

## REFLECTING ON MINISTRY: AN ONLINE RETREAT

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### *Thesis Five: Christian Ministry Is Collaborative*

The charismatic structure of the church also points to the collaborative nature of ministry. All the Spirit's gifts, says Paul, are given for the good of all (1 Cor 12:7), and all come from the same Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-6, 11), and so it is clear that all need to work together. In his famous analogy of the body, Paul speaks about the rich diversity-and-unity in the church: "God has set each member of the body in the place he wanted it to be. If all the members were alike, where would the body be? There are, indeed, many different members, but one body" (1 Cor 12: 18-20), and each contributes to the whole by being itself and working along with the others.

For ministry to be truly collaborative, several factors need to come into play. Foundational, I believe, is a sense among all ministers in the church of the common dignity and equality that is shared by all. This basic sense of "common servanthood"<sup>1</sup> is forcefully expressed in the very order of the chapters in Vatican II's document on the church. Rather than starting from a *distinction* between laity and office holders in the church, the Council stressed the fundamental *equality* of all Christians by placing the chapter "The People of God" before the chapters on the hierarchy and laity. By doing this, the Council stressed the fact that "the brotherhood and equality of all members takes precedence over all later distinctions and persists in them."<sup>2</sup>

In the second place, however, collaboration acknowledges the fact that there *is* in the church a certain order of responsibility. Not everyone on the church is endowed with the charism and ministry of "holy order," and those who are are entrusted with the governance of the whole. It is ultimately correct to speak of the church as a hierarchical reality, and there is a particular order in the church that needs to be respected. A significant aspect of collaboration, then, is a clear sense of responsibility on the part of church leadership and the willingness on the part of others to cooperate and obey.

The full spirit of collaboration, however, comes to light when leadership recognizes the basic equality that it shares with all ministers, and commits itself to "co-labor" with them. As Terence L. Nichols has recently pointed out, the term "hierarchy" need not be interpreted in terms of the dominance of one "higher" or "better" group of ministers over others--rather than a "command" model of hierarchy we may speak of a "participative, integrative or inclusive" model.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps, as philosopher Ken Wilber suggests, the term "holarchy" might serve as a better term, since it points to the order that has as its goal the unity of the whole.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, one of the most valuable qualities of leadership becomes the ability to engage in honest dialogue and open conversation, being able to listen, to learn and to develop vision by engaging the entire community. The key to this entire process, and, according to Loughlan Sofield and Donald Kuhn, the "basis of effective leadership," is listening.<sup>5</sup> Listening, they say, is a "transaction": "Effective leaders listen to the needs and hungers which underlie what is being said and, most importantly, respond in such a way that the speaker feels he or she has been understood and has had an impact. This kind of active listening does not imply agreement with what is said, but it does build relationship so that ongoing dialogue and resolution of differences are possible."<sup>6</sup>

Mary Benet McKinney's work on discernment models for decision making lays out several important principles that are involved in working collaboratively. First, she says, no one has all the wisdom; no matter how educated, holy, no matter how much authority a person has, no one knows everything there is to know about an issue. Second, everyone has a different piece of the wisdom. Not everyone in a community will agree, and there may be a wide variety of approaches to or insights into a particular issue. Because of this there may very well be conflict as a community engages in discernment. Finally, McKinney says, while no one has *all* of the wisdom, *everyone* in group has some of it. Every person in the community, no matter how "off the wall" his or her opinions might seem, possesses "something the Spirit is calling the group to consider and, therefore, to listen to, respect and even treasure."<sup>7</sup> The role of leadership, ultimately, is "discerning the discernment,"<sup>8</sup> a process that involves both letting go of personal opinions and preconceptions on the one hand, and bringing to bear convictions and insight that the group might not possess. Collaboration is not simply doing what a group has decided; it involves a deep spiritual openness to the Spirit present in the *whole* community. It involves a truly ecclesial sense--a sense that *every* ministry is important, that ministries should never compete with one another, that ministry truly is the work not of individuals but of Christ's body, the church.

