

THE MISSION HAS A CHURCH, THE MISSION HAS MINISTERS

Thinking Missiologically about Ministry and the Shortage of Priests

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I BEGIN THESE reflections with you this morning with not a little trepidation. I speak to you as a complete outsider—I am not and never have been a major superior; I am not a bishop; I am not an Australian. What I share with you will be only out of my small competence as a theologian, a religious priest deeply interested in and committed to mission, a practitioner of ministry in the church, and a scholar interested in a theology of ministry. I speak to you this morning out of the context of the U. S. American church, a complex church of many cultures and a rich history. It is a church scarred by scandal, and yet a church that is incredibly vibrant and alive, especially at the grassroots level.

How might these theological, missiological and U. S. American reflections help you as Australian church leaders and pastors? I hope that they will serve as a catalyst to theological and missiological thinking yourselves—that you will take what I say and reflect on it from your own experience, in your own Australian context. The point is not to agree with me, or to take the examples I will give as something that have to be duplicated here. The point is rather to let me get you thinking, to enter into real dialogue with what I say, and ultimately to come up with your own ideas.

This said, I'd like to begin by quoting a section from the e-mail that Tim Norton sent me when he asked me if I could be with you this morning. Here is what Tim wrote. Here is the issue about which I'd like to get you to reflect with me this morning.

You may be aware that Australia and New Zealand are facing a steeply declining number of priests. Many senior priests are staying on as PPs because they know that when they retire, their parish will probably not have a resident priest. Many parishes have now been closed or twinned because of this. (We SVD are assisting in six Dioceses across these two countries in a variety of situations). It is becoming a very difficult reality.

Tim's intuition was that perhaps by thinking in terms of the mission we might find a way to get ourselves out of this conundrum. I think Tim is right, and so this is the tack that I'm going to take in this input session to get you thinking yourselves. Mine will be the reflections of a theologian, one who deeply respects church tradition and church teaching, but is convinced that on the theological level one needs to think as freely, as creatively and even as playfully as one can.

I'm going to offer these reflections in three parts. First, I'd like to reflect on the fact that the church does not so much have a mission as that the *mission* has a church. The church is not about itself; it is about the Reign of God that it preaches, serves and witnesses to, and this makes all the difference. Second, if such is the case, any structure of leadership in the church serves the church by helping it be faithful to God's mission. Ministry in the church—be it that of reader at Mass, director of religious education in a parish, bishop of a diocese or head of the college of bishops—is relative to mission. It does not so much *direct* it but *is directed* by it. The third part of my reflections will

offer you some examples of how ministry might be conceived if this missionary perspective of church and ministry can be put into practice. I'll focus on some of the 'obvious' solutions to the problem of the shortage of priests that is so vexing our churches today, several of which are impossible, and others of which are being put into practice but are nevertheless somewhat ambiguous. Then I will outline two solutions in the context of a wider development of lay ministry from my own context of the U. S. This will be followed by two suggestions out of my 'missiological imagination.' Having done this, I'll hand the reins over to you, in small and large group discussion, for reactions and reflections out of your own rich experience and the Australian context.

The Mission Has a Church

Our understanding of the church's evangelizing mission has been expanded in the last several years. Vatican II's Decree on Missionary Activity (AG) locates mission in the very life of the Trinity, in the overflowing fountain that is Holy Mystery sending the Word and the Spirit into the world (see paragraph 2). That God as such is mission means that in its deepest identity reality as such is not about itself, but finds itself in going out to the other. Nothing is enclosed upon itself, not even God. Theologians today insist that Ultimate Reality is not a monad. In the beginning was communion, says Latin American theologian Leonardo Boff. God, as the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said, is not the great exception to reality, but its greatest example.¹ God could not be God without freely and joyfully creating, revealing Godself to that creation, and being present and active in the healing and redeeming that creation because it had not been faithful to its own inner dynamic of going beyond itself in risk and love—like God. The 'missions' of the Son and the Spirit, classical theology has always argued, are simply the processions of the Trinity within history.

