

**Parish Life Coordinators:  
The Theological Implications of Canon 517 §2**

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Our topic today is a few lines of canon law and the ministerial reality these lines have unleashed.

The lines are those of canon 517 §2, which state, “If, because of a lack of priests, the diocesan bishop has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest who, provided with the powers and faculties of a pastor, is to direct the pastoral care.”<sup>i</sup>

The ministerial reality that these lines have unleashed is the role of the parish life coordinator—the deacon, religious, or layperson entrusted with the pastoral care of a parish in the absence of a resident priest-pastor.<sup>ii</sup>

I was asked to offer a theological reflection on this relatively new ministerial reality. And so let me begin with a theological assessment, one that I direct to all of the parish life coordinators gathered here today: You people really mess things up.

It’s nothing personal. And here I want to be clear: I am not making a personal statement. I am not making a pastoral statement. I am not offering an evaluation of your individual ministerial gifts or your contribution to the life of the church. In fact, from my own experience and from what I read in larger studies, I would say that what you do as parish life coordinators at the personal and pastoral level is precisely the opposite of messing things up. You are meeting a real need, working in concert with your communities and your bishops, and providing outstanding ministry.

But from a theological perspective, you people really mess things up. What I mean by that is that you do not fit into a certain dominant theological vision of ministerial order. This vision is one endorsed by the magisterium and held by many theologians. It is a vision rooted in our sacramental theology and shaped by centuries of pastoral experience. It is a vision that links the ability to preside over the eucharistic community to the ability to preside over the eucharistic sacrifice. It is a vision that ties pastoring (a least in its fullest sense) to ordination. It is a vision that you people—you parish life coordinators—really mess up.

**A CONFSSION**

What I would like to do this morning is to reflect theologically on the exceptional—the extraordinary—nature of the role of parish life coordinator. This exceptional nature seems to be the clear implication of canon 517 §2’s opening clause on the “lack” (*penuriam*) of priests. Parish life coordinators are allowed as an exception to the church’s ordinary ministerial order (thus *extra*-ordinary) as a response to a pressing pastoral need. Ordinarily, parishes should be led by ordained priests. In some places and cases, there are not enough ordained priests. So parish

life coordinators are allowed. The U.S. Bishops point out the basic difference between parish life coordinators and all other forms of lay ministry: “Participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish, as described in the *Code of Canon Law*, canon 517 §2, is another example of lay ecclesial ministry, although it differs in kind from the other roles because it exists simply because of the shortage of priests.”<sup>iii</sup>

As an exception, the role of parish life coordinator does not fit the canonical norm. It does not fit the canonical norm because it does not fit a certain theological conception of ministerial order. This new ministerial role is an exception. I want to take this exceptional character seriously, and reflect on it theologically. I want to ask: What do we do with the exception?

For the theologian, the easiest thing to do with the exception is simply to get rid of it. The easiest way to “clean up” the theological mess is to eliminate the parish life coordinator. It seems quite severe. But this is actually something that theologians on the far right and the far left can agree on.

On the right, the solution is to eliminate the parish life coordinator by terminating the position. Ignoring the clear accommodation made in canon law and disregarding the prudence of many bishops who have appointed parish life coordinators, some commentators argue that “lay pastoring” is totally inappropriate. They see parish life coordinators as the most extreme example of laity stepping outside of their proper role of witnessing in the world—a clericalization of the laity that should be actively discouraged, resisted, and even prohibited. What the church needs to do, they argue, is to terminate these positions and redouble its efforts to recruit more seminarians and to pray for more vocations to the priesthood.

On the left, the solution is to eliminate parish life coordinators, not by terminating them, but by ordaining them. After all, some commentators argue, isn’t the priest shortage simply the result of the exclusion of women and married men from the ordained priesthood? They argue that the role of parish life coordinator is a kind of duplicate ministry, one that has appeared—not out of genuine needs or new ways of serving—but one that has appeared simply because access to priestly ordination is being withheld. Therefore, they argue, the easiest and most honest thing to do is to ordain as pastors the parish life coordinators already “pastoring” in the church.

I have a confession to make, and I address it to all the parish life coordinators in the room. When I first started thinking about these issues, I wanted to get rid of you too. I didn’t like how you didn’t fit. I had trouble with the exception. I wanted to eliminate it. And of all the options out there, I was drawn to the later one described above. I addressed it in my first book on ministry—addressed it with great prophetic zeal—in the middle of footnote 91 on page 240.

