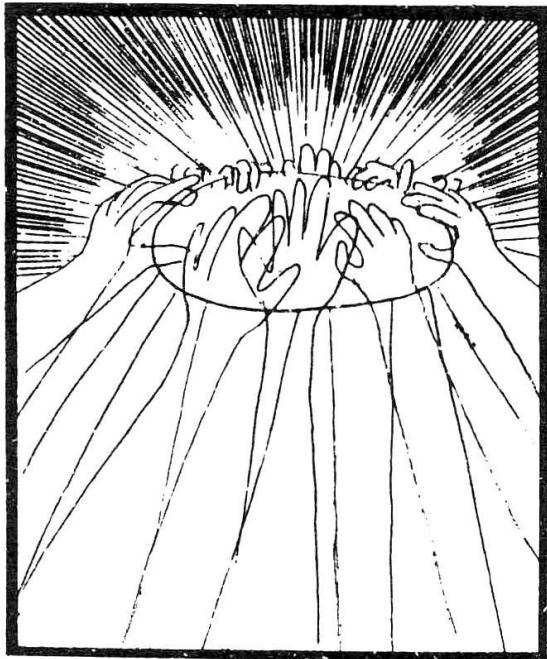


# REFLECTIONS ON LAY PARTICIPATION IN THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY IN HONG KONG



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The concept of lay ministries has been with the Church for a long time now. Our awareness of its importance and necessity continues to grow, especially in the post-Vatican II atmosphere where ecclesiology has become such a dominant theme. Yet, while theologians and other church theoreticians have addressed the subject with great zeal....there is no shortage of seminars, discussions and conferences on the matter....it must be admitted that their practical implementation in the pastoral ministry of the church still leaves much to be desired. Is this because there exists an unbridgeable chasm between theory and practise, two realms of reality separate and distinct which are destined never to meet? Or are the problems to be found elsewhere, perhaps in the actual condition of church environment and structure, and the limitations and exigencies of our frail human nature? Whatever the cause, the result is the same; namely, unrealized ideas that threaten to disintegrate into the stuff of empty dreams. In this brief article, we would like to explore the meaning of lay participation in ministry from the twin perspectives of the experience of the infant church and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. More practically, we hope to delineate some of the more obvious difficulties and obstacles which might be hindering their growth and development in our own diocese of Hong Kong, and offer in passing some suggestions about how such difficulties might be overcome.

There is no shortage of evidence in the New Testament of the important role the laity played in the pastoral ministry of the early church. Just a few short references should suffice. Luke, in the third gospel, his "Gospel of the Disciple", notes that in addition to the choice of twelve apostles, Jesus selected seventy-two disciples, who were commissioned to bring the good news of the Kingdom to the towns and villages which Jesus himself intended to visit. In chapter ten, Jesus speaks of the plentiful harvest but the lack of labourers, and instructs these disciples to "heal the sick" and proclaim "the Kingdom of God" in every town along their way.

In the opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we find the disciples returning to the upper room, where in the company of "Peter and John....some women and Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and his brethren, all were praying together with one accord." Luke then describes the Pentecost event: "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place....and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:1-4) The passage leaves no room for doubt that the Spirit descended on the whole community, apostles, disciples, men and women, and that all were sent in mission to evangelize the world.

Later in Acts (chapter 18) we are given an insight into how the apostle Paul went about his mission of evangelizing the gentiles. "After this Paul stayed many days longer and there took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila." (Acts 18:18) Lest the reader think that these two women journeyed to Ephesus merely to serve the domestic needs of the brethren, the author notes their role in the instruction of Apollos in the "way of God" (18:27), Apollos being a leader and one of the most eloquent preachers in the early church.

We turn now to an epistle written some years later, the First Epistle of Peter, wherein the Christian community is described as a community of priests who work together to realize the Kingdom of God in the midst of the larger society. Each Christian is to assume the responsibility and duties of priest, king and prophet. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may proclaim the wonderful works of him who called you out of darkness into his own wonderful light." (I Peter 2:9) Note how the roles are given to all in the community without discrimination as to sex or class.