Although the standard way of expressing the 'missions' of the Trinity is to speak, like



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Vatican II, of the 'Father' or 'Holy Mystery' sending the Son into the world, and then sending the Spirit subsequently as God's continuous presence in the church, I have found it more 'useful' theologically to reverse the order and speak rather of Holy Mystery first sending the Spirit into the world. After all, it is not as though the Spirit was not in the world before Jesus was incarnate (see AG 4). John Paul II talks about the presence of the Spirit 'in every time and place' (see *Redemptoris Missio* [RM], title before paragraph 28). In this perspective, the Spirit is the way God as Holy Mystery is present to the world from the first nanosecond of creation—giving life, courage, wisdom, prophecy, healing as the Old Testament describes her. The Spirit is God, as it were, 'inside out' in the world.

'In the fullness of time' (see Gal 4:4), God's ever-present Spirit took concrete form in Jesus of Nazareth, and the Spirit's mission becomes his: speaking words of wisdom and prophecy, offering God's healing and forgiveness, revealing God's loving but challenging presence in people's lives. Jesus gives the Holy Spirit a human face. Jesus' ministry of teaching, healing, wrestling with the power of evil in exorcisms, including even those who are usually excluded reveals in a concrete way who God is and what God is about in the world.

Even during his life Jesus shared his mission with those who followed him and especially with those whom he chose to be in his inner circle. But it was only after Jesus died—as a consequence of his mission—and was experienced as raised again to life did his disciples realize—gradually, painfully, and yet

surely—that they themselves had been called now to continue Jesus’ mission in the world, in every time and in every nation and culture. As the Spirit had anointed Jesus at the start of his ministry (see Lk 4:16-21), so Jesus sent the Spirit upon his followers to lead them to this realization. It was the same Spirit whom Jesus had embodied in his own ministry; now that Spirit was given to Jesus’ community, who began to call themselves the church, God’s new People, Jesus’ very bodily presence in the world, created by and a dwelling place for the Spirit.

This is why we say, with Vatican II, that the ‘pilgrim church is missionary by its very nature’ (AG 2), or as twentieth century German theologian Emil Brunner put it so beautifully: ‘the church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.’² Mission comes first. The church does not have a mission. The mission, rather, has a church. The mission is first that of God’s mission—through the Spirit, in Christ. We have been called into the church to share and continue that mission.

What this means is that the be all and end all of the church is not itself. The church does not exist to expand itself, the church does not exist to perpetuate itself. The church exists not as an answer, as it were, but as a response—a response to God’s call to continue God’s loving, redeeming, healing, reconciling, liberating, forgiving, and challenging mission. Jesus called the aim of his mission the establishment of the Reign of God and envisioned it as a community of those who were forgiven and forgiving, who included everyone, who recognized and rejoiced in the abundance of God’s grace. All this could happen if women and men would just let God reign.

The church is not the Reign of God. Yes, it is a foretaste of it, it is a sign and instrument of it, but it is not identical with it. It certainly has an internal mission of what has come to be called pastoral care—being present at the crucial moments in its members’ lives: when they are born, when they marry, when they die, when they need healing, when they need forgiveness, when they need counseling and consolation.

But a crucial part of that pastoral care is equipping the members of the church for ministry—to each other in the church, but also in the world, beyond the church’s boundaries. The church needs to work that it itself be a worthy sign and sacrament of God’s Reign, but it has also to work—through witness and proclamation, through working for justice, through interreligious dialogue, through the work of reconciliation, in the outwardness of its prayer and its efforts of inculturation—for the world. It has to work to transform the world into a place where God can worthily reign. It doesn’t do it alone. The Spirit is always the principal agent of evangelization. But God has called the church to work with the divine purposes—so amazing is God’s grace.

