lay Ecclesial Ministry* [click here](#) [1].

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