If in the new testament there is clear indication of the role lay ministries played in the development of the early church, we find in the

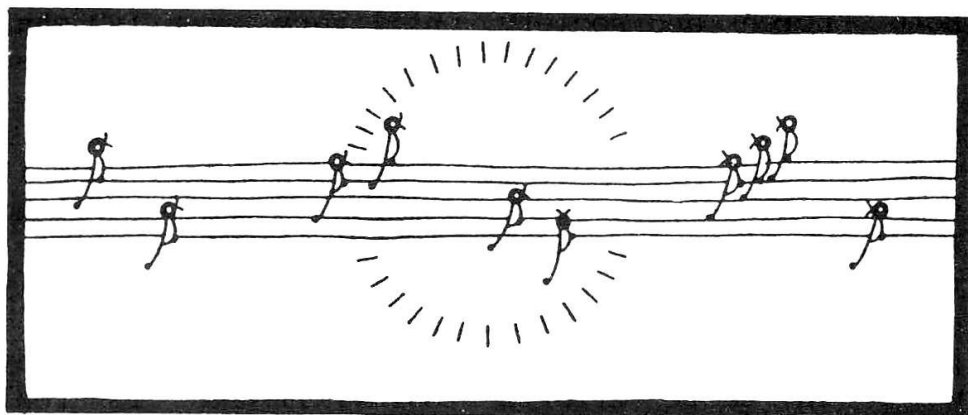
documents of Vatican II even more specific verification of the place of the laity in her pastoral ministry. The following quotation is taken from the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, paragraph two: "In the church there is a diversity of ministry but unity of mission. To the apostles and their successors Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing in his name and by his power. But the laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly offices of Christ; they have therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole people of God." Here we find a distinction between ordained ministry and lay ministry, with the sphere of lay ministry given a much wider context than that of the ordained ministry. Lay ministry is not limited to ministry within the structures of the church itself, but must be extended to include the world at large. The interdependency of both forms of ministry is addressed in paragraph ten of the same document: "Their action within the church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect.... They enthusiastically cooperate in the spread of the Word of God, particularly by catechetical instruction, and through their special expertise they increase the efficacy of the care of souls as well as of the administration of the good of the church." This citation not only indicates the broad range of ministries open to the laity, but instructs each and every lay Catholic to use their unique skills to contribute to the church's overall mission.

Paragraph ten goes on to develop the idea of the need for close cooperation between the laity and the ordained ministers, emphasizing that their common responsibility to the church is a shared responsibility to be borne jointly: "The laity should develop the habit of working in close union with their parish priests. In the parish community they should bring up their own problems, world problems and questions regarding man's salvation. Together the community can examine these problems and solve them through general discussion. According to their abilities the laity ought to cooperate in all the apostolic and missionary activities of their ecclesiastical family."

From the above comments on scripture and church teaching, it is evident that there is no lack of purpose and encouragement in establishing and maintaining forms of lay ministry. In fact, the proliferation of lay ministries is essential for the full realization of the role of lay people in the pastoral life of the church. We turn now to some of the practical problems which arise when the ideal comes into contact with the real. We shall limit our comments to the diocese of Hong Kong, as it is the environment with which we are most familiar.

In the diocese of Hong Kong, we find that in recent years there has been a rapid increase in the number of ministries now open to the laity. Aside from the traditional roles of the catechist and religious instructor, most parishes now have ministers of the Word and ministers of the Eucharist. More lay people than ever before are involved in parish pastoral tasks: teaching, preaching, visiting the sick, engaging in peace and justice programmes, etc. Unfortunately, the range and level of lay participation and the numbers of those actually involved is still quite limited. Why is this so? Among the many reasons, two predominate: the attitude of the clergy and the attitude of the laity.

In general, there are two kinds of attitudes which may be found among the clergy. It would be too simple to label one "open" and the other "closed", but there is reason to state that there does exist a pre-Vatican II and post-Vatican



II mindset among them, which divides opinion and often serves as a brake to the rapid expansion of lay ministries in the parishes.

For those whose ordained ministry came to maturity in the years prior to the Second Vatican Council, there is a more traditional approach to the Church as an institution. Conscious of their role as representatives of God, they tend towards an authoritarian approach to problem solving. They wait for official church approval, in the form of hierarchical confirmation and specific directives, and feel that the whole notion of lay ministries has not yet been given final official approval. They tend to form protective shields around existing church structures and disciplines, and are suspicious of new forms that often are seen as threats to orthodoxy and time-honoured traditions. With regard to changes in church structures, they look for church legislation, concrete and specific, as a green light before moving forward. Underlying this may be a fear of a loss of personal identity as the laity continue to encroach upon what has been traditionally a sphere reserved for the ordained ministry. The participation of the laity in direct pastoral activity often is perceived by them as a threat to the role of ordained ministry. In the end, they seem to feel there

will be few pastoral tasks left for the priest to do. What is needed here is a new understanding of the pastor's role in a community that shares pastoral responsibility in common. Far from decreasing the pastor's responsibility, a community directly and vitally engaged in the church's pastoral ministries, will only increase and heighten the need and importance of the pastor's role.

