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**The Call to Be Paul:
Lay Ecclesial Ministry Today and the Pastor of Tomorrow**

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“The same God who called Prisca and Aquila to work with Paul in the first century calls thousands of men and women to minister in our Church in this twenty-first century.”¹

So concludes the U.S. bishops' 2005 document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. This document takes as its focus the many lay women and lay men who serve in important ministerial roles in our Catholic parishes, dioceses, and other institutions. These lay ecclesial ministers have been professionally prepared for ministry. They evidence a long-term commitment to serving the church. They work full-time in close collaboration with the clergy. They lead religious education programs and social justice initiatives. They coordinate liturgy and youth ministry. They head diocesan offices and campus ministry departments.² For forty years, they have been reshaping the experience of the parish community. And they have been reshaping the experience of the ordained pastor as well.

As we reflect on the evolving dynamic of lay ecclesial ministry and the impact this dynamic is having on the ministry of the pastor, we do well to turn to the co-workers' co-worker—the one who so encouraged Prisca and Aquila—the Apostle Paul.

Paul's world is not our world. And his experience of church is not our experience of church. Still, in Paul's insight, we find inspiration. In his way of ministering in the first century, we find a way to minister in the twenty-first century.

The following remarks reflect first on the reality of lay ecclesial ministry today. Then, we consider the pastor as a kind of present-day Paul, the one who plays a vital—though not exclusive—role in calling forth co-workers, supporting them in their ministry, ordering their charisms and collaborating with them in serving the mission of Christ.

Lay Ecclesial Ministry Today

First, a bit of background. The history of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* goes back over twenty years to the November 1988 meeting of what was then called the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. At that meeting, Bishop Timothy Harrington of Worcester proposed a study of laypeople from a variety of perspectives. His proposal went to a subcommittee of the Pastoral Research and Practices Committee and, after about a year of deliberation, the decision was made to examine the rapidly expanding practice of hiring laypeople and women religious for pastoral positions in parishes.³ The committee commissioned

a study, which was conducted by the late Philip Murnion at the National Pastoral Life Center. The results were published in 1992 as *New Parish Ministers*.⁴

New Parish Ministers got people's attention. What Murnion and his colleagues did was to put numbers to the experiences of many Catholics—revealing the broad ministerial shift taking place in our country. The report revealed that, twenty-five years after the close of Vatican II, there were over 21,000 lay and religious ministers working at least twenty hours a week in pastoral positions in parishes. Indeed, over half of all U.S. parishes employed these new lay ministers. Impressed by the scope of this reality, the bishops' conference moved to establish a Subcommittee on Lay Ministry. For the next decade the subcommittee launched a number of initiatives, including further demographic studies, hundreds of consultations, and a series of publications culminating in *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*.⁵

I point to the context of the document to emphasize that *Co-Workers* came as a *response* to a reality already there. The rise of lay ecclesial ministry in this country has been very much a grass-roots movement. There was no Vatican directive mandating these ministries, no national pastoral plan encouraging them. Instead, as Zeni Fox put it, the rise of lay ecclesial ministry was a lot like Topsy, it “just grewed.”⁶

We can trace lay ecclesial ministry back to those early “coordinators” or directors of religious education (DREs)—parish volunteers and women religious, who, in the mid-1960s, were hired by their pastors to bring some order to parish CCD programs.

As religious education programs grew, parishes themselves were changing. After the council, liturgical reforms needed explanation and implementation. Adult parishioners sought out opportunities for faith sharing, study, and direct service. Newly emerging questions about civil rights, war, and poverty were recognized as concerns that parishes needed to address.

The DRE became a model for other roles on the parish staff. General assistants, called pastoral ministers or pastoral associates, appeared, as did youth ministers, liturgical coordinators, and directors of social concerns. The work of organists and other liturgical musicians was recognized as ministry.

At the same time, colleges and universities began to offer degrees in theology and religious education before it was clear what a layperson would do with a degree in theology or religious education. Women religious sought out new forms of service, creating new positions on parish staffs. National organizations for lay ministers emerged and expanded, promoting professionalization, competency standards, and networking beyond the parish.

After thirty or forty years of this ministerial expansion, the bishops as a group finally realized that they had to take it seriously!

None of this is news to pastors and others who have paid attention to parishes since the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, many of the pastors still serving today were among the first who helped open up space within parishes for these new lay ministerial positions.

