

As I Have Done For You: A Pastoral Letter on Ministry Does the Vision Still Hold?

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Let me begin by thanking you for the invitation to address you as you gather for your annual convention. A special word of thanks to Father Richard Vega and to all those who have planned this convention. I am honored and delighted to be with you.

I have been asked to address you in light of the understanding of ministry that I, together with the priests of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, articulated in our Pastoral Letter *As I Have Done for You*, promulgated on Holy Thursday 2000. When Father Vega invited me to address this topic—well over a year ago now—I began to give some thought to this question: Does the vision of ministry in *As I Have Done for You* still hold? My answer to this question is yes, even as I recognize that there are obstacles that pose challenges to its full implementation.

I will proceed in three steps. First, I will describe the understanding of ministry in the Pastoral Letter. Second, I will indicate what we have done in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to carry the vision forward. Third, I will identify some of the challenges we face as we move forward, not only in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles but, I believe, in your Local Churches and parishes as well.

I. THE VISION

At the heart of the Pastoral Letter is a vision supported by a theology of ministry. Some of you may recall that the Letter opens with a double-panel portrait of Saint Leo's Church, first in 1955; next in 2005, 50 years later. When the Letter first appeared, Saint Leo's 2005 seemed a long way off. 2005 has come and gone. In 2000 we described Saint Leo's 2005 as a flourishing intercultural parish, sharing resources and talent with neighboring parishes. There are lay leaders who work shoulder to shoulder with one another and with the priest who attends to the sacramental needs of several parishes. There is a clear sense that social responsibility is required, not merely desirable, for the parishioners at Saint Leo's. They meet in small faith sharing groups and have a strong sense of their responsibility for evangelization in word and deed. There is much more to say about Saint Leo's. What is important to recognize is that the

portrait of parish life we painted in 2000 has come to life in many of our parishes over the last nearly ten years.

Saint Leo's and the understanding of ministry in the document are supported by a theology with strong roots in the tradition and in the Documents of the Second Vatican Council. And, at times such as ours, when questions and complaints abound about the current ecclesial climate, it is important to remind ourselves that there is no higher teaching authority in the Church than the Pope teaching in Ecumenical Council. It is my firm conviction that our vision of ministry in general and priestly ministry in particular is thoroughly grounded in the conciliar documents. What is this understanding of ministry?

All Christians are configured to Christ through baptism, for that is the sacrament by which the new People of God are incorporated into the Church, participate in Christ's death and resurrection, and assume the name "Christian." All Christians are called to a life of discipleship and have the obligation of extending His work and presence in the world today, advancing the Reign of God in our own time and place. All share in the one same vocation: to be and to build the Body of Christ, building up the Kingdom of God here and now.

Whatever the vocation or ministry, ordained or non-ordained, each and every one is an expression of the threefold mission of every baptized Christian. What the Church is—a Body of *witness, worship, and service*, participating in the threefold office of Christ who is *prophet, priest, and king*—is what each of us is called to be. We do this according to the gifts, the charisms we have received in baptism. These differ. But whatever we do, we do it in the name of the Lord in the power of the Spirit for the building of the Body of Christ and the transformation of the wider world.

The priest both engages the priesthood of the faithful and represents the priesthood of Christ to the priestly people. This the priest does principally through preparing the People of God to celebrate the Eucharist and by presiding over the Eucharistic celebration. The priest also does this as one whose life, by a unique and permanent sacramental character, is ordered to prayer, witness, and service in the name of and on behalf of the whole Church.

The conciliar documents allow for a fresh understanding of the vital role of all the baptized—laity, Religious and clergy—in the life and mission of the Church. Thus, the exercise of the priestly ministry today calls for an awareness of the importance of *participation* on the part of all who make up the Body of Christ, the Church. We now have a better understanding that the priestly ministry is not only for the purpose of celebrating Mass, hearing confessions, anointing the sick and dying, and officiating at marriages. The priest is ordained to be a *leader* of, and *father* within, the Catholic community, all of whose members are given gifts in Baptism, strengthened in Confirmation, and nourished week by week or day by day in the celebration of the Eucharist. The one who is ordained must be able to hold a community together, to coordinate the many gifts and to negotiate the many tensions that are part of any gathering or group of people, yes, even people in the Church!

