

The Non-Ordained in Ministry

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# The Non-Ordained in Ministry

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Eamonn Conway

## INTRODUCTION

I have been asked by the Pastoral Commission of CORI (formerly the Conference of Major Religious Superiors) to provide some theological reflections arising out of the results of their survey of non-ordained ministers. Questionnaires were distributed through religious congregations as well as through Institutes such as Milltown Park, All Hallows and Mountjoy Square. Almost 400 people responded, 95% were women, 87% were religious and 75% were over 50 years of age. The commission is satisfied that the sample is representative of those engaged in non-ordained ministry in Ireland. A summary of the findings of the Survey is printed in the 'Chronicle' section of this issue of *The Furrow*, pages 187-90.

This document calls for 'the recognition of the gifts of the non-ordained minister (religious or lay person) in pastoral ministry'. It also identifies five specific ministerial contexts where non-ordained ministry has evolved or should be encouraged to do so: school, parish, hospital, youth and industry/commerce. The report suggests strongly that it is now time to formally recognize these as ministries, structure them, and provide those who exercise these ministries with proper initial and on-going formation as well as financial and other support.

## COMMENTS ON THE SURVEY

My initial concern is whether or not we can learn much about the future of non-ordained ministry in Ireland from this survey. Given the profile of respondents we can take it that the vast majority of those involved in non-ordained ministry at present are older women religious. We can guess that many of them have taken up their present ministry after a lifetime of teaching, nursing or social work. Their courage to attempt something new and difficult, to plough new furrows, their willingness to learn again,

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to work without much recognition or support, financial or otherwise, has to be acknowledged. Indeed financially many of them have probably had to rely to a large extent on their pensions or on the support of their congregations (the survey shows that 37% receive no payment for their work, only 20% receive a proper salary and the remainder receive only the odd donation or stipend). These religious are not going to be replaced because there will be no religious to replace them.

The many young lay people who are qualifying in theology and in pastoral education cannot be expected to work under the same conditions. While they probably lack adequate financial remuneration, religious sisters who work in non-ordained ministries have the security of knowing they belong to a congregation or society which will look after them. They are also free of family commitments. Lay people, on the other hand, require adequate salary, health insurance, pension etc. And whereas religious and priests can be easily moved or indeed dismissed from a particular position, a promise of obedience perfecting this system, it is only reasonable that lay people, especially those with family responsibilities, should expect some serious commitments from the Church as employer. It seems to me that this is the nub of the matter. Is the Irish Church *prepared* to employ lay people and give them the security as well as the remuneration which justice may demand? Upon the answer to this question depends the future at least of *full-time* non-ordained ministry here. A related matter is whether or not the Church *can afford* to pay lay people an adequate wage. It is often suggested that this is the key factor in the stifling of lay ministry in Ireland at present. But the reluctance of authorities to establish lay people in *voluntary* non-ordained ministries, and even to set up effective parish councils with genuine shared planning and decision-making, would seem to suggest that the key factor is control, not finance. Lay people cannot be controlled as easily as clerics or religious and that is the problem. Financial difficulties, at least in the short-term while religious practice rates continue to remain relatively high, can be overcome. As practice rates decline, and there is little at present to suggest that they will do otherwise, it is difficult to see a future for *full-time* non-ordained ministry in Ireland. A friend of mine in Germany remarked recently that their problem is not a shortage of ministers (unlike the Church in France for example, the German Church, thanks to the *Kirchensteuer* can still afford to pay ordained and non-ordained ministers quite well): the problem there is a shortage of Roman Catholic communities to whom they can minister.

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### TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY

The main point this document brings home is that as yet we do not have a coherent theology of collaborative ministry. The very awkwardness of our language testifies to this, the use of terms such as 'non-ordained' and 'lay', both saying more about what a person is *not* than what she or her is. I would like to make some brief points which should be taken into account in the construction of such a theology.

The first point is that if collaborative ministry is to become a reality, the 'ordained' have to be convinced of its value. We have seen all across Eastern Europe that the old regime could not be dismantled until one of its own 'grasped the nettle', read the signs of the times and initiated a process of radical change. Basically people like Gorbachev had to be prepared to let go of their own power-base. Collaborative ministry also involves power-sharing and a sharing of power and authority in the Church will not happen unless those who now possess them are willing to let go. A major stumbling block in the development of non-ordained ministry, then, is that we are not yet working out of a theology of ordained ministry which has emerged from a genuine vision of collaborative ministry and is not merely an ordering of 'Santa's little helpers'. If collaborative ministry is to work at all then it must shape our theology of ordained ministry.

As we know, the number of candidates for ordinary ministry continues to decline; there are probably half as many seminarians in Ireland today as there were fifteen years ago. If the Church's mission is to continue, those who are now being ordained will simply have to collaborate with lay people who will either be ministering voluntarily or on a full-time or part-time basis. It is vital, then, that the operative theology of ministry of those now being ordained is collaborative. Whether or not it is, and whether or not they will have the required personal and ministerial skills and attitudes required to implement it, depends to a large extent on the operative theology of those currently selecting and training them.