So this may not be news. But it is new.

I have tried to make the case that the rise of lay ecclesial ministry represents an epochal shift in our church.⁷ It marks a truly new moment. With all the usual disclaimers about the dangers of overstating the importance of our own time; nevertheless, I believe that if we reflect on what has been going on in the Catholic Church over the last forty years, it is hard to escape the conclusion that we are living in one of the most significant periods of ministerial transformation in the history of the church. The emergence of lay ecclesial ministry since the council stands out as one of the top three or four ministerial shifts of the past two thousand years. It ought to be compared to the changes in the church brought on by the rise of communal forms

of monasticism in the 5th century, the birth of mendicant orders in the 13th century, or the explosion of women’s religious communities in the 19th century. It is that kind of history that we have been living through.

In making this comparison, I am not suggesting that lay ecclesial ministry is a new type of religious order. But it is a new way of ministering—just like those new forms of religious life were in their day. We often miss this fact (the “newness” of religious orders) because we tend to read the history of religious life through the lens of the evangelical counsels—the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. When we look at religious life instead through the lens of ministry (the active service these communities actually provided), we see the freshness and the originality each major wave brought.⁸

With this originality, with the novelty in ministry that these new orders embodied, the church again and again faced a challenge. Each new form or new family of religious life brought a challenge to the ministerial order of the time. More often than not, these new forms did not fit. Whether it was the mendicant friars of the Middle Ages or the active sisters of the early modern period, it took time for the institutional church to adjust. But for all the slowness and setbacks involved in incorporating these orders into the ministerial life of the church, these new ministries and ministers were a blessing. They stretched the church in a positive way.

Lay ecclesial ministry, I believe, is stretching the church today. It is stretching us in a lot of places, including the experience and self-understanding of the pastor. And just as monasticism left its mark on the priesthood and the mendicants influenced the secular clergy, so the reality of lay ecclesial ministry is having its impact on the role of the ordained pastor today. I see this as a great opportunity. I see it as a chance to reflect on and recommit to a vision of pastoring that is deeply apostolic—a collaborative and mission-oriented ministry inspired by that great apostle, St. Paul.

The Pastor of Tomorrow

Paul seems a strange choice in rethinking the ministry of the pastor. After all, Paul was not a pastor, nor is he an ideal model for the role.

Raymond Brown has a wonderful set of reflections on the differences between the Paul we meet in the authentic Pauline letters and the Paul we meet in the so-called pastoral letters of the New Testament. In Galatians, in Philippians, in 1 Corinthians, we meet a fiery and dynamic missionary, someone always on the go and not afraid of offending anyone. In the pastoral epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy, we find the author offering up a different image of the minister: one who is measured, diplomatic, respectable, and stable. So different are these two images that one wonders if Paul himself would have been able to meet the qualifications for a bishop laid out in 1 Timothy! (It is difficult to describe as “dignified” [1 Tim 3:2], the guy who wished that his circumcising adversaries would slip with the knife and castrate themselves [Gal 5:12].⁹ Not Paul’s most pastoral moment.)

Paul was an amazing missionary, but he would have made a lousy pastor. As Brown concludes, it was probably best for everyone that Paul’s missionary genius kept him on the move.¹⁰

So Paul is not the ideal model for the pastor of today, or of tomorrow. But if not a model, he is still a mentor. There is still a lot we can learn from his example of calling forth co-workers in Christ.

1. CALL

Paul experienced a profound and personal call to ministry. He then called forth many others. A central task of the pastor today is to call forth co-workers in service of the gospel.

Lay ecclesial ministers speak comfortably and deeply about their call to ministry.¹¹ And they recognize God's call coming through a variety of voices—including, in many cases, the invitation of their pastor. But the church's response to this call is often hampered by an overly deductive understanding of vocation.

To make this point, I draw on the insight of the pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey, who uses an old typology in a fresh way. In the context of reflecting on human diversity, Lartey argues that every human person is, in certain respects, like *all* others, like *some* others, and like *no* other.¹² For Lartey, we need to claim each of these three truths, hold them in relation to one another, and never allow an emphasis on one to overshadow the other two.

Each of us is like all others. We share a common humanity. We were all born helpless. We grow in independence. And every one of us will die. These are inescapable facts of human existence. These are common experiences that all of us share. Each of us is like *all* others.