With such a strong emphasis on participation and collaboration, at times some priests wonder about the distinctiveness, or uniqueness, of the ordained ministry. This calls for a clear articulation of the identity of the priest. What precisely is the priest ordained to be and to do?

The priest's identity can only be discerned within priestly relationships—with Christ, with the priestly People of God, with the bishop and with other priests. The purpose of priestly ordination is to call forth and serve the priesthood of the whole Church, the entire Body of Christ. The ordained priesthood is not only a ministry for the Church on behalf of Christ, but it is also a ministry done with a priestly people (*Lumen gentium* 10).

Priests are co-workers with the Bishop. The priest builds up the Church by engaging in a threefold ministry of preaching the Word, celebration of divine worship that is rooted in his sacramental ordination, and guidance of the faithful. But the ordained priest's ministry of teaching, sanctifying, and guiding is also linked to the more fundamental, common mission of the lay faithful to witness, worship, and serve. This is also true of the bishop's ministry. By teaching, the priest enlightens, encourages, and at times corrects the baptized faithful as they strive to witness to the Gospel amidst a culture quite indifferent and often hostile to its values. The priest sanctifies the baptized by preaching the Word (for Christ is present when the Word is proclaimed and preached), by leading prayer (for Christ is present whenever two or three gather faithfully in his name) and by celebrating the Sacraments (for Christ is present in every Sacrament, and, above all, in the Eucharist, the source and summit of Christian worship). We have come to see that the priest does all of this best when he sees himself first as a member of God's holy people and not set apart from, or above them, by ordination. Finally, the priest guides by establishing, cultivating, and sustaining relationships that are collaborative for the purpose of mutual service, calling forth and coordinating the gifts of all the baptized faithful, including those consecrated by religious vows.

In understanding the ministry of the ordained priest in the Church today, what is so important is the gift of presiding over the life of a community and its prayer. The priest must know how to evangelize, to catechize, to preach, to pray, to celebrate, to discern but, above all, he must know how to draw all the members of the Catholic community together into communion and mutual service.

At this point let me note here two tensions that we priests face. When faced with such a view of the priesthood, it is easy to understand why some priests get overwhelmed, disheartened, or discouraged. So much is expected of the priest if he is to exercise his ministry in this way. Added to this, due to the recent misconduct issues involving deacons, priests, and bishops, the priest is not always treated with respect, nor is his vocation highly regarded, in some circles by some people. I need not remind you that sometimes the priest and the priesthood are scorned.

Additionally the priest must be aware of the many ways in which certain influences in our culture have made inroads into the Church and into the exercise of the priestly ministry. We tend to be a very fast-paced people who travel at break-neck speed. We are a noisy culture. We live in a culture in which things and possessions often count more than the inherent dignity of each and every person created in the image of God. And, we are a very task-oriented people. We can become caught in a never-ending cycle of doing, of achieving, of working ourselves to the point of exhaustion. All of these tendencies can drive the priest, so that he is constantly on the move, doing more and more tasks, moving at such a fast paced speed that he risks "burn-out." Perhaps even more troublesome, the priest can easily measure his own worth, his goodness,

by the standard of what he does, what he has accomplished, rather than by the measure of God's love for him, the God who has called him to a unique vocation in the Church.

II. IMPLEMENTATION

Having cautioned about the tendencies to become “do-ers unto death,” let me quickly add that we have had to take concrete, very practical steps to implement this vision of ministry. First, we held an Archdiocesan Synod which concluded in September 2003. The Synod chose six Pastoral Initiatives, nine Pastoral Priorities, and fourteen Pastoral Strategies for implementation. The first Pastoral Initiative, “Evangelization and the New Evangelization” is the governing concern, the central focus, of the Archdiocesan Synod and its implementation. This means, quite concretely, that “Evangelization and the New Evangelization” is the gauge for all judgments and decisions involved in the other five Pastoral Initiatives.

