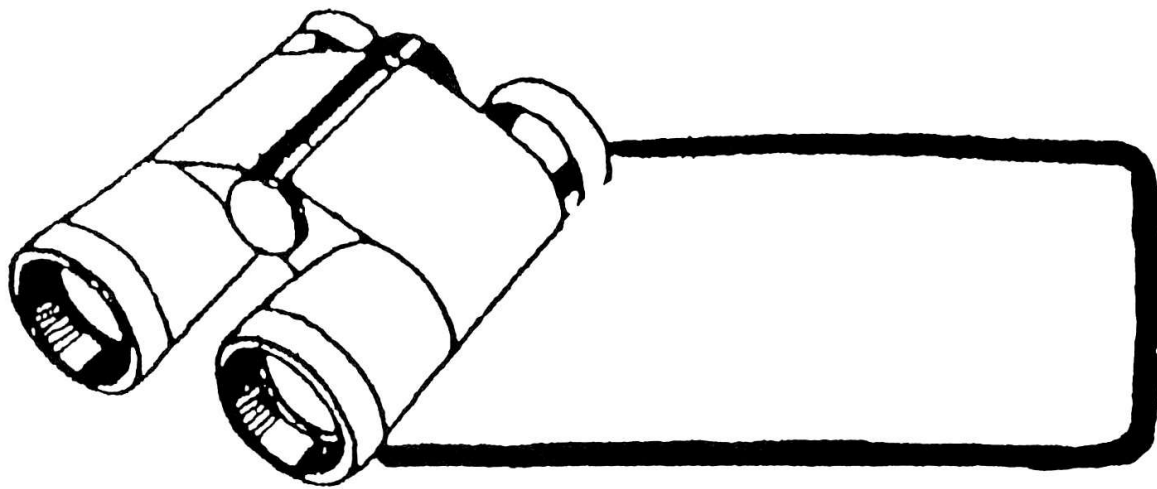


# The Hong Kong Central Council of Catholic Laity Looks at Lay Ministry



For a long time now we have become accustomed to thinking of ministry in terms of the administration of sacraments by the clergy, and we have limited the focus of pastoral ministry to liturgical celebrations. On the other hand, because lay Catholics are now becoming more involved in the work of special ministries within the Church on a voluntary basis but without formal designation or appointment, there are those who feel that it is not necessary to establish new forms of ministry.

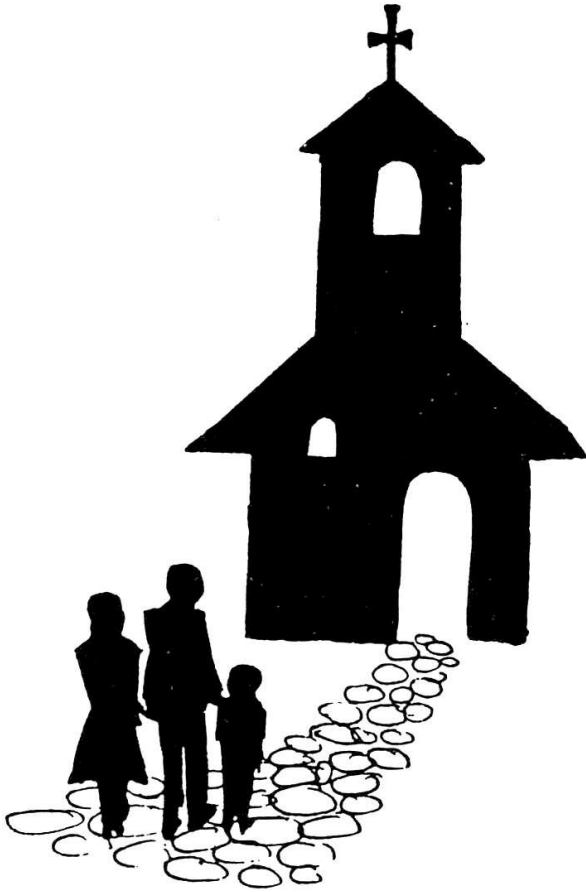
Besides the three sacramental ministries of deacon, priest and bishop, the early Church had the following non-sacramental ministries: deaconess, lector (one responsible for Bible study in the Christian community), acolyte (one responsible for the liturgical life of the Christian community), exorcist (which included care for the spiritual needs of the sick). These lay ministries were established because of the specific needs of the Church of that time, and they played a major role in developing and manifesting her inner

life. Later, because of changes brought about by history, the actual practice of these ministries gradually diminished.