There I wrote: “Edward Schillebeeckx distinguishes between an authentic multiplicity of ministries, which arise out of new needs in the community, and an inauthentic multiplicity of ministries, which arise because the access to appropriate ministries (such as the presbyterate) are withheld from individuals and groups in the church.” And then I concluded, “From some future vantage point the nonordained role of pastoral coordinator may appear as an inauthentic multiplication of the ministry of community leader.”<sup>iv</sup>

This was not exactly a call to action. What I was struggling with was the exceptional—the extraordinary—character of the parish life coordinator. What shaped my response was a certain systematic and deductive approach. This approach presumed a certain normative framework or idealized model for ministry, a model within which the parish life coordinator did not easily fit. This ministry was a kind of loose end to the beautiful theological tapestry I was weaving. The loose end grated against my German constitution and desire for order. As a rule, I

do not like problems. And so ordaining parish life coordinators seemed like the easiest way to solve this problem. It seemed that the best way to handle the exception was simply to get rid of it.

My point is that both the termination and the ordination responses are rooted in the exceptional character of role of the parish life coordinator. But rather than take the exception seriously, both sides want to eliminate it. Both sides want to clean up the theological “mess” that the parish life coordinator makes. What the two sides share is the desire to carry on, to carry on with a certain theological ideal of ministerial order. The only difference is that this ministerial order would be populated with different kinds of people—one more inclusive than the other.

Both sides hate to hear this, but they are really a lot alike. Neither response really addresses the fundamental theological paradigm that guides the discussion of church order. And neither takes the exception to that paradigm seriously.

Since writing footnote 91, I have grown more interested in the exceptions. Maybe it has something to do with having kids, but I have become more comfortable with chaos. I have come to see the exceptions—the things that do not fit, the “messes”—less as problems to eliminate, and more as opportunities to investigate. Might we have here an invitation, coming from the Spirit, to reflect on where God is leading us as a church?

In the time remaining, I want to do three things: (1) reflect on frameworks for ministry and their limitations, (2) ask what we can learn from the history of ministerial diversity, and (3) offer three concluding comments. In the end, what takes shape is not a theological response to the reality of the parish life coordinator, but what I hope is a healthy way of framing such a response.

## **A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO MINISTRY**

There is a developing sense—both among professional theologians and in official church documents—that a theology of ministry can be fruitfully articulated in relational terms. We see this approach in John Paul II’s repeated emphasis on the church as a communion, and in his efforts to link this ecclesiological vision to a theology of trinitarian communion. It is a way of framing the discussion of church and ministry that comes through particularly clearly in the late pope’s post-apostolic exhortations on the laity, the formation of priests, consecrated life, and the ministry of the bishop. It is an approach to ministry that we also see in the U.S. Bishops’ recent document on lay ecclesial ministry, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*.

*Co-Workers* locates lay ecclesial ministry within the context of ministry; ministry within the context of the church’s mission, and the church’s mission within the context of the missions of the triune God. Thus the theology of ministry present in the document proceeds from God to church to ministry. First, God is described as a loving communion of persons that reaches out into creation in order to draw all people into the divine life. Ministry ultimately begins with our baptism into Christ; and it is through the charisms of the Spirit that we are made ready to serve. Second, the document describes the church as “a mystery of Trinitarian communion in missionary tension.”<sup>v</sup> Finally, ministry is presented as that which serves the church’s communion and its mission. Lay ecclesial ministry falls—as one ministry among many—within this dynamic movement. Working collaboratively with other ministries (ordained, lay, religious), lay ecclesial ministry contributes in its own way to proclaim, serve, and celebrate the reign of God. What holds the vision of *Co-Workers* together is its thoroughly trinitarian, relational approach.

Shortly after the publication of *Co-Workers*, Richard Gaillardetz argued that this trinitarian, relational approach marks one of the great strengths of the document—its chief contribution to a comprehensive theology of ministry.<sup>vi</sup> *Co-Workers* reminds us that ministers are not primarily isolated individuals whose relationships of service are secondary or nonessential to their existence as ministers. Rather, one becomes a minister by entering into and being established in relationships of service. This approach has the potential to move us beyond the current stalemate in contemporary discussions of ministry between ontological approaches and functional approaches.<sup>vii</sup> Ministry cannot be reduced to either being or doing. Rather, it involves a fundamental reconfiguration of one's place in the church—one's ecclesial position.<sup>viii</sup> Identity and activity come together in our relationships with others and with God.