In the light of mission, then, any exclusively inward focus is a betrayal of the church’s identity. If we are not equipping our people for mission, if we are not willing to risk the comfort and prestige of the church (e.g. its tax exempt status) for principles of the gospel, if we are more interested in building impressive cathedrals and churches than in witnessing to the simplicity of the gospel, if we are more willing to save the church’s good name than expose priests as criminals—then we are not being faithful to what God has called us to in Christ through the Spirit. These are some of the implications of recognizing the primacy and priority of mission in the church. This is what it means that the mission has a church.

The Mission Has Ministers

If we begin to think of the church as missionary by its very nature, meaning that it is mission that gives identity and purpose to the church, any *structure* in the church will be understood not as an end in itself but as existing to contribute its part to serve the mission. Every ministry in the church, whether that of a sacristan, a minister of social justice, a minister of bereavement, a professed religious engaged in the ministry of contemplative prayer, a parish priest, a theology teacher, a diocesan bishop or the head of

the episcopal college, is about working with God to prepare people's hearts to accept God's Reign. Ministry in the church exists not merely in order to contribute to or build up the church. It certainly does this, but its ultimate purpose is to form the church so that the church can get on with its work in the world. Ministry is called forth in the church for the sake of mission, and exists for the sake of mission.

Ministry is always for mission, but it belongs to the *church*, the entire church. We might argue, as the U.S. bishops did a few years ago, whether we should designate as *ministry* the work that lay people do in the church and in the world. We might want to limit ministry, as does Thomas O'Meara, to public, recognized work by the church.³ But about this we cannot argue: all Christians are called to participate in God's mission, to somehow promote in their lives the Reign of God. This is their privilege, right and duty because of their baptism. Whether they do that by being dutiful parents, honest lawyers, exemplary employees, members of a church choir, a member of a commission for fair housing, leading a parish or leading a diocese does not matter. What matters is that they live lives of giving and service, lives that in small or great ways are signs of God's loving and healing presence in the world.

If this is true about every ministry in the church, it is true in a more graphic—indeed, *sacramental way*—of those who participate in the *Sacramentum Ordinis*, the Sacrament of Order or ordained ministry. Notice that I have translated the Latin literally: the Sacrament of Order, as it appears, for example in Canon 1008. Traditionally, and this even appears in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the name of the sacrament is understood and often translated in the plural, referring to the persons ordained or commissioned into a special state, class or 'order' (a term going back to ancient Roman times).⁴

Many theologians today, however, suggest that the singular is deliberate. As sacramental theologian Dennis Smolarski expresses it, for example, when the singular is recognized, 'we

may be led to think of the Church as a whole, and how order is necessary in the Church through leadership.'⁵ If the entire church is an *ordered* community, the ministry of those ordained is to be a *sacrament* of that order. I myself have suggested that the word 'order' should be taken as a *verb*, emphasizing the idea that the ministry of the ordained is the *service of holy ordering*. Bishops, priests and deacons order the church—order its faith expression, order its ministerial structure, order its liturgical celebrations—so that the church might better work for God's Holy Order (the Reign of God) in the world. Every ministry, but in a particularly *sacramental way*, ordained ministry, is at the service of the mission.⁶

Specifically, ordained ministry *calls forth* the ministry of the church. John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV), says this in a particularly powerful way. He is talking about the priesthood, and it cannot be said of the deacon, but I think it could be said of the bishop as well: 'Christ gives to priests, in the Spirit, a particular gift so that they can help the People of God to exercise faithfully and fully the common priesthood which it has received' (paragraph 17). Ordained ministers are not to 'do it all,' but to inspire, discern, see to the training of, regulate, admonish, console the variety of ministries so that the church, well-equipped for ministry, can faithfully witness to the Reign of God in the world. The ministry of bishops and priests is specifically to call forth the ministry of the whole church, so that the church can do mission. The mission has ministry—at every level of the church's order.

