

FORMING PROPHETIC LAY LEADERS FOR
CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONS

- Topic: Forming Prophetic Lay Leaders for Catholic Institutions: What does tradition have to do with it?
- Convener: Colleen Mary Mallon, Aquinas Institute of Theology
- Presenters: Christopher Vogt, St. John's University, Queens, New York
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- Respondent: David Cloutier, Mt. St. Mary's University

What constitutes effective, even prophetic, formation of lay leaders of ecclesial ministries? While current imagination around lay leadership centers on parish and diocesan settings, little of the recent work exploring leadership in Catholic healthcare as an institutional ministry of the church has made its way into the broader discussion of formation for lay ecclesial leadership. From differing points of reference, Vogt and Mallon analyzed the state of lay formation being worked out *in medio ecclesiae* by Catholic healthcare institutions.

In "Resisting False Gods and False Hope: On the Formation of Disciples and Fellow Laborers," Vogt suggests that programs best suited for the task of lay leadership formation are those which integrate a three-fold interrelated approach: virtue ethics, narrative and intentional practices. This approach, adapted from the work of William Spohn, highlights the mutual interplay between all three elements. Virtue ethics focuses on both the character of the leader and the character of the institution for which leaders hold particular responsibility. Institutions, as distinct embodiments of the Spirit, must be attended to as spiritual entities. What stories will best sustain identity and support lay leaders of ecclesial ministries? Vogt agrees with Spohn, suggesting that "the Reign of God" functions as the proper metaphorical frame and model for the kinds of people and communities Christians are meant to become. This frame, however, is profoundly challenged in a world marked by 21st century market capitalism. Following J. Shuman and K. Meador's analysis in *Heal Thyself: Spirituality, Medicine and the Distortion of Christianity*, Vogt argues that only a depth immersion in the Christian narrative itself can sustain the kinds of attitudes and dispositions necessary to lead a ministry of the church. For example, contemporary medicine's alignment with market values serves up a version of hope that distorts this virtue: the false "dream of a life without death." Christian hope, however, "is not a distraction from death or suffering, nor an empty promise that no harm will ever come...you will suffer, you will die, but those things can never separate you from your ultimate end. God will always be with you." Practices that "express a way of life and...shape us more deeply in that life," further deepen the power of the Christian narrative to organize and discipline our desires towards the things of God. Vogt concluded by suggesting that the practices of prayer, liturgy and regular conversations on Catholic identity might be the beginning of an larger conversation around the formation of lay leaders of ecclesial ministries.

Mallon's paper, "Formation for Mission of the Mission of Formation? An Ecclesiological Reflection on Lay Leadership in Catholic Healthcare" suggested that an overlooked area of ecclesiological reflection has been the self-understandings of lay women and men participating in formation for mission programs in various Catholic healthcare organizations. Shifting the focus away from the parish or diocese as the geography of reflection on lay ecclesial leadership, Mallon explores the narratives emerging from these lay leaders and the stories they tell about spiritual formation, religious identity and mission consciousness. There is evidence that formation for mission is transforming lay leaders into change agents who wholeheartedly embrace the mission of formation. Two significant seeds of transformation are evidenced in these leaders: intention spirituality and active responsibility for the institution qua ministry. Documenting the spiritual journeys of senior leaders highlights the impact that "thick" theological and spiritual formation is having on the total organization. Mallon pointed particularly to the shift from personal responsibility to prophetic responsibility for mission, evidenced by senior leaders' commitment to introduce formation programs at all levels of their ministry organization. "Leaders who have experienced the spiritual power of 'knowing their purpose' and of 'uniting the work of their hands to the work of their souls' are prophetically poised to shepherd the mission of formation throughout the multiple systems of their healthcare organizations."

Cloutier offered an energetic response to both papers, initially highlighting key similarities in the presentations: intentional and "thick" formation for leaders, personal growth and transformation, institutional instantiations of formation and productive engagement with the norms of the Catholic tradition within the transformation of larger personal and institutional worldviews. Concern was raised as to the sufficiency of described formation programs to meet the challenges that prophetic conversion will demand of institutions in the face the "counter-sacred." Effective programs must also strengthen participants' capacity to resist "more serious structures of sin," even while remaining in the "tragic gap" where "tough, very real, very material, very public kinds of matters" call leaders to attest in their person that "God is here, God is acting, God is real and God wants something from you."

A lively discussion with presenters and participants followed.

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