

## THE LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTER AND THE BISHOP

Topic: The Lay Ecclesial Minister and the Bishop  
Convener: Edward P. Hahnenberg, Xavier University  
Moderator: Carolyn Weir Herman, Boston College  
Presenters: H. Richard McCord, USCCB  
                  Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women & Youth  
                  Edward P. Hahnenberg, Xavier University  
                  Aurelie A. Hagstrom, Providence College

In November 2005 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. In his opening presentation, “Reading the Signs of the Times: The U.S. Bishops and Lay Ecclesial Ministry,” H. Richard McCord, the Executive Director of the U.S. Bishops’ Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth, summarized the historical and ecclesial context out of which this document emerged. The rise of lay ministry in the United States has been mostly a “bottom up” movement. Beginning not with national degrees but at the parish level, the number of parish lay ministers has gradually grown—a 2005 study counts over 30,000 lay people employed in parish pastoral roles, a presence in over two-thirds of all U.S. parishes. McCord noted that the method of the bishops’ conference here has been inductive. It has observed and described an emerging reality, attempting to “test everything and keep what is good.” As such, McCord argued, *Co-Workers* is a successful example of the USCCB implementing three of its goals as a conference. First, by bringing together best thinking and practice on this subject, the USCCB has offered “appropriate assistance to each bishop in fulfilling his particular ministry in the local church.” Second, by recognizing lay ecclesial ministry as a national reality, the conference has acted “collaboratively and consistently on issues confronting the church and society.” Third, by offering a theology of ministry built on an ecclesiology of communion and mission, the conference has served its goal of fostering communion within the universal church under the leadership of the pope.

Edward P. Hahnenberg’s presentation, “Theological Reflections on the Bishop as Source and Center of Ministries,” argued that the increased attention given to the role of the bishop by *Co-Workers* is helpful if it is animated by a theological vision of the bishop as the center of the ministerial life of the diocese. However, this increased attention is problematic if it rests on a vision of the bishop as the source of lay ecclesial ministry. Two theological claims—both present in the documents of Vatican II—risk supporting this latter vision: (1) the historical narrative of apostolic succession and (2) the philosophical principle that the bishop possesses the fullness of the sacrament of orders. Hahnenberg argued that in articulating these teachings, the Second Vatican Council was “looking above” the bishop in trying to correct a theological overemphasis on the role of the pope. When balanced with those passages where the council was “looking below” the bishop to his relationship to the local church, Vatican II offers a different image—that of the bishop as the center of a ministering community. Keeping this image in mind avoids a new

theological overemphasis on the bishop, while at the same time affirming his role in promoting, coordinating, and directing lay ecclesial ministry within the diocese.

Aurelie A. Hagstrom, in her presentation “By Whose Authority? Lay Ecclesial Ministry and Questions of Authorization,” noted that one aim of *Co-Workers* was to offer a theology that would be helpful in promoting collaboration among priests, deacons, and laity in ministry. It does so in its trinitarian foundation, its ecclesiology of *communio*, and its affirmation of diverse charisms and functions as enriching and complementary. *Co-Workers* then distinguishes between the pastoral ministry of the ordained (described in the document as a special apostolic calling, empowered in a unique and essential way by the sacrament of orders) and the ministry of the laity (presented as a way of assisting this pastoral ministry of the ordained). This distinction raises the question of authorization. After examining the language of *Co-Workers*, Hagstrom concludes that—at least in its section on authorization—the document presents a vision of the bishop as source and font of ministry. Authorization is seen as entrusting to the laity certain offices and roles connected to the ministry of the ordained pastors. The bishop (or his delegate) entrusts these responsibilities to a lay ecclesial minister through an administrative act that involves acknowledgement of competence, appointment to a specific position, delineation of responsibilities, public announcement, and, perhaps, a liturgical ritual.

The presentations sparked a spirited half-hour discussion among the two dozen participants present. Several insights were shared: the possibility of drawing other models for authorization from the early church or from women’s religious communities, the call to shift our starting point from the minister to the church, the need for more theological work on vocation, the priesthood, and church governance, among others.

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