For all of the potential of this relational approach—which I think is significant—the model carries with it at least two potential dangers. The first danger with a relational approach to ministry is what I have come to call “the warm fuzzies.” When you hear the claim that ministry is all about relationships, what is your immediate reaction? For many, the reaction is a kind of warm feeling deep inside. Ministry is about relationships. It sounds right. It *feels* right. That is the warm fuzzies. And who, after all, is going to argue with the warm fuzzies? That bothers me a little. It bothers me because we all know from our own experience that the category of relationship is equivocal. Relationships can be affirming or abusive, empowering or oppressive. So when I say that ministry is based on relationships, I want to know what these relationships look like concretely in the church.

For this reason, I have found it helpful to distinguish between interpersonal relationships, on the one hand, and ecclesial relationships, on the other. Interpersonal relationships speak to the basis of all Christian ministry: people meeting people. Basic human contact. Gestures of care. The offer of help. Moments or months of presence to another in need. This is where ministry is at. This is where God is at work. We recognize, down deep, the importance of the interpersonal. After all, isn't it true that an apology accepted can be more transformative in an individual life than a liturgy of episcopal ordination? Can't a word of consolation communicate the reign of God more clearly than a papal encyclical? The interpersonal level is the foundation of all ministry.

Yet, when interpersonal relationships take on a public and structural dimension, when they involve activity done on behalf of the church and are formally integrated into the church's mission, they become ecclesial relationships. In taking on this new ministerial role of leadership within a parish, you, the parish life coordinator, do not automatically become every parishioner's friend. That is the level of interpersonal relationship. But, on accepting this role, you do become a ministerial representative with a certain responsibility for leadership and coordination on behalf of every parishioner within the community. That is the level of ecclesial relationship.

Attending to the ecclesial dimension of our ministerial relationships helps to avoid the first danger of this framework for ministry. It opens up a way of talking about the particular ministerial role of the parish life coordinator—a role that involves significant leadership within a parish community. In a relational approach, the ministry of leadership cannot be reduced to a question of status; it cannot be limited to a discussion of certain tasks or roles. Purely ontological and purely functional approaches will not do. Rather, leadership becomes defined in terms of relationship. Pastoral leadership involves not only a new relationship to the community; it involves a new responsibility for ministerial relationships within the community.<sup>ix</sup>

At the same time that this distinction between the interpersonal and the ecclesial helps to avoid the danger of a spiritualized and idealized conception of communion in the church, it also

helps us to see a second danger—exposing the limits of this framework for discussing the role of the parish life coordinator. This relational approach sketched above stresses the ministerial leader’s responsibility for communion within the church. But our tradition witnesses to deep historical and theological links between the communion that is the church and the communion that is the eucharist; it emphasizes deep ties between presiding over the community and presiding over the Lord’s Supper. Thus there is a way in which this relational approach simply magnifies the mess caused by the exception that is the parish life coordinator. In light of all this, might we be tempted to conclude that the role of parish life coordinator does in fact represent an inauthentic multiplicity of ministry—returning us to the dilemma with which we began?

## **DIVERSITY IN MINISTRY**

The theological dilemma cannot be solved by a relational approach alone. It demands a reframing of the way in which we think about diversity in ministry. Or rather, it invites us to remember the ministerial diversity that has always marked our tradition. To put it another way: If I was prepared to say that parish life coordinators are an inauthentic multiplicity of ministry—an exception that ought to be eliminated—would I be willing to say the same thing about the Dominicans or about the Jesuits? Would I be willing to say the same thing about the dozens and dozens of communities of active women religious that have been reshaping the ministerial life of the church since the sixteenth century?