Another point worthy of mention here is the traditional conception of pastoral ministry as a male domain. A thousand years of celibate pastoral leadership is bound to have an effect on how the community approaches pastoral authority. The ministries now opening themselves to women's participation were traditionally the sole prerogative of males. Both Church and society, until very recently, sharply restricted the role of women. And while women were much in evidence in church life, there were few leadership roles open to them. Lay participation makes no such distinctions. But while new ideas may receive approval in theory, old attitudes die hard, especially when it comes to matters sexual. The increased assumption of pastoral authority by women in a traditionally male dominated field of activity is bound to meet resistance, and while this difficulty may be largely psychological it is none the less real, and is often an obstacle in implementing church policy on increasing the number and extent of lay ministries. Many women in their efforts to fulfill what is really their Christian obligation of service in the pastoral mission of the Church meet with opposition, an opposition based in part on male intransigency.

The second attitude found among the clergy might be described as Post-Vatican II. Usually younger and reared in a church environment less defensive about change and more sympathetic to new ideas, these priests generally manifest a more open attitude towards increasing lay participation in their pastoral ministries. But while such priests may have the will, often they lack the way. Their youth places them in situations of limited authority, often they serve as assistant pastors to more traditionally minded older priests. When conflicts in point of view arise, they tend to retreat into silence. Given the alternative of open conflict with the pastor and what their traditional training has taught them about preserving parish unity as a paramount pastoral responsibility, they pull back. They, too, wait for the approval of higher authority and the backing of episcopal directives before initiating an attack on the status quo. If official sanction is not forthcoming, they often shrug it off with a comment on the differences between the ideal and the real world. While their commitment to the task remains firm, they tend to put the matter off until a more propitious time.

An example of how church structures can themselves be obstacles to the rapid development of lay ministries was a recent directive by the diocese officially informing all of its parishes that financial committees, including both priests and lay people, were to be instituted in every parish. The diocese was operating on instructions which originated in Rome. While most local people have been aware for some time now of the need for lay participation in the financial planning of a parish, we are so used to waiting for word from on high before actually implementing plans, that it took a directive from Rome and a further directive from the diocese to realize in practise something that should have been done a long time ago. Is it the habit of looking to higher authority that causes us to hesitate, or is it the fear that having established a form of lay participation it would only be met with disapproval from above? A multi-layered authority structure ingrains habits of passivity that often serve as obstacles to the growth and development of lay ministries.

From a discussion of difficulties to be found among the clergy, let us look for a moment at some of the problems among the laity that stand in the way of putting theory into actual practise.

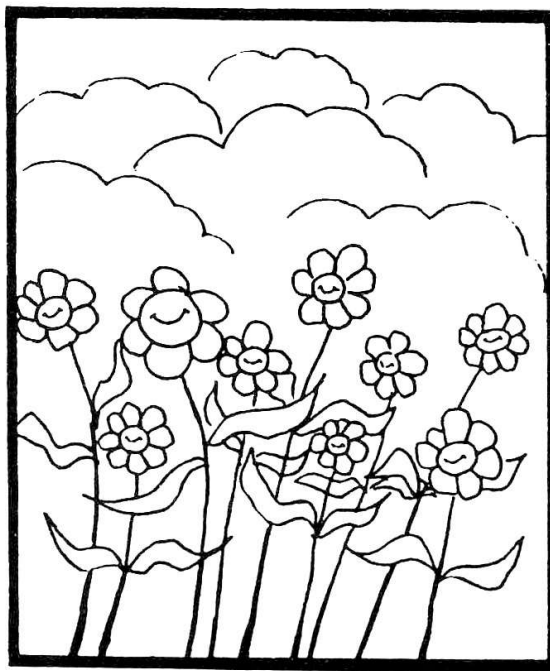
Most of our Catholics do not have a deep knowledge of their faith. Their practise is rooted in tradition. They tend to be passive and depend too much on the clergy in making decisions and judgments with regard to church matters. They accept a church structure where decisions are made at the top and then filtered down, and see their role in ministry as secondary to that of the clergy or religious. They frequently confuse ordained ministry with lay ministry, equating general pastoral ministry with specific sacramental ministry. As a result, they seldom see pastoral ministry in its broader sense as their own responsibility. They would be surprised to find that the basis for the early church was the "community", and that hierarchical forms were only developed later as needs arose.

Many Catholics suffer from an underdeveloped sense of mission. They are unclear about their own role in the Church and lack a strong identity with its pastoral concerns. Often they look upon the more involved lay people as an oddity or merely as a good natured volunteer willing to give the Church some "free time". Because they see a line of demarcation between the sacred and the secular, they feel little responsibility for roles that pertain to the "spiritual". These they leave in the hands of the clergy while they go about their lives in the secular world. That they should take an active part in pastoral ministry strikes them as something novel and outside their realm of expertise.

