

Review: Lay and Ordained Ministry

Reviewed Work(s): Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood: Theologies of Lay and Ordained Ministry by Susan K. Wood

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Source: *The Furrow*, Vol. 55, No. 6 (Jun., 2004), pp. 372-377

Published by: The Furrow

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27664980>

Accessed: 17-12-2018 14:45 UTC

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Featured Review

– *Lay and Ordained Ministry*

Patrick Connolly

In the centuries immediately before Vatican II, the ordained priesthood was understood to be the exclusive locus of ministry in the Catholic Church. Since the Council, things have changed dramatically, and in some parts of the world there has developed a paid 'professional' lay ministry. This is most obvious in parishes in the United States and in German-speaking countries, and that development is clearly connected to the fact that these are well-resourced Churches with a shortage of priests. That said, the phenomenon of catechists in the developing world demonstrates that lay ministry has a universal importance. While the flowering of lay ministries in various and diverse forms has clearly enriched ecclesial life across the Catholic world, this has not been without tension and sometimes conflict, and part of the reason has been a lack of theological clarity and consensus about the nature of ministry itself and about the relationship between lay and ordained ministries.

To outline a contemporary theology of ministry, ten scholars gathered at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, with the aid of a grant from the Lilly Foundation, to discuss prepared position papers and discuss points of convergence. The results of the Collegeville Ministry Seminar have now been published.¹ Among the contributors are well-known authors in the area of ministry and ecclesiology. The volume is clearly written in an American context, and its practical examples come from that situation, but this does not detract from its value, as the writers don't let that particular local background dominate matters too much as sometimes can happen. There is a consistency of quality across the contributions, not always found in edited works.

1. *Ordering the Baptismal Priesthood: Theologies of Lay and Ordained Ministry*. Edited by Susan K. Wood SCL. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press. Pp. 275+x. Price US\$26.95. ISBN 0-8146-2941-5.

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Moreover, the book is also important as it brings to a wider audience in a reasonably accessible and succinct manner the work of academic theology, especially historical studies like that of the distinguished Irish Oblate theologian David Power. Nor does it dodge current tensions within the Church about the development of lay ministries.

It would be beyond our scope to comment on all the articles in depth, so it might be best to focus on some lines of thought which relate with a particular relevance to the Irish situation.

A TENDENCY TO PRAGMATISM

Michael Downey, a lay theologian who has served as a seminary professor, begins the book by noting that in times of transition or perceived crisis there is a tendency to safeguard identity, and he thinks one expression of this is the familiar warnings against ‘clericalization of the laity’ and ‘laicization of the clergy’. He goes on to point out that often in the Church all forms of ministry are in practice rooted in secular models of leadership with their emphases on ‘doing’, ‘skills’, and ‘outcomes’, rather than an understanding of ministry in which *knowing/being* has priority over *doing*. In his view, these two governing concerns in understanding ministry today – identity by contrast with others and a focus on ministerial skills – are not good starting points. He rightly cautions against an overly pragmatic view of ministry, lay or ordained, in other words an excessively functional approach which leads to the phenomenon of the ‘doer unto death’, a danger not confined to the ordained ministry. The most important skill of any minister is *to know*, to cultivate a whole way of being, so that in knowing and loving the Christian tradition it can be passed on effectively, and hence others can live fruitfully in it. This means that being properly schooled in theology is not something simply desirable, but essential.

What Downey has to say in this regard has a particular resonance for the Irish context. He thinks the American tendency for the merely pragmatic, for instance when dealing with education for ecclesial ministry, is very strong, but this temptation is alive and well in Ireland also. Sometimes it seems to be forgotten that when preparing laity for ministry, a solid theological education is important before proceeding to pastoral formation. Degrees for example in pastoral studies and spirituality which lack a thorough theological foundation are ultimately are not the best preparation for ministry, because while such graduates may be very skilled in pastoral care they often lack an education in the history of theology that would allow them to think beyond contemporary pastoral problems. Of course the problem is that many Irish lay people

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interested in lay ministry cannot afford years of theological education before pursuing pastoral studies, and that raises the fundamental question of just how interested is the institutional Church in helping such people obtain a solid theological formation, in other words whether this will be pursued on a national level and go beyond the commendable efforts of individual bishops.