Today, under the impulse of the Second Vatican Council, there is a renewed understanding of the role of the laity. Now the laity are acknowledged to be active participants in both sacramental and non-sacramental ministries, and this new awareness has received concrete expression in recent Church documents. The instruction Fidei Custos, dated April 30, 1969, called for the institution of extraordinary lay ministers of Holy Communion. On August 15, 1972 Pope Paul VI published two apostolic letters, Ministeria Quaedam and Ad Pascendum, which reformed the diaconate and established the offices of lector and acolyte as lay ministries. (These latter ministries could also be exercised by those preparing for the ministry of priesthood.) Moreover, the Sacred congregation for Divine Worship is preparing a document which treats of the formal appointment of lay people to official ministries within the Church. The first draft of this document has already been distributed to various experts and advisers for their comments. The apostolic letter Ministeria Quaedam asked that local churches everywhere study local ministerial problems, and, if new ministries were found to be helpful to the Church in its mission to the world, then, the establishment of such ministries would be considered.

The above mentioned documents help us to understand more clearly that ministry is a special responsibility conferred by the Church on certain Catholics for specific service within the Christian community. Like other organizations, the Christian community also has its own special mission and areas of responsibility, and it must respond to a variety of needs, both personal and community-wide. Today, of course, the most arduous tasks and duties still fall on the shoulders of the clergy. But living as she does in an ever-increasingly complex society, the Church must examine anew her present organizational structures and activities. When required, she should officially "install" lay Catholics, especially those who combine professional qualifications with a spirit of service, in special pastoral ministries.

With regard to the conferring of lay ministries, the



above mentioned documents point out that when the Church delegates authority to lay Catholics for specific ministries, the whole community should join in prayer for those being appointed, that their work for the Church might prove efficacious. Those receiving a lay ministry are:

1. to carry out the special pastoral work to which they have been appointed in the name of the Church;
2. to promise to offer their whole lives, or a specific number of years, either full-time or part-time, to their ministry;
3. to receive from the Church the authority they need to carry out their tasks;

4. to implement their authority in a spirit of loyal service as servants of the people of God.

In accord with the universal Catholic Church, the Hong Kong Catholic Church has also made an initial, positive response to the lay ministries movement. In 1970, to implement the spirit of Vatican Council II, the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese held its first synod. This synod reaffirmed the need for the laity to participate in the work of evangelization:

In this the laity are called to a more direct form of cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy. While sharing with the sacred ministers of the Church a true equality with regard to the dignity and the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ, the laity should enthusiastically cooperate with and assist their pastors and

teachers. (Hong Kong Diocesan Synod, Document #5, "Catholic Life," para. 8)

The Hong Kong Central Council of Catholic Laity, since its inception in 1959, has vigorously promoted and cooperated in the work of evangelization in the diocese. In recent years members of the Council have participated in a series of meetings on lay ministries. Among them have been "New Ministries in the Church" sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) in Hong Kong in 1977, "The Role of the Laity in the Church's Life and Mission in Asian Society" organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity and held in Hong Kong in 1983, and a meeting of the Bishops' Institute for the Lay Apostolate (BILA-FABC) held in Taiwan in 1984 on the topic "The Participation and Co-responsibility of the Laity in the Church." Through these conferences the Hong Kong Council of the Laity has gained valuable experience and deepened its realization of the importance of the lay apostolate. This year the Council decided to implement that part of the Volunteer Apostles Programme which has to do with the training of Bible study leaders. Most parishes have responded enthusiastically to this program.

In past years, when the work of evangelization was expanding at an accelerated rate and clergy were few, the Church allotted a portion of this important ministry to the laity. Lay collaborators were called "catechists". In the absence of a priest, the catechist's duties were to lead the community in Sunday worship, preach, officiate at funerals, minister to the sick, teach catechism, and prepare couples for marriage. However, from a theological point of view, the catechists' work in those days was considered supplementary to that of the clergy within the Christian community, and catechists only worked under the close direction of the priest. The Second Vatican Council considered the important position that such lay Catholics held in the early Church, and it reaffirmed the essential worth of the laity's role in the building up of society. Vatican II no longer refers to the laity as "priest's helpers," but rather as "capable cooperators with clergy." The laity are not temporary substitutes, but rather persons who "make an outstanding and definite contribution to the Church." Are we right in saying that there is a causal

relationship between the shortage of clergy today and the reappearance of lay ministers? Or would it not be more correct to say that this is a God-given opportunity arising from the challenge of the times?

Within its competence the Hong Kong Council of the Laity is now offering an opportunity for the training of evangelizers. The Council hopes that, when their period of training is over, these lay apostles will receive an official commission from the bishop at a public ceremony. At the present time, some Catholics in Hong Kong, after receiving training, have already been commissioned as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist. Obviously, lay ministries is the trend of the future.

It is a time of decision, for the Hong Kong Catholic Church which has been brought about by her own historical circumstances. She should no longer be thinking about whether or not to establish lay ministries, but how and where to establish them in order that they may be most effective. Let us ask the Holy spirit to give us the determination and courage to face up to this contemporary challenge!

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