Here is where I had an intellectual conversion experience. I had been laying out a systematic theological framework for ministry—a kind of ideal model built around the notion of communion—and I could not figure out where to put women religious. What brought the whole deductive system to its knees were the sisters. For here were a group of ministers doing incredible ministry—in fact, for much of our nation’s history, they were doing most of the ministry—who did not fit into the paradigm of pastoral ministry envisioned by this idealized model of church communion. Like the parish life coordinator, the sisters didn’t seem to fit. They didn’t fit a model that bound ministerial leadership to ordination. They didn’t fit a model of church that confined all ministry to the parish.

Maybe, it slowly dawned on me, the problem wasn’t the peg. Maybe the problem was the hole I was trying to fit these ministries and these ministers into.

This shift in thinking inspires a different kind of question. In reflecting on the role of parish life coordinator, maybe we should focus less on the ways they do not fit into a particular model of church order. Maybe we should focus more on the ways in which this ministerial reality is helping to expand, stretch, or complement the model already in place.

The theological conception of ministerial order that shapes our canonical and theological expectations today can be named quite simply: Patristic. This is the model that guides so many of our decisions about church life today. It is the model that parish life coordinators mess up.

To speak of a Patristic model of ministry is to evoke that Golden Age of church order in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. This was a time—after centuries of persecution, but before the decline of the dark ages—when brilliant bishops like Ambrose and Augustine, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom wrote rich theological treatises and delivered deeply moving homilies. In their carefully preserved writings, and in the various liturgical documents that have survived, we catch our best glimpse of ministerial order in the “Early Church.” Much less is known about the earlier years. What we can say is that after several generations of incredible flux in ministerial forms, by the third century a more stable situation started to emerge—as

canon, creed, and community leadership began to offer greater consistency to the faith. By the fourth century, with the imperial recognition of the church, the familiar pattern took hold. Ministry revolved around a single bishop in each local church, who was surrounded by his council of presbyters, deacons, and a host of other ministers serving the Christian community. It was a ministerial order symbolized beautifully as the whole local church gathered around the bishop at the table of the eucharistic celebration. This is what I mean by the Patristic model of ministry.

There are good reasons why this Patristic model continues to influence church life. It has obvious and deep roots in our tradition. And it is the fundamental vision of ministry presented in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. These two facts are not coincidental. For the documents of Vatican II were influenced by—even written by—the great twentieth-century theologians of *ressourcement*, Yves Congar, Henri De Lubac, Jean Danielou, and others. These scholars dedicated their life's work to recovering the great riches of the Christian tradition. And of these riches, no period shone more brightly than the Golden Age of the early church. This appreciation is reflected in the council documents, which hold up the ideal of Patristic church order so highly that one might get the impression that this is the only shape Christian ministry ever has or ever could take.

To point this out is not to deny the ongoing value of the Patristic conception of church order. But it is a reminder that this conception is not the only ministerial model in our history. Indeed, there is much greater diversity in our tradition than the predominance of this model implies.

Over twenty years ago, the Jesuit historian John O'Malley published an important—and too-often overlooked—article titled, “Priesthood, Ministry, and Religious Life: Some Historical and Historiographical Considerations.”<sup>x</sup> As the title suggests, O'Malley's primary focus is on priesthood and religious life, particularly priesthood within the context of religious life. But his concerns are really about diversity in ministry and the history of ministerial transformation. His argument offers a fresh way of reflecting on the reality of the parish life coordinator.

O'Malley begins his article with Vatican II's teaching on the priesthood. He welcomes the council's emphasis on the ministry of the priest, which he sees as a helpful corrective to the magisterium's past emphasis on the status or ontology of priesthood. But then he asks: What is the precise nature of the ministry implied by the council documents? He surveys the documents on the church, priesthood, priestly formation, and bishops, and concludes that, according to Vatican II, the ministry of the priest is marked by three essential components. It is: (1) a ministry by and large to the Christian faithful; (2) a ministry conceived of taking place within a stable community of faith; and (3) a ministry done in hierarchical union with the bishop.<sup>xi</sup>

Now, O'Malley argues, these characteristics fit pretty well the ministry of diocesan priests. But they do not fit so well the ministry of religious priests. In fact, particularly in the council's emphasis on the priest's relationship to the bishop, this vision of priesthood actually contradicts the history, self-understanding, and canonical structures of religious order priests—a ministerial reality that evolved within a tradition of explicit *exemption* from episcopal oversight. In other words, there is significant ministerial diversity here, which Vatican II, with its preference for a Patristic model of church order, simply glosses over.