But each of us is also like some others. We are not born into a blob that is generic humanity. Each of us is born into a specific family—or lack of family. Each of us grows up within a particular community. We are formed by a distinct culture and tradition. We are socialized into a group, and shaped by the values and expectations of that group. Each of us is like *some* others.

Finally, each of us is like no other. My genetic code is unique. My psychological composition is complex and unrepeatable. My personal history unfolds in an individual narrative that is my story—a story that is different from every other story ever told. Even those whose lives most closely track my own—my siblings and my spouse—these individuals have related stories, but unique and different ones. There never was, nor will there ever be, anyone exactly like me. Each of us is like *no* other.

According to Lartey, dealing with diversity demands paying attention to all three levels: human universality, cultural specificity, and individual uniqueness.

I see a parallel between these three facts about human existence and our Catholic understanding of vocation. In other words, these three aspects reveal something about who we are, but they also reveal something about who we are called to be. Our faith tradition affirms that vocation is something that can be understood as operating on these three levels: the universal, the particular, and the personal.

First, we speak about the universal call to holiness, a call affirmed so strongly at the Second Vatican Council and repeated by every pope since. Through our common baptism we are all called to discipleship, to live lives worthy of the call we have received, to be holy. This is the most basic, the most fundamental vocation—and one that we all share—to love God and love neighbor.

But we Catholics speak about a more particular kind of vocation. We talk about different states of life as vocations. Priesthood, religious life, marriage, even the single life—these are often what we have in mind when we think of “a vocation.” Sometimes, the word is restricted even further, reserved to ordained and religious life. But obviously the concept of vocation cannot be so simply reduced. As important as this understanding of vocation is, Vatican II reminds us that God's universal call is broader than these states of life.

Finally, God's call is not only broader (all others), it is also more focused (no other). There is in our tradition—though perhaps not as well publicized or understood—a conviction

that God calls each of us to some unique work and way of living that is profoundly personal. Our personal call to discipleship takes place within the universal call to holiness and within a particular state of life, but it cannot be reduced to these. Each of us has a personal vocation.

When I suggest that the church is often hampered by an overly deductive approach to vocation, what I mean is that we tend to move down this list of three. Since Vatican II, many treatments of vocation start with the universal call to holiness, and then explore the states of life through which this universal call might be lived out.

That is usually where we stop. Too often, we never get around to a serious treatment of the personal vocation. If we do, then we treat the personal vocation as a sort of specialization within a particular state of life (a call within a call)—which only confirms a basically deductive pattern. Vocation is imagined like Russian dolls, or nested cake pans. We find ourselves by fitting into molds already set. This approach easily leads to an idealized, and often abstract, notion of holiness. It rests on a static conception of particular states of life.

What is so fascinating to me is that some of our greatest saints—Ignatius of Loyola, Francis de Sales, Therese of Lisieux, and others—approached vocation not deductively, but inductively. Ignatius, for example, believed that people usually don't march through theory toward a vocation. For Ignatius, we discover our call in the face of a concrete choice, a personal decision, the everyday living out of life.

For most people, it is not the abstract ideal of marriage, but love for this specific person that leads them to embrace this commitment. For most ministers, it is not a vague idea, but a concrete need, a personal invitation, a specific decision to serve that draws most people into ministry.

In other words, we don't usually move from a universal call toward a personal vocation. Rather, we move from a personal vocation toward our unique way of living out the universal call to holiness. That is how Christ's call came to St. Paul. That is how he extended it to others.

In terms of fostering and cherishing the call experienced so deeply by so many lay ecclesial ministers, we make a mistake by approaching it deductively. Affirmation comes not by fitting their lives into some preconceived mold. Affirmation comes by responding to the individual in front of us. A better approach is a more inductive approach—one that attends to the experience of this particular person, one that listens for the Spirit's song in this soul, one that joins in and harmonizes with the call of Christ already echoing in this heart. This kind of response is an effort to join in discerning the way God is working in an individual life—in the lives of lay ecclesial ministers that are so often, so obviously oriented toward serving the reign of God.

2. CHARISM

We are in the midst of the season of God's reign, Easter. We are headed toward the great feast of the Spirit, Pentecost. Over these weeks, our scripture readings follow the movements of those first Christians recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. Here we encounter a wonderful story of common purpose and Christian unity, of disciples devoted "to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers," the story of believers who "ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people" (Acts 2:42-47). It is a beautiful image of a perfect community—that seems to have lasted about a week.