FEARS

Fear that the distinctive character of the ministerial priesthood is being somehow obscured on account of the growth in lay ministry is an issue which many of this book's authors mention or address. Maybe unsurprisingly, this apprehension seems to be more a concern in those richer Churches with a paid wide-scale lay ministry, and doesn't appear to be a burning issue, even among the conservatively-minded, in an Ireland with an aging clergy rapidly diminishing in numbers, and where trained laity are not employed on any serious scale. When it does happen it is usually on a part-time or on a full-time fixed-term basis, rather than a permanent one. Aside from underlying theological reservations and the usual reason of inadequate finances, one wonders if for some Church leaders in this part of the world employment law is the sometimes unspoken dominant factor in the background. The contributors to this volume don't approach it in these terms, but in the United States there is really no such thing as a permanent job in the sense we understand it here, and local legislation generally favours the employer, so unlike here parishes and dioceses there have great flexibility in this regard, which in turn leads to questions about justice and employment security for lay ministers, issues mentioned by some of the authors. While canon law recognizes the principle of a just wage for lay ministers (c. 231 §2), the need for consistent and mandatory employment practices is not outlined by the canon, and whereas in many American dioceses carefully worked-out policies have been developed, in others lay ministers have little job security with the coming of a new bishop or pastor. In one paradoxical sense, the underlying question for Church authorities of trusting lay ministers, even if the numbers taken on are relatively small, is much more compelling on this side of the Atlantic where civil legislation increasingly supports permanency as the usual mode of employment.

TENSIONS

On a more theological plane, it is interesting that when in 1997 eight departments of the Roman Curia together issued an Instruction on 'Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests', the

most vigorous reaction came from some parts of Western Europe and North America. Certainly, informally, in some places some bishops claimed it wasn't relevant for their countries and that the document was aimed at German-speaking countries. There is perhaps an element of truth in the assertion that this was indeed the Instruction's primary target audience. On one practical level, that of presenting and summarizing current discipline, the Roman document said little new, though it did seem on occasion to go beyond what the law demanded by adding details (e.g. forbidding the liturgical use of oil by laity in case there would be confusion between a non-sacramental anointing and the sacrament of the sick). However, on another level, the Instruction demonstrated a deep Roman unease with developments which in its view undermine the priestly ministry, and in its theological section it appealed to a view of ministry not much favoured in theological discourse since the Council. Thomas Rausch calls this a theological current which seeks to restrict the language of 'ministry', and it stands in sharp contrast to two other currents: one which is very expansive of the concept of ministry, and another, proposed by feminist and other scholars, which challenges the very idea of an apostolic office related to the Twelve and hence sees all Church order as a later development. Other authors in this volume see the Instruction as returning to an older 'two-realm' theory, with the clergy ministering in the Church and the laity witnessing in the world.

THEOLOGIES OF MINISTRY

One of the appealing things about this book is that, firmly rooted in the Catholic tradition, the authors grapple with historical conundrums, and do take magisterial texts seriously.

Franciscan Kenan Osborne contributes an excellent thought-provoking piece, mostly on the historical development of the concepts of *episkopos* and *presbyteros*, but he thinks that much historical data have not yet been accepted by Church leadership. Perhaps he is expecting too much too quickly, because in the face of theological and historical debates, the stance of the Church authority usually tends to be tutiorist, i.e. it endorses what it regards as the 'safer' theological opinion especially in matters pertaining to the sacraments. This innately conservative approach is not however beyond learning from historical and theological research, and perhaps official Catholic thinking is being more influenced than Osborne fears, as the process tends to take time.

