

“Collaboration: Laboring Together in Building the Kingdom”

Daniel P. Horan, OFM

Evening Reflection | Catholic Theological Union | 15 September 2015

[Reading: Luke 4:16-21]

To labor together.

This foundational meaning of *collaboration* is familiar to many of us. If not from a sharp familiarity with the Latin roots *laborare* and *cum*, then it may be familiar to some gathered here because of the 2005 USCCB document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, a text that outlines resources for lay ecclesial ministry.

Collaboration is certainly a fitting theme for this year’s “Catholics on Call” Partners Conference, because indeed we are called to be co-workers, with one another and with the Spirit, in discerning what is ours to do. And whatever our particular vocation may be, and wherever we are called to live that vocation out, and whichever time and season we find ourselves—we never do it alone.

For the Kingdom of God is not made up of *sole proprietors* or *independent contractors* or *lone rangers*.

The call of the Gospel is always and everywhere a call to community, and in this sense all vocations are inherently about *collaboration*— or, to borrow from the USCCB document title: all vocations are inherently **about being co-workers of and for the Lord.**

And yet, I sometimes fear that our familiarity with certain images and phrases inadvertently dull our imaginations and impede us from recognizing how truly radical the notion of a Christian vocation really is. That's why I would like to invite us to be *etymologically radical*, or return to the linguistic roots of collaboration this evening.

Within the context of prayer and with the Gospel freshly in our minds and hearts and on our lips, let us consider the meaning of collaboration in terms of *laboring together*.

By *laboring together*, I do not mean to focus our attention on the physical work that we usually think about when we think of "hard labor," such as tilling the fields and harvesting the crops, extracting ore in mines or building houses from scratch.

Instead, I invite us to reflect on the other meaning of *labor*; that is, I want us to think about *giving birth*.

When we think of co-working, as in the USCCB document, we tend to think about the first kind of labor – tending to the vineyards as we find in the Matthean parable from which that title comes.

But if we shift our focus to the second kind of labor—*giving birth*—our Christian imaginations may be opened to the possibility of seeing something new.

I'm reminded of Francis of Assisi's wonderful penchant for drawing on feminine imagery in his spiritual writings and in the hagiographical accounts of his life and ministry. Devoted as he was to Mary the Mother of God, Francis often looked to her as a model and guide for Christian living. (And that we are gathered on the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, this seems all the more fitting).

In his *Life of St. Francis*, Bonaventure describes precisely this aspect of Francis's rich Marian spirituality; a spirituality, it should be noted, that did not merely stop at veneration but commanded appropriation and adaptation.

Bonaventure writes:

In the church of the Virgin Mother of God, her servant Francis lingered and, with continuing cries, insistently begged her who had conceived and brought to birth the Word full of grace and truth, to become his advocate. **Through the merits of the Mother of Mercy, he conceived and brought to birth the spirit of the Gospel truth** (*LMaj.* 3.1 in *FAED* 2:542).

Bonaventure reminds us that, for Francis, we are called to be disciples like Mary, and the manner in which we live out our Baptismal Vocation is by ***laboring to give birth to the Word.***

This is something that Francis himself wrote about around the year 1220 when he instructed his followers that we are all called to be “spouses, siblings, and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He explained:

We are spouses when the faithful soul is united by the Holy Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ. We are siblings, moreover, when we do the will of His Father Who is in heaven; [and we are] **Mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example** (*2LtF* 50-53 in *FAED* 1:49).

To collaborate, then, is to be those who *labor to give birth* to the Word in the world through our words and deeds.

But what does this look like? How might we know when we’ve brought the Word to term successfully by our labor?

This is where Luke’s Gospel offers us an insightful clue. The business of conceiving the Word of God and laboring to bring it to birth in the world begins with what I will call **Jesus’s Mission Statement**. Within the context of his faith

tradition's communal worship, Jesus announces in the borrowed words of Isaiah that,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18).

Not only is this Christ's "mission statement," but it is also that of every Christian woman and man. Like the Lord, we too have been made *christos*—anointed ones—with the Chrism of Baptism; and so his task is our task, his business is our business, his mission is our mission.

And like Jesus who does not leave the synagogue to perform the work of this mission alone, but calls others to follow him in this labor, so too we go out into the world *to labor together* in building the Kingdom of God.

Do we allow the Word of God to take root in our hearts such that we can bring it to birth?

What about **good news to the poor**? In a world in which the materially poor are discarded, overlooked, forgotten, and oppressed, what good news do we

announce through our labors? Or what about those who involuntarily face poverty of other kinds?

What about **release to the captives**? In a nation in which the ‘justice system’ is sadly ironic, offering disproportionate punishment to women and men of color without holding white collared and, often, white-skinned people accountable for widespread criminal behavior in business and the economy, what recourse does our labor provide them? How about those held captive by the many structural injustices and institutional systems of social sin; those imprisoned by gender inequality, xenophobia, racism, and homophobia, among others, in what way does our laboring together announce good news in this context?

What about **sight to the blind**? In a culture that is increasingly blinded by individualism and self-interest, what does our living of the Christian Mission Statement say to those needing recovery of sight – perhaps not only visually, but for the eye of the mind, heart, and soul as well – in order to see the world as it really is?

What about **proclaiming a jubilee year of the Lord**? When forgiveness is seen as weak and reconciliation viewed as impossible, how might our laboring to give birth to the Word in the world offer our sisters and brothers a sign of a new hope or of a peace that the world cannot give?

These are the signs of a healthy birth of the Word that is planted deep within our hearts, the results of our labors.

As we continue to reflect on the meaning of *collaboration* in vocational discernment and ministerial formation, may we recall that we do not work alone in isolated response to an individual vocation, but that we *labor together* to give birth to the Word in our world and thereby contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God.