How quickly Christians forgot the love of God. How soon old divisions and old hierarchies re-emerged. No doubt the author of Acts paints an idealized portrait of those early

days, dreaming of the way things ought to be in full knowledge of the way things so often turn out.

In St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we get a more realistic glimpse of what community life is like. Here we read about a small church in a busy city, made up of folks living less than a generation after Christ. It is a community torn apart by its differences.

People are bickering over their interpretations of the gospel, their differing moral codes, their rival leaders. When they gather together to celebrate the Lord's Supper, the deep-seated biases based on class and social status are on ugly display. The Eucharistic Table—meant to be a celebration of Christian unity—had become another source of human division.

When the Corinthians strive to serve the mission of Christ by pointing their gifts toward the Gospel, they get into fights over who's gifts are better than others. A sense of superiority settles in for those with the more spectacular endowments, the most dazzling charisms. Jockeying for status were prophets and apostles, teachers and healers, workers of mighty deeds and those who utter oracles. Everyone claimed some special gift, and this was pulling them apart. Their diversity was a source of division.

In responding to their divisions, Paul does not denigrate these gifts. He acknowledges their various and diverse contributions to the life of the church. But he calls for some order. He asks of each that one's gifts do two things: confess Christ and build up Christ's body. These two criteria cut through all the posturing, all the tuft wars—even if they don't solve all the problems. He encourages and calls forth charisms, but he does so by stressing their common source and their common purpose: "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit" (1 Cor 12:4-7).

Paul does not pretend to do it all. Instead he offers a vision, a Spirit-vision. Today, there is still much we can learn from Paul's theology of charisms. For in affirming diverse and particular charisms, Paul starts with the concrete individual before him—but he does not let that individual gift, that individual call turn inward. The gift that I am, the gifts that I bring, always open outward. What his theology of charisms teaches us is that we are who we are—unique, unrepeatable, special—not for ourselves, but for others. This sensitivity toward charism as a grace given to one for the sake of another is what pastors today are called to cultivate.

3. COLLABORATION

In turning these charisms outward to serve the body of Christ and the reign of God, Paul did not work alone. We usually think of Paul as a kind of lonely hero, a solitary genius, single-handedly carrying the gospel to the entire Gentile world.

This is a false portrait. It is a romanticized vision. Recent scholarship has made abundantly clear how much Paul depended on others—men and women that he called fellow apostles, ministers, partners, and, most commonly, co-workers in Christ.

If we take Acts of the Apostles and the whole Pauline corpus, we find as many as 95 different individual co-workers named. If we limit ourselves to the authentic Pauline letters, we find 36 significant individuals who were crucial to the success of Paul's ministry. There is Timothy and Titus, Luke and Barnabus, Apollos. But there is also Prisca and Aquila, Phoebe, Andronicus and Junia, Mary, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. The list goes on.¹³

Paul literally survived because of the help and hospitality of fellow Christians.¹⁴ But these co-workers were not just hosts. They were active collaborators. They traveled with him,

ministered with him, helped him compose letters. They “risked their necks” with him, as Romans 16 says of Prisca and Aquila. Throughout his ministry Paul was an initiator and a reconciler. He worked hard to keep these churches together. And he seemed to recognize that he could only do this with the help of many others.

The implications for the ministry of pastor today are obvious. Let me make one concrete connection. Over the past several years, the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project has collected and analyzed a wealth of data about the changing shape of Catholic parishes in the United States. Last year’s Ministry Summit reported on this work, and encouraged further engagement on the part of all church leaders to meet the challenges and opportunities of the present moment.

In all of this data, one observation stood out for me in particular. It is so obvious that I am rather embarrassed to have been struck by it. Marti Jewel articulated this observation precisely: “The primary strategy being used by U.S. bishops to deal with the diminishing number of priests available for pastoring is clustering parishes under the care of a single pastor.”¹⁵ Thanks to the research of Sr. Katarina Schuth, we know that nearly half of all U.S. parishes (44%) share their pastor with one or more other parish or mission.¹⁶ Moreover, given the size and multi-cultural nature of many parishes today, even those priests who lead only one parish often feel like they are pastoring more than one.