I

Evangelization and “The New Evangelization”

II

Structures for Participation and Accountability

III

Ongoing Education and Formation:
Adults; Young Adults; Youth

IV

Ministry and Leadership:
Lay; Consecrated Life; Ordained

V

Eucharist and Sacramental Living

VI

Social Justice: Living at the Service of God's Reign

There have been three crucial documents that have built on the foundation set in *As I Have Done for You*: 1) *As One Who Serves*-2005, on leadership of the ordained and non-ordained; 2) *Serving Shoulder to Shoulder*-2006, on the ministry of the Parish Life Director; and most recently 3) *A Fresh Encounter with Jesus Christ: Directions in Evangelization*-2008, a very practical document grounded in grass-roots parish experience and replete with examples from the lives of our own people engaged in the ministry of evangelization and the new evangelization. The title of this last derives from the words of Pope John Paul II who insisted that any program of evangelization must be rooted in a “fresh encounter with Jesus Christ” This encounter with the living Christ leads to continuing conversion (*Ecclesia in America*, 28).

The “fresh encounter with Jesus Christ” as the basis for all our efforts at evangelization is echoed by Pope Benedict XVI: “The hoped-for renewal of parishes cannot only result from

pastoral initiatives, albeit useful and timely, nor even less from programs worked out theoretically. Inspired by the apostolic model as shown in the Acts of the Apostles, parishes "rediscover" themselves in the encounter with Christ," (Address to the meeting of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, September 22, 2006).

In all of these documents there is a view of ministry which emphasizes *participation* and *collaboration* for *mission*, a view of ministry that is also expressed in the document of the USCCB on Lay Ecclesial Ministry: *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*.

These recent documents promulgated in our Archdiocese have continued to guide us as we have gone about the work of Synod Implementation. Let me indicate the general direction of this implementation:

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- On September 6, 2003, Synod Session III (the final session) was convened within the context of the concluding Mass and promulgation of the Synod Documents, with an emphasis on the six Pastoral Initiatives/priorities. (I see these Six Pastoral Initiatives as comprising the Master Plan for the Archdiocese).
- On September 16, 2003, the Office of Synod Implementation (and Stewardship) was established with the appointment of the Executive Director.
 - The initial priorities for the Office of Synod Implementation called for the establishment of:
 - The Synod Implementation Commission (to help develop an implementation strategy and to monitor and evaluate progress);
(Established December 2003 and ongoing)
 - The Regional Pastoral Councils (one in each of the five pastoral regions);
(All five Councils were commissioned in October 2004)
 - The Archdiocesan Pastoral Council;
(Commissioned in November 2006; Inaugural Meeting on January 27, 2007)
 - A viable, engaged, fully functioning Parish Pastoral Council in every parish.
(Ongoing, involving periodic Parish Pastoral Council workshops and the like).
 - Other initial priorities included:
 - Orientation and ongoing active engagement of Archdiocesan offices in the implementation process, particularly in their ability, by virtue of their expertise, to promote and develop those Synod Initiatives relevant to their ministry;
(Ongoing)
 - Ongoing education and “call to action” re: Synod Initiatives and priorities among Archdiocesan parishes, organizations, and advisory boards;
(Ongoing)