In an attempt to bolster up the *ancien regime* it might be argued that the three-fold structure of ordained ministry in its present format is of divine origin and cannot be tampered with. In other words the Church will not change it because it is not free to do so. First of all it has to be admitted that this system is collapsing – as the decline in vocations across developed nations signifies. The choice is between transformation and further decay. And secondly, the structures which are now collapsing were heavily influenced by the societal structures at the time when they evolved, especially when Christianity became the

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religion of the Roman Empire, with the result that their genuine apostolic forms became obscured. The 'phylacteries and tassels' which still accompany the offices of bishop, priest and deacon are visual reminders of this. Aspects of the monarchical structure may have served the Church well in the era of kings and emperors but surely values such as team-work, justice in the work-place, shared decision-making, accountability – these can all be quite properly imported into the Church now just as hierarchy and autocracy were readily accepted in the past.

### THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF MINISTRY

In developing a theology of collaborative ministry there is a danger in insisting that every activity of the baptized has to be considered a ministry. If everything we do is described as ministry then the concept of ministry will cease to be of much practical use. I am satisfied with Thomas O'Meara's insistence (*Theology of Ministry*, 142) that ministry strictly speaking involves a public activity on behalf of a Christian community which furthers the reign of God. Those who insist on everything being called a ministry are usually afraid to single out particular activities as ministries or people as ministers in case they promote the development of a new élite within the Church and people might 'feel' excluded. Their position is actually a reactionary one, their vision of collaborative ministry being determined by the previous experience of ministry as the exclusive preserve of the ordained. A mature vision of collaborative ministry is not afraid to identify specific public activities as ministries because it understands ministry to be about service, not status, and it simply seeks the most effective way of providing this service. Such a collaborative ministry takes place in an atmosphere of mutual respect among people confident in their own giftedness, and therefore free to acknowledge the giftedness of others, who are prepared to accept and exercise responsibility, and above all are orientated outwards to the real needs of the community, and, aware of the power and strength of a vision of the reign of God to transform society, are filled with a sense of urgency to realize this vision which leaves petty concerns about status behind.

### MINISTRY AT THE SERVICE OF MISSION

It is also important to put ecclesial ministry in context. The Church's ministry is at the service of its mission. Today computer companies, travel agents and even restaurants have mission statements – clear, precisely worded accounts of their *raison d'être*, understood and presumably accepted by employees,

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probably drawn up in consultation with them and open to scrutiny by their customers. Can the same be said of the Church? I would suggest that Vatican II optimism about the possibility of salvation of people who are not Christian but who lead moral lives continues to muddle our sense of mission. In particular, and quite understandably, such optimism has spilled over to include Roman Catholics we might describe as non-practising but who also lead good lives. If Christ died for all, and all people are called to one and the same destiny, and if those who through no fault of their own (and who can judge?) do not accept the Good News as they have experienced it may still be considered graced, what *is* distinctive about being a practising Catholic? What real difference do we make? What is our *particular* contribution to the furthering of the reign of God? Precisely what difference does a personal relationship with Jesus Christ in and through the Church actually make? I am not sure that *Redemptoris missio*, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, or the Pope's recent book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* answer these questions convincingly for the contemporary Christian who will not remain a card-carrying member of the Church merely out of convention. Ministry is at the service of mission. We need to solve our own identity crisis as Christian community. We need to know what precisely is our mission as Church before we can construct ministries to facilitate it.

## WAYS FORWARD

In order to evolve a theology of collaborative ministry which is appropriate to the needs of the Irish Church we need a creative conversation between those involved at the 'coal-face' – those already in ministries, ordained as well as non-ordained, and bishops, religious superiors and theologians. Perhaps CORI is well placed to facilitate such a dialogue. More practically, perhaps religious congregations could consider putting (more) resources into the training and support of lay people who wish to engage in ministry. Indeed it might be one way of ensuring that the charisms of congregations survive. And insofar as congregations have access to schools, parishes and hospitals perhaps now should be seen as a time for experimentation with regard to structures during the course of which a vision and a coherent theological underpinning for it will emerge.

Finally, perhaps it is time to stop praying for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. Instead, perhaps our prayer should be a humbler one which gives the Lord more freedom with regard to just how God's reign will come. We could pray instead for courage to accept the vocations and gifts that are

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being given, for confidence to let go of structures which can only petrify them, and for guidance to create new structures for ministry which will enable the Church to fulfil its mission.

**Healing for self-hurt.** And, in the same prayer-moment, I can see God's 'forgiveness' as embracing all this self-wounding called sin. Forgiveness is not like the headmaster being surprisingly lenient. Indeed the human analogies are all a little lacking. When I ask someone to forgive me, and especially if that person has been offered by me, I'm really asking him or her to stop holding that fault against me, to drop the coldness, to renew the friendship. But this cannot be true of God. God does not carry grudges or avoid speaking to me. To ask God to forgive is not seeking a change of God's mood, some softening of harshness. God's forgiveness does not mean a change in God but in me. It is God's never-withdrawn love reaching where I have withdrawn some part of me from that love. Forgiveness means receiving healing for that self-hurt.

—MICHAEL PAUL GALLAGHER, SJ, *Letters on Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd) p. 45.