It strikes me that there is something profoundly Pauline about this new context. The pastor is becoming a kind of Paul—“visiting” and overseeing a number of different communities, but unable to reside deeply in any one of them, or stay put for very long. Like Paul, the pastor today initiates things, offers a vision, and keeps the peace. But in all of this he relies extensively on others.

Is the role of the pastor being transformed before our eyes? If the early church saw a shift from the minister as moving missionary to the minister as stable pastor, are we now seeing a shift back to a more missionary model? Or if not a shift back, an expansion of the role of pastor? If so, more and more pastors will be called to be Paul, themselves calling forth co-workers in the vineyard.

4. CHRIST

Finally, there’s Jesus. For all of his innovation and energy, for all the churches he founded, Paul’s greatest legacy is his preaching of Christ—Christ crucified and risen.

Collaboration was key to Paul’s ministry, but he always kept it in perspective. In response to the Corinthians’ petty competitiveness, their cliques and biases, Paul reminded them: “What is Apollos, after all, and what is Paul? Ministers through whom you became believers, just as the Lord assigned each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth” (1 Cor 3:5-7).

God is the primary agent of the gospel. Pastors and lay ecclesial ministers alike are only instruments, serving what God is doing.

Later in the letter, when Paul confronts the Corinthians about their infighting and their bad behavior at Eucharist, what does he do? What does he say? He says: “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread . . . broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (1 Cor 11:23-24).

Rather than a long lecture, Paul simply points the people back to Christ. He reminds them of the love of God revealed in Christ's death on a cross. What a good reminder for us this Easter season.

¹ U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2005), 66.

² *Co-Workers* lists four elements that characterize lay ecclesial ministry: (1) authorization of the hierarchy, (2) leadership in an area of ministry, (3) mutual collaboration with the ordained, and (4) appropriate preparation and formation. See *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, 10.

³ For brief background see Eugene F. Lauer, "Introduction," in David DeLambo, *Lay Parish Ministers: A Study of Emerging Leadership* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 2005), 13-16.

⁴ Philip J. Murnion et al., *New Parish Ministers* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 1992).

⁵ After Murnion's initial study came two follow-up studies. The most recent, conducted by David DeLambo and published in 2005, shows that the number of lay ecclesial ministers working in parishes has risen to over 30,000. See DeLambo, *Lay Parish Ministers*, 19. Significant publications of the subcommittee include *Together in God's Service: Toward a Theology of Ecclesial Lay Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998) and *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1999). For history and resources related to the work of the subcommittee, go to <http://www.usccb.org/laity/>.

⁶ Zeni Fox, *New Ecclesial Ministry: Lay Professionals Serving the Church*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2002), 4

⁷ Edward P. Hahnenberg, "The Vocation to Lay Ecclesial Ministry," *Origins* 37 (August 30, 2007), 177-82.

⁸ John W. O'Malley, "Priesthood, Ministry and Religious Life: Some Historical and Historiographical Considerations," *Theological Studies* 49 (1988), 223-57.

⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Early in the process, the bishops' subcommittee recognized this sense of call, concluding that "this call or vocation is worthy of respect and sustained attention." See *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: The State of the Questions*, 27. DeLambo notes that the majority of lay ecclesial ministers (54.2%) say the factor that most influenced them to pursue a lifetime in church ministry is a "call" by God. When you look at the top three factors, almost 70% of lay ecclesial ministers name God's call. See DeLambo, *Lay Parish Ministers*, 72.

¹² Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 2nd ed. (New York: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 34.

¹³ E. E. Ellis, "Coworkers, Paul and His," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 183-89. See the new series published by Liturgical Press, "Paul's Social Network." Each slender volume takes up one of Paul's co-workers, giving a glimpse into the vast web of connections that made Paul's ministry possible.

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- ¹⁴ Daniel J. Harrington, “Paul and His Co-Workers,” *Priests & People* 17 (August/September 2003), 320-25.
- ¹⁵ Marti Jewell, “The Findings of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project” *Origins* 38 (May 15, 2008), 1e 1. See full reports on the Emerging Models project at: www.emergingmodels.org.
- ¹⁶ Katarina Schuth, *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006). See also Mark Mogilka and Kate Wiskus, *Pastoring Multiple Parishes: An Emerging Model of Pastoral Leadership* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2009).