- Promotion of canonically mandated Finance Councils
(*Ongoing, involving periodic Finance Council workshops and so on*).
- The creation of the Regional Pastoral Councils (RPC) and Archdiocesan Pastoral Council (APC) has significantly contributed to the emergence of a strong/vibrant lay leadership; they have immersed themselves in the mission of the Local Church, serving as advisors, counselors, collaborators, and advocates at all levels of the Local Church.
 - The members of the Council serve as collaborators with their Bishops and participate in the governance of their respective regions/Archdiocese through a process of consultation and shared decision making;
(*Ongoing*)
 - The RPCs have been actively engaged in dealing with the challenges facing the Archdiocese due to the shortage of priests. Apprised of the need to staff parishes with Parish Life Directors (in lieu of a Priest Pastor) and Pastoral Associates, and the potential need to twin or consolidate parishes, their input has been invaluable.
(*Ongoing*)
 - The Archdiocesan Pastoral Council is immersed in a three year process to evaluate and report on the regional efforts underway to implement the Synod Initiatives, focusing on best practices and replicable programs/activities.
(*Underway; scheduled for completion by the end of 2010/11*)
 - The Regional Pastoral Councils continue to develop and foster strong relationships with parishes, Archdiocesan Catholic Center (ACC) departments, deaneries.
(*Ongoing*)
 - The Social Justice Standing Committees of each RPC and the Archdiocesan Justice and Peace Commission have been working collaboratively throughout the Archdiocese to promote social justice concerns; they have sponsored and conducted workshops, forums, and the like.
(*Ongoing*)
 - The Evangelization Standing Committees of each RPC have been actively pursuing the development of a comprehensive strategy to promote evangelization within their respective regions; the publication of the Letter *A Fresh Encounter with Jesus Christ: Directions in Evangelization* has served to collectively heighten their awareness and double their efforts in that regard.
(*Ongoing*)
 - The ongoing Education and Formation Committees of each RPC have individually been immersed in determining how to pursue the development of a school of ministry within their respective regions. While they have identified a number of activities that may already qualify, the variety and differences of each

activity challenge the development of one overall comprehensive approach.
(*Ongoing*)

--The need for better communication and enhanced communication resources has surfaced in the APC and RPCs.

- The APC has established a Communication and Media Committee for the development of a comprehensive/integrated Archdiocesan Communication Plan. (*Underway*)
 - The APC has been actively supporting the development of an Archdiocesan e-mail blast system (*almost completed*), a renewed and reinvigorated Archdiocesan website, and the further expansion of video conferencing sites.
- Synod Initiative II (i.e., Participation and Accountability) has served to provide a greater awareness of the need and importance of accountability and transparency throughout the Archdiocese.
- Synod Initiatives II and IV have served to underscore the importance of lay leadership and are a strong endorsement of the need for our Local Church to continue in the effort to promote lay leadership.
- Synod Initiative I (i.e., Evangelization) has led to a renewed recognition of biblical stewardship and its practice as an alternate form of evangelization (i.e., “A parish actively engaged in stewardship is an evangelized parish”).
(*Underway*)

III. CHALLENGES

In a culture such as ours which is “outcomes driven,” it is helpful to remember that “there is nothing as practical as a good theory.” In biblical terms, “Without a vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:28). To the degree that our efforts at implementation have been successful, it is due to the generosity of our people in responding to the Spirit’s gift and to the clarity of the vision itself. In a recent gathering of many who were involved in the Synod, one woman took the microphone and in very simple terms shared that reading our Synod Documents was for her an experience of Pentecost.

But challenges remain. Let me identify some of my concerns as we look to the full implementation of this vision of ministry. I raise these, not with the aim of giving any definitive answer, but in the hope of stimulating further reflection and discussion in this gathering.

1. In my travels here and there, I am seeing some really harsh generational divides in many presbyterates with the younger generation often quite openly challenging the orthodoxy of the older priests.
2. I would like to see more emphasis on the parish ministry of welcome and hospitality. On several occasions I have called parish offices and got entangled in the web of voicemail menu choices, trying to extract myself from the non-stop options without ever being able