## ***Thesis Six: Christian Ministry Is Catholic***

Catholicity is that “mark” or dimension of the church that ensures that it is both rooted in a particular, local situation and is at the same time open to and involved in the wider world and Christian community: it is a concern for wholeness, embracing everyone and everything, including the entire creation as loved and redeemed by God. On the one hand, the church needs to be concerned with a particular group of people in a particular place, perhaps of a particular cultural group, perhaps with a particularly shared ecclesial vision or ministerial interest. On the other hand, no local church can be isolated from other local churches, or from the global reality of all the churches. Particular churches need to be in communion with other particular churches--sharing their abundance with them, receiving assistance from them, learning from them, at times perhaps challenging them in some way or another. Catholicity, therefore, involves both “depth” and “breadth.” It reaches deep into the particular, cherishing all that is unique in persons, languages, cultures, histories; but it also reaches out widely to include *all* peoples--saints and sinners alike--*all* cultures, *all* races, *all* forms of spirituality, *both* men and women. Catholicity is sparked by the vision that until all peoples and cultures and points of view have succeeded in learning from the richness of each one’s uniqueness, the church will not be the church and the full truth of the gospel--and indeed the fullness of Christ--will not be known.

Christian ministry, then, is catholic. On the one hand, it is ministry within the context of particular communities and situations. Diocesan offices sometimes give the impression that there is ministry that is done in a general or “mainstream” way, and then there are the special ministries like African American ministry, Asian ministry, Hispanic ministry, ministry to gays and lesbians, or ministry to the deaf. But there really is no such thing as “ministry” in general; ministry is always particular, done in the context of a particular culture, a particular place, at a particular time, with a particular amount and quality of training. Ministers need to be conscious of the particularity of the community in which they minister, and be conscious of well of the particular gifts--cultural, intellectual, gender-determined, etc.--that they bring to their task.

On the other hand, ministers need to be open to both the gifts and the needs of the wider church. As important as it is to be an African American minister, for example, she or he needs to be open to the values in other churches throughout the world, and help the African American community to appreciate, learn from and even be challenged by them. Or as important as it is to help build a vibrant community of affluent Christians, the minister’s task is also to make his or her congregation aware of less fortunate churches, whether down the street or across the sea. At the same time, while a minister needs to be steeped in the traditions of his or her own culture, race or language, commitment to this holy particularity should not hinder him or her from reaching out to other in the community who are different. A truly *catholic* parish is not one that has settled for a least common denominator in terms of liturgy, social services and leadership, but one in which ministers have learned to cross cultures and enter into conversation--and even sometimes creative conflict--with all the constituents in the community. Finally, while ministers are rooted in commitment to the local church, they should always be willing to share themselves with other churches throughout the world. There will always be need for “foreign missionaries”--not any more, of course, as representatives of “more authentic,” “more developed” churches, but in the context of a healthy exchange among the world’s churches. Particularly in today’s globalized world, where time and space have come to mean less and less and where the local can deeply affect the whole, the phrase “the world is my parish” (attributed to John Wesley) is truer than ever.

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1. U. S. Bishops, p. 19.

2. *Ibid.*, quoting Walter Kasper, “A New Dogmatic Outlook on the Priestly Ministry,” *Concilium*, 3, 5 (March, 1969) British edition, p. 14a.

3. Terence L. Nichols, *That All May Be One: Hierarchy and Participation in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press [A Michael Glazier Book], 1997), pp. 7-8.

4. Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything* (Boston and London: Shambahala, 1996), pp. 27-30.

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5. Loughland Sofield and Donald H. Kuhn, *The Colaborative Leader: Listening to the Wisdom of God's People* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1995), pp. 45-55.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

7. Mary Benet McKinney, *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision Making* (Allen, TX: Tabor Publishing, 1987), p. 13.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 60.