O'Malley argues that there is a 1500-year blind spot in recent Catholic historical scholarship on ministry and priesthood. He charts a tendency within this scholarship to treat everything having to do with church order between the Patristic era and Vatican II as dark, dysfunctional, “medieval,” and irrelevant to church life in the modern world. He lays out ten

historiographical reasons that explain this oversight. And then he takes us back to the thirteenth century, to remind us of all that was going on, all that has been overlooked by Catholic writing on priesthood and ministry.

During the thirteenth century, the kind of pervasive, grass-roots enthusiasm for “apostolic life” that characterized late medieval Europe burst forth into a new and lasting ministerial form: the friars. With the friars—the Dominican and Franciscans, but also the Carmelites, Augustinians, Servites, and others—we find a new form of ministry emerging out of pastoral need and personal experience. We see diversity in ministry.

The Dominicans, for example, were founded to confront the Albigensians, a heretical movement that the current ministerial structures of the church were simply incapable of responding to effectively. The structures in place could not meet the need. Something new was needed. And a new ministerial form took shape in response to the specific needs of the time.

Good teaching and good preaching were needed, so the Dominicans—the Order of Preachers—stressed education for their members. The opulence of the clergy was condemned by the Albigensians, so the vow of poverty was embraced, in part, so that the Dominicans might get a hearing. Mobility was needed to respond to a rapidly spreading movement, so the friars abandoned the monastery and successfully campaigned for freedom from the supervision of local bishops.

This last point—exemption from episcopal oversight—strikes O’Malley the historian. The earlier exemptions from episcopal oversight granted to monasteries like Cluny were meant to safeguard the internal governance of those communities. The exemption granted to the Dominicans and the Franciscans was of a different sort. It was intended not only to protect the internal governance of these new orders; it was also intended to protect their ministry. In other words, what the friars successfully argued was that, in order to more effectively accomplish their ministry, they had to be free from the control of the bishop.

“From the viewpoint of church order,” O’Malley concludes, “this development is astounding.”<sup>xii</sup> We forget how radical this departure was at the time. What we see in the friars is an experimentation with not only new ministries, but also new ministerial forms. There is a freedom and a flexibility here that we too often overlook.

For O’Malley, a Jesuit, it is in the sixteenth century, and through the Society of Jesus, that this experimentation is taken to new heights. This period, he argues, was not simply a reactionary time of Counter-Reformation. It was, in fact, one of the most explosive and expansive periods of ministerial innovation in the history of the church. It was a time of incredible creativity in ministry, a time when anything that seemed to “produce fruit” for the good of souls or for the mission of the church was pursued with energetic zeal and hard-headed pragmatism.

We could say the same for the dozens and dozens of communities of active religious life founded since the 16th century—communities of women marked by the same energetic creativity and ministerial flexibility. In the mendicants, in the Jesuits, in the sisters, O’Malley concludes, we discover a history of ministerial creativity that stands in marked contrast to the more “normative” approach that dominates today—where we too often ask “What is allowed?” before we ask “What is the need?”

O’Malley’s focused point is that priesthood is more internally diverse than Vatican II seems to imply. Alongside the Patristic and pastoral tradition of priesthood—which emphasizes ministry to the Christian faithful, in a stable community, under the supervision of the bishop, there is another model. This other model is more missionary and modern—embodied in a

priestly ministry both to the faithful and to those outside the fold; one that moves beyond the stable community, serving in relative independence from the local bishop.

But in O'Malley's more focused point about priesthood, we find a larger lesson about ministerial diversity, experimentation, and change. We learn a more appreciative and open attitude toward the exception, the extraordinary in our ministerial experience.

What might this suggest about our present experience of the parish life coordinator—those deacons, religious, and laypeople who share in the exercise of the pastoral care of parishes? We have to be careful about drawing parallels between ministerial diversity in the thirteenth century and ministerial diversity today. Parish life coordinators are not a new religious order. And here we find not the new missionary impulse that marked the mendicants, but rather a new form of participation in the pastoral care of parishes. Thus it is not so much a question of a direct parallel between these two historical moments. It is more a question of our stance, our theological posture: How do we see ourselves responding to exceptions in ministry?