- to speak to a real, live person. Our parish staff, beginning with us priests, need constant instruction and updating on how we come across to people trying to contact us.
3. The status of the permanent diaconate today is remarkably like that of lay ecclesial ministry. Both are largely post-conciliar realities with ancient roots in the Church. Both, in their contemporary forms, have grown at a rate that has outpaced theological reflection. I am not sure we can adequately understand one without the other. Ministry is not an abstraction. Ministry is exercised by people within relationships that are always situated in a particular time and place. I have gradually abandoned a theology of the diaconate simply as “humble service.” I believe that service is a call to be exercised by all ministerial persons. What then, is the distinctiveness of the diaconal order? While I am unable to give a full answer at this time, I am convinced that we need to be cognizant that the growing practice of forming deacons primarily for the purpose of becoming pastoral administrators in accord with canon 517 presents some danger of undermining the integrity of the diaconate as a ministry distinct from the ministerial priesthood.
 4. With the severe economic downturn, how do we rely more heavily on deacons and volunteers of good will while assuring that lay ecclesial ministers are given the proper theological and pastoral formation—and ongoing formation—necessary for the life of the Church today?
 5. How do we train candidates for the priesthood in a way that provides them with a clear sense of their vocation and identity within the Church while assuring that they do not become less collaborative, less flexible, more anxious to find their “proper place” and so more inclined to assert their authority in the parish? (A true story: One of our seminary professors asked a first year seminarian: Why have you asked your bishop to transfer you to another seminary? Answer: Because the priests, sisters and professors who teach at Saint John’s Seminary want to give the Church to the laity!)
 6. Have we really taken a hard look at the changing profile of candidates for ordination in terms of age, language, culture? We use such phrases as “formation for a multi-cultural Church,” but do we really have the resources to walk the talk? Do we realize that some of our seminarians from diverse cultures have little or no interest in what many of us think of as “multiculturalism”?
 7. After nearly thirty five years as a bishop, I am still struck by the fact that there are too many liturgies and homilies that are not what they might be, often because of a lack of a good grasp of the meaning of Scripture as the basis for homilies and for liturgy planning.
 8. Despite the valiant efforts of many, there seems to be a slowing down of ecumenical efforts at the local level and indeed at all levels.
 9. I am concerned about the reported weakening of social concern among our parishioners, at least as a united parish enterprise, sometimes to avoid the kind of conflict provoked by moral and political divisions, and disagreements over the nature of the parish’s social responsibility. The Church’s current efforts at comprehensive immigration reform have often been met with outright denunciation as the anti-immigrant mood takes deeper root.
 10. What are we to do about the whittling down of the vision of one parish community with the re-introduction of the Latin Mass and more “sacred” liturgies which has the effect of creating two parallel communities?
 11. We all face the challenge in dealing with the continued problems our people feel over Church positions on sexuality, leading people to seek a spiritual haven elsewhere. How

do we articulate the Church's position on what many of our people feel are "thorny issues" in a plausible and compelling way?

12. Even in a time of economic downturn, I would like to see more parish retreats to give people an inexpensive and parish-related quiet time.
13. I am concerned about the poorly realized renewal of reconciliation ministry within parishes—especially the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
14. As part of a larger spiritual renewal ministry in the parish, perhaps more lay persons in parish ministry could be trained in spiritual direction.
15. Because our vision of ministry is parish-based and parish-centered, what do we do with the nagging problem of too many people getting children baptized and getting married outside their own parish? The problem is exacerbated by increased popularity of destination weddings.
16. I am concerned that there is still not enough attention given to a communal approach to Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick as an integral part of a community's care for the sick.
17. Even though I often make the rounds to all the deaneries in our archdiocese emphasizing that we are first and foremost a Local Church comprised of many parish communities, there is still not enough interaction between parishes in a diocese, all the more necessary where there are many social classes and many cultural groups in a diocese or archdiocese.

IV. CONCLUSION

The shortage of priestly and religious vocations has awakened in us an appreciation of a broadly based shared ministry and a realization that it is in the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ to be endowed with many gifts, ministries and offices. Ministry is not an abstraction. Terms like "priest," "deacon," "bishop" and "lay minister" should not be treated as if they were Platonic ideals, as if there were an essential definition of each ministry. It is true that the Church's teaching office offers a set of doctrinal teachings that say something about ministry in general and ordained ministry in particular, but these are surprisingly sparse and serve more as survey lines that map out the boundaries of the faith, leaving considerable theological and pastoral territory within which to roam.

Because of *As I Have Done for You* we have not been roaming aimlessly. The understanding of ministry expressed in this Pastoral Letter is both theologically solid and eminently practical, as I have demonstrated. Does the vision still hold? Indeed it does. And it will guide us for many years to come. The challenges I have identified are themselves indicative of a living, indeed vibrant, faith and are themselves a sign of God's deep love for the Church, an invitation to a more creative and effective ordering of gifts and energy in the Body of Christ. This is a time of great challenge and opportunity in the Church, not least of all because the gifts of all the People of God—clergy, Religious and lay faithful—have been flourishing and will continue to flourish in unforeseen ways.