As a result of lay people equating the sacramental role of the church with the role of the clergy, when lay Catholics assume responsibility for such ministries as bringing communion to the sick or officiating at para-liturgical services, they often find a lack of acceptance. There is a reluctance to accept a lay person when he or she comes to bless a house or officiate at a funeral. Many Catholics feel that the ritual would be more efficacious if performed by a priest. A minority are of the opinion that unless the priest is there, sacramentals lose their effect. This sharp division in what is seen as clerical and lay responsibility in pastoral ministry often has a negative effect on the best of lay Catholics and makes them reluctant to assume further active responsibility for pastoral tasks. Sometimes when they meet with rejection or are subject to the various pressures that arise from both clergy and laity alike, they give up and retire into more passive roles.

Having laid out in some detail the obstacles to implementing lay ministries on the parish level, it is time to offer some suggestions by way of possible responses. Most of what we have said is based on the positive assumption that all members of the people of God share a common hope that the mission of the church will continue to develop and expand, and that the idea of lay ministries is to be encouraged and furthered as a major priority in the life of the Church.

A realistic step in putting such an ideal into concrete form would be the acceptance by both clergy and laity of the fact that we learn about lay ministries and their possibilities only through actual practise. As an example of the efficacy of this approach, we have the widespread development of the ministry of the Word. Once solely the responsibility of the ordained, this ministry has gradually come to include laymen and women, and even children. What might at first have been seen as a radical departure from tradition, has, through actual practise, become a commonplace in parish life, and has greatly enriched the community's liturgical celebrations. The evolution of lectors at liturgical functions did not wait upon a command from above, but was part of a prophetic



initiative from below. Also practise is far and above the best method for training ministers. What emerges is concrete and specific, and, because of that, of more lasting value.

Our second recommendation is that the present scope of official lay ministries should be expanded to include preaching, counseling, spiritual direction and organizing and directing spiritual retreats. Ministries that go beyond the boundaries of church structures should also be sought out and encouraged. Such forms will serve to strengthen ties between the parish and the larger society within which the parish exists. These ministries are to be seen as part and parcel of the parish's overall pastoral ministry, an expression of its task of evangelization.

More work could be done in the training of priests. In the seminary, formation programmes should enhance the seminarian's understanding of the spiritual potential in practical forms of lay ministry; his knowledge and awareness of social and secular society should be heightened; close attention should be paid to his own social and psychological development that he might be able to function well as an enabler for lay people to carry out their specific ministries in the secular world. The trend towards opening up theological courses for lay people should be encouraged, and ways and means to attract more and more lay people to them should be diligently sought. With seminarians and lay people studying, questioning and learning together, the chance of clergy and lay people coming together with mutual respect and cooperation later on in the parish would be greatly enhanced. Also, having lay people with seminarians in their study of theology would introduce a wider perspective in the courses themselves and help to develop more cogent analysis and realistic appraisal of that world to which they are both called to minister to.

In our parishes, we can nourish among our lay people an appreciation of their importance and value; train them to have confidence in their role and encourage in them a spirit of initiative in carrying it out. If the word participation means anything, it means decision sharing. Opinions offered should receive a serious hearing, and, passivity should be met with a conscious effort to elicit new opinions and ideas.

We have some work to do in overcoming our tendency for making class distinctions. While we have different roles to play, we all share in a common responsibility. Any vocabulary, be it spoken or written in our many diocesan periodicals, should be careful to reflect our communality as the people of God. We tend to be careless with our words and often,



without intending to, give the impression that there are higher and lower classes of ministry within the community. Granted that many of the titles we use come from a former time and reflect a tendency to aggrandize social positions, but we must also be sensitive to the educational effects such vocabulary has on those who wrongly assume that with the title comes social status. Along the same line, we should review our approach to delegating authority within our many church structures. Care should be taken that diocesan committees and commissions reflect an understanding of lay participation on the highest levels. In many cases, lay people of talent and ability could well fill those positions of authority to which now priests are generally appointed, and they would also free the priests to be more directly engaged in the specific tasks for which they were ordained.

In conclusion, while we have pointed out many difficulties and obstacles in the way of a practical and realistic implementation of the ideal of lay ministries, we also see the great benefits that have come and can continue to come from our efforts under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. More and more lay people will continue to come forth to participate more actively in the work of the church. This will bring us a new vitality and cause us to be enlivened further by the Spirit of Christ. We remain committed to and united in our common goal to make of our church truly a servant church, with all its members sharing a communion of pastoral responsibility and concern for the world in which we live.

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