As most of you recognize, the choices are not as stark as the extreme responses I summarized at the beginning of my remarks. Most of church life is lived in the middle. Most theologians, church leaders, and ministers recognize that the role of parish life coordinator exists as a legitimate pastoral tool, extended by canon law to address a pressing pastoral need. Where there is debate, the debate revolves around the question of need. If canon 517 §2 addresses the situation of a “lack of priests,” our disagreements often reflect different judgments about how “lack” (*penuriam*) is to be understood, and what other strategies ought to be considered.<sup>xiii</sup>

What is not in question is the exceptional nature of the role of parish life coordinator. Everyone agrees that canon 517 §2 speaks to an extraordinary form of ministry—a deviation from the norm that is allowed due to difficult circumstance.

As I suggested above, I don't see any other way to read the canon. This is the reason why I have lifted up the exceptional nature of the role of parish life coordinator as *the* theological question to confront. It is the theological question that presses itself upon us—particularly on you parish life coordinators, for whom this question touches the level of ministerial self-understanding and identity.

It seems that, even within the broad space between the two extremes of those who want to “get rid of you,” the fact of the exceptional nature of your ministry cannot be avoided. And thus it seems impossible to escape the conclusion articulated by those bishops interviewed by the Emerging Models Project and reported in Kathy Hendricks excellent volume, *Parish Life Coordinators: Profile of an Emerging Ministry*. These bishops described their overall positive experience with parish life coordinators, but described this model as a less-than-ideal and temporary solution to the priest shortage—“a stopgap measure until a priest can be assigned to the parish as pastor.”<sup>xiv</sup>

So here is my question: Would we have said the same thing about St. Dominic and his friars, or about St. Ignatius and his companions—that their model of ministry was a “less-than-ideal and temporary solution” to the needs of the church at the time?

What if we were to imagine ourselves in the thirteenth century, facing these enormous challenges, challenges that the ministerial structures of the time simply could not handle. Would we look at the Franciscans and the Dominicans and say, as I did in footnote 91, that “from some future vantage point,” all of this “may appear as an inauthentic multiplication of ministry”?

Returning to the present—no, not to the present, looking ahead to the future, looking ahead seven hundred or eight hundred years from now—might we not hope that the role of the parish life coordinator will appear to the church not to have been an inauthentic multiplication of

ministry, but an authentic diversification of our ministerial life? Could we come to see that—like the mendicants, like the active women’s communities—this ministry emerged in response to new needs in the church, that it brought into being new ways of ministering that earlier models never anticipated, new forms of Christian service that would bring a great grace to the church and the world?

### THREE CONCLUDING REMARKS

First, the ministerial reality unleashed by canon 517 §2 challenges a theology of ministry built exclusively on a deductive, systematic, and static model of church order. It invites us to imagine our theology of ministry from a more inductive, experimental and dynamic perspective. This new way of serving calls us beyond the myth of an eternal church structure, toward greater honesty about our history, and a freer way of responding to the demands of the present.

O’Malley ended his 1988 article on priesthood and religious life by pointing toward a more practical and dynamic vision: “Do we not need, therefore, especially to recover the pragmatic approach to ministry that current historiography is showing happily characterized our past, but that today seems to be ever more effectively smothered by the ‘normative’ or by some idealized model? The abstract ideal can deliver death as well as life. . . . It is not our ‘fidelity’ that today needs testing, but our creativity.”<sup>xv</sup> In other words, as we look out at the enormous challenges facing our world and our church, the real danger might not be the danger of new ideas. The real danger might very well be the danger of *no* ideas.

Perhaps, then, we can gently encourage our bishops to join that great Catholic tradition of ministerial experimentation—to be prudent, but not to be afraid of where all of this might lead.

Second, within this more dynamic, historically-conscious approach, a theology of ministry articulated in relational terms can help. If we continue to frame these questions in terms of ontology and function, being and doing, status and activity, we will continue to run into polarities that frustrate us.

Your ministerial identity—like that of the bishop, like that of the ordained pastor—is not based primarily on status or job description. It is based, first and foremost on your relationships—with God, through Christ and the Spirit, with the people you serve, with other ministers in the community, both lay and ordained. In taking up your present ministry, you did not “become” a pastor—canon law won’t allow it, ontology can’t name it. But you are not just “doing” what a pastor would do. Function doesn’t capture it. You have moved into a new set of ecclesial relationships, in which identity and activity come together in the way you serve.

