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'We can't do this by ourselves'

by Matthew H. Clark

The following is an excerpt from the chapter titled "One Bishop's Story" in the book Forward in Hope: Saying Amen to Lay Ecclesial Ministry by Bishop Matthew H. Clark of Rochester, N.Y.

Whether we are bishops or not, we can't do this by ourselves. We live fully in the community of the church. We can only continually invite and encourage, bring people together, urge people to live fully and faithfully the gifts they have for the Gospel we profess.

I have heard of bishops who apparently resist the use of the term "lay ministry." I'm not sure what this means in reality. For example, I was recently told about an archbishop who has urged those in his diocese not to use the term "lay ecclesial ministry." He thinks the term is misleading and problematic in a number of ways. At the same time, though, there are real and concrete signs in that diocese of the emergence of genuine lay ministry: an education program at the local seminary is strengthened by diocesan financial support and healthy enrollment, and many parishes employ laypeople in a variety of pastoral ministries. While use of the term may not be encouraged, and the general concept may be under scrutiny, the archbishop is helping the reality flourish in his archdiocese.

Another potential difficulty could be reflected in the comments of another bishop who complained at one point that lay ministry is causing a new caste or class system to be created in our dioceses. I have to say that my own experience has not at all indicated that a new ranking or class system is emerging among the people I know who are engaged in ministry. It is rare in my experience to encounter a lay ecclesial minister who appears to be in ministry for power or prestige. Still, I understand my colleague's concern in terms of the many ways in which our proneness to sin can make all of us vulnerable to temptations to move in that direction.

Another friend once shared with me his concern that affirming lay ecclesial ministry might indicate a

diminishment of commitment to recruiting and developing fine priests for the service of the church. He seemed to indicate that to support one implies a neglect of the other. My own position is quite different from that. I think the mutual support of both highlights and raises the other to new levels. In my thinking, the fullness of Christ is more fully manifest through the support of both. To those who fear that encouraging lay ministry might constitute a threat to the priesthood, I go back to the example of my own transition from life in Rome to life in Rochester.

In the seven years prior to my ordination as bishop, I had little experience not only of women in the church, but actually of anyone except males between the ages of 22 and 28 years old. While I would say that there were certainly opportunities to enjoy what diversity there was in Rome in those days, I have to admit that I did not find in the seminary setting the kind of richness that I have found in a church served by women and other lay ministers. I think the same richness and benefit for the whole church is available as we learn to nurture the vocations of our fine lay ministers.

Early on, I found that I needed to absorb the experience of lay ministry, to reflect on it in order to come to understand and appreciate it. Obviously I came to this new experience as a kind of blank slate in terms of any experience of this dimension of church life. I wanted to see what the new picture looked like, I wanted to appreciate it and perhaps to promote it, but I had very little personal experience of it at all. I wondered about what I observed in my new situation, asking, "Is this good? Why is this happening?"

I did not detect anything negative in what I saw happening. In fact, I saw that the people reacted positively to lay ministry. I saw broader numbers of people served because such ministry was available. I saw enriching mutual interaction between ordained and lay ministers. I kept being mindful, over and over, of the passage from Matthew's Gospel, "By their fruits you will know them" (7:16). I can honestly say that it became an awesome kind of thing to unpack, to appreciate all that people were putting into lay ministry to make it actually happen. ...

We need to be equitable and honest in the support we give to the development of lay ecclesial ministers. These people invest considerable time, energy, and money into their formation. They realize, as we do, that candidates for ordained ministry receive much fuller funding for their formation. This reality calls us to serious reflection on whether that situation should be preserved. It seems to me that we need to find concrete, practical ways to support all the people who are so willing to devote themselves to the pastoral ministry of the church. It is our responsibility to do so.

We also need to keep working on the understanding of lay ecclesial ministry held by our communities at large. So many still equate ministry with that offered by the priest. That, of course, is appropriate as it relates to the sacraments that only a priest can administer. But I have met people who complain because they have not received ministry from a priest, even when a non-ordained minister has, in fact, come to them and cared for them beautifully. We need to help people understand that it is the ministry of Christ for which they thirst, and it is not the ordained alone who exercise that ministry and bring that service to us.

Progress in all these things will not be automatic by any means. I think it will come as all things do: through patient instruction and through careful, continuing reflection by both lay ministers and those to whom they offer ministry. We can respond in ways that promote understanding when there are complaints that Father should have come and not a layperson. Somehow we have to help one another realize church as the people of God, too. To assume that "only Father" is good enough to exercise the ministry of Christ is surely not to appreciate this image. ...

What do I see down the road? I am optimistic about the future. In my view, the emergence of lay ecclesial ministry in the church is not just a sign of innovation or revision but is a sign of true renewal and hope. I

truly believe that it is a work of the Holy Spirit. There is much more to be done. We need to reflect continually on the experience of lay ecclesial ministers and on our experience of their ministry. We need to work on the areas outlined in [The U.S. bishops' 2005 document on lay ministry] 'Co-Workers in the Vineyard': recruitment, initial and ongoing support, relationships with bishops and other ministers of the Gospel, relationships with the people they serve, compensation, and accountability.

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If we can do this work in faith and with mutual respect -- and I have no doubt that we can -- we can be an integral part of the continued growth of one of God's greatest gifts to the postconciliar church.

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