Some of the contributors who deal with the 1997 Roman Instruction admit that that unease is found well beyond the Curia, and while they acknowledge its legitimacy, they rightly respond that neither a theology of ordained ministry nor a theology of lay

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ministry can be developed in isolation from or in contrast to each other. In a compelling and careful study, Richard Gaillardetz proposes a middle ground between the preconiliar identification of ministry with holy orders and a more recent tendency to consider any kind of Christian activity as ministry. Seeing ministry as 'ecclesial repositioning', he sees ordination as bringing the one ordained into a fundamentally new ecclesial relationship beyond that established by Christian initiation. Respectful of the Catholic tradition, he affirms the ontological effects of sacramental ordination, but wishes to shift to a 'relational' ontology: '... it is not the conferral of power that makes the ordained minister; rather, it is the reconfiguration of the person into a new ministerial relationship that requires that empowerment by the Holy Spirit necessary for the fulfilment of that ministry' (p. 40). Within the life of the Church, ministerial ordering need not be restricted to ordination, and following through with his thinking on the ecclesial re-positioning involved in ministry, he sees the need for public liturgical rituals to recognize and initiate 'installed' and 'commissioned' ministers. The former would be for more stable, probably full-time ministries (e.g. pastoral assistant), while the latter would be for other ministries such as liturgical reading.

The Roman Instruction had called for a 'full recovery of the awareness of the secular nature of the mission of the laity', and Aurelie Hagstrom takes up this challenge in an interesting and informative survey of magisterial documents, finding three varying interpretations of this secular nature. In the third approach the secular character of the laity is not posed in opposition to their participation in the inner life of the Church, and so taking this interpretation, ecclesial lay ministry cannot be seen as a desertion of the proper identity of the laity.

On a practical point, contributors note that when Pope Paul VI abolished the 'minor orders' in 1972 (*Ministeria quaedam*), replacing them with the 'installed ministries' of lector and acolyte (which in pastoral practice have largely remained a dead duck, being usually received only by those proceeding to ordination, because the ministries are confined to men at the moment), he also invited episcopal conferences to petition for the addition of other public ministries, but the invitation was never taken up. Not everything is Rome's fault. So even the current discipline is apparently open to the formalization of *de facto* lay ministries if local Churches see this as useful. Gaillardetz sees the Roman nomenclature of 'installed ministries' as much more helpful than other terms like 'lay ecclesial ministry', or 'the lay apostolate', or 'non-ordained ministry', or 'the ministry of the baptized', since each probably reflects an operative view of the Church.

On another practical note, canon law is often a bugbear in discussions about lay ministry, and in a fine succinct contribution, Elissa Rinere outlines the strengths and weaknesses of the 1983 Code in this area, noting that its hesitancy about *cura animarum* (to use the traditional term) by the laity has its roots in the equally tentative texts of Vatican II. In any event, the Code is not meant to mirror emergent theologies, but rather put into practice theological teaching that has attained a level of universal acceptance in the Church, and it can be argued that as applying to the whole Church across the world the Code cannot directly address many local issues, an attribute which may be both a strong point and a limitation. Pastoral practice in the Church often runs ahead of theological reflection and canonical structures.

Finally, in all of this discussion one might wonder where stands the poor old parish priest, a ministry which seems to get more demanding every day. Vatican II clarified and indeed developed the theology of the episcopate, teaching that bishops had the fullness of the sacrament of orders. In retrospect it can hardly be said that the Council laid down a similarly worked-out theology of the presbyterate. Since Vatican II there has been much discussion of the presbyter as a 'collaborator' of the bishop, but that has its theological and indeed spiritual limitations, at least for many presbyters. It is in this context that Susan Wood, well-known for her book *Sacramental Orders* (2000), suggests the need for an enriched understanding of presbyteral identity, and she pursues this in the context of where most presbyters minister, the parish. While recognizing that many presbyters are in other ministries, and not intending to replace other work done on priestly identity, much of which concerns the priest's ability to act *in persona Christi* or *in persona ecclesiae*, her work is balanced, yet innovative and appealing.

CONCLUSION

One does not need to agree with all the positions adopted in this book to acknowledge that both in the issues covered and in the cogent clarity of its contributors, it is impressive for its historically-informed perspective combined with a nuanced discussion of possible future developments. For anybody wishing gain a substantive insight into theological questions about ministry today, this book is an excellent place to start.