I’m not sure what this relational approach will look like in the future—at a minimum, it will have to incorporate the kind of ministerial diversity suggested above. But I remain convinced that it offers the kind of flexibility needed for a changing church.

Finally, behind this relational approach and this historical vision lies an ecclesiology, a vision of church rooted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council—namely, the vision of the church as the pilgrim People of God.

The image of the People of God has been embraced in the post-conciliar period as a way to stress the equality of all believers, an equality rooted in our common baptismal dignity. That is the great claim of *Lumen Gentium*’s chapter 2: What unites us is stronger and more primary than what divides us.

But the great claim of *Lumen Gentium*’s chapter 7 is that this people is on pilgrimage. We are on the way, oriented in history toward an eschatological end. This eschatological vision

reminds us that the church is always changing, always growing, always seeking out new ways of responding in faith to the Gospel. And while human history is not a simple story of linear progress, an inevitable march from success to success; still, Christianity holds out hope that all of this is leaning forward into the reign of God, that evil will not triumph over good, that the darkness will not swallow up the light. It will be alright in the end. For in faith we know, if it's not alright, it's not the end.

And so I wonder if there is not some deep truth buried in the words of those conflicted bishops who see parish life coordinators as good, but temporary. Maybe the role of parish life coordinator is temporary. Maybe it is temporary—not because you will all be replaced by new priests coming from who knows where. Maybe it is temporary because you will be the ones helping all of us to move into something new—a new form of ministerial life, a new way of being church, a new way of serving the future reign of God. We'll see what the Spirit has in store.

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<sup>i</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, c. 517 §2 ([http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_\\_\\_P1U.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/___P1U.HTM)).

<sup>ii</sup> Different dioceses use different titles to name those appointed under canon 517 §2, including pastoral life coordinator, pastoral coordinator, parish life director, and others. See Kathy Hendricks, *Parish Life Coordinators: Profile of an Emerging Ministry* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2009).

<sup>iii</sup> USCCB, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2005), 11.

<sup>iv</sup> Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Ministries: A Relational Approach* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 240, n. 91.

<sup>v</sup> USCCB, *Co-Workers*, 19, citing John Paul II, *I Will Give You Shepherds (Pastores Dabo Vobis)* (Washington, DC: USCCB-Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), n. 12.

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<sup>vi</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, “The Theology Underlying Lay Ecclesial Ministry,” *Origins* 36 (July 20, 2006): 138-43, at 139.

<sup>vii</sup> Edward P. Hahnenberg, “Ordained and Lay Ministry: Restarting the Conversation,” *Origins* 35 (June 23, 2005): 94-99, at 94-95.

<sup>viii</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Shifting Meanings in the Lay-Clergy Distinction,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 64 (1999): 115-39, at 135.

<sup>ix</sup> See Hahnenberg, *Ministries*, 135.

<sup>x</sup> John W. O’Malley, “Priesthood, Ministry, and Religious Life: Some Historical and Historiographical Considerations,” *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 223-57.

<sup>xi</sup> O’Malley, “Priesthood, Ministry, and Religious Life,” 224.

<sup>xii</sup> O’Malley, “Priesthood, Ministry, and Religious Life,” 236.

<sup>xiii</sup> Two different understandings of *penuriam* in canon 517 §2 can be found in two different documents. The first is the 1997 Vatican “Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests,” which interprets *penuriam* in a very restricted sense. See [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/laity/documents/rc\\_con\\_interdic\\_doc\\_15081997\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/laity/documents/rc_con_interdic_doc_15081997_en.html). The second is the 2006 statement of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, “Serving Shoulder to Shoulder: Parish Life Directors in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles,” which offers a broader definition, stating, “Determining whether there is such a ‘lack’ certainly takes into account the total number of priests, but also must take into account the suitability and capacity of any ‘available’ priest for the pastoral care of a particular community (canon 521, §3).” See <http://www.la-archdiocese.org/ministry/associates/certification.html>.

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<sup>xiv</sup> Hendricks, *Parish Life Coordinators*, 83. See Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Listening to the Spirit: Bishops and Parish Life Coordinators* (CARA: July 2007), 2.

<sup>xv</sup> O'Malley, "Priesthood, Ministry, and Religious Life," 257.