It is a special responsibility of the bishop to ensure that the ministry of the church at all levels is being exercised, and when we realize that this ministry is at the service of the church's mission—not for the exclusive pastoral care of the faithful, and certainly not for the survival of the ministry itself—the bishop is called upon to do some rather creative thinking. This is true in any case, but it is particularly true in our own times, when we are suffering from a lack of vo-

cations to what has developed as the key ministry of ordering in the church. There is, it is said ironically, no lack of vocations to the episcopate, and there will probably be no lack of vocations to the diaconate. The neuralgia point is the lack of vocations to the priesthood.

As it has developed in the church, the priest nudged out the deacon as the ‘right hand man’ of the bishop. It is with the priest that the ordinary Catholic has contact, and it is the priest who is most closely responsible, in the name of the bishop, for calling forth the church’s ministry, and so inspire people to participate in God’s mission in the world.

Given the lack of vocations to the priesthood in this context, then, what are some ways that we might think creatively—not just to keep up a tradition, but to better serve the mission? How can the people of the church continue to be called forth to ministry so that the church can engage in mission? The issue, actually, is not just a shortage of priests. It is a shortage of Christians who can call people forth to ministry. Otherwise the mission would be without ministry.

This is what I hope we can begin thinking about together, but first let me, in a third part, make a few suggestions—some from my own context of the United States, others from my own imagination.

Calling Forth Ministers for Mission

This section is going to have four parts. In a first part I’m going to rehearse some solutions that are impossible in today’s church. Second, I’m going to reflect on three solutions that are already in practice, and offer a constructive critique of each. Third, I will offer two examples from my own context in the United States in general and then in Chicago, my home, in particular. Finally, I will let my imagination roam to see if we can’t ‘think out of the box’ a bit in the light of the urgency of the issue, and so that God’s mission might be served.

A. Solutions That Are Not Possible.

1. Inviting Back Resigned Priests and Lifting the Celibacy Requirement

Three solutions are obvious, but at least for the moment are not possible. The first, of course, is inviting those men—or at least some of them, the best—who have left the priesthood for one reason or another, to return to active ministry. This would depend on a second option, and that would be to make the requirement of priestly celibacy optional, admitting unmarried men who might want eventually to get married, or ordaining men who are already married and have proved themselves to be effective leaders in the church. I am not sure whether this would greatly ameliorate our urgent situation, since many resigned priests would probably not come back, and, if memory serves me right, surveys indicate that young men—at least in the United States—are not interested in the *vocation* of priesthood, whether celibacy be required or not.

In any case, the lifting of the celibacy requirement is clearly something that *could* be done, since it has been admitted in several magisterial documents that it is indeed a requirement of the church, and not a divine mandate. In fact, there are a good number of married priests in the church already, whether in Eastern rites or ministers from another church (e.g. the Anglican communion) who have joined the church and requested ordination. Still, at the moment a general directive making celibacy optional is not something that will be given in the foreseeable future—although I would personally urge bishops to keep on pushing the issue, as some are doing.

2. Admitting Women to Ordination

A third option, naturally, is the admission of women to ordained ministry, perhaps with the celibacy requirement intact, perhaps not. While the door to discussion of this matter is open ever so slightly—the ruling against it has not been declared formally infallible and some of the wording of the documents could be in-

terpreted as ‘we would if we could see clear to do it’—but as we know the firm teaching of the church is that the church does not find itself free to admit women to ordination.

At least in countries like ours, however, this is an issue which has so far refused to die, and so issues of doctrinal reception may be at stake. Scholars continue to reflect and research on the issue, and it is certainly within the realm of possibility that greater evidence may surface in favor of women’s ordination. My own conviction is that the answer lies in a clearer understanding of the nature of tradition, the argument which founds the prohibition: does change necessarily mean infidelity? Do changes in circumstances and culture call for change in doctrinal understandings and ecclesial practice?

In any case, it is very clear what the teaching of the church is on the matter, and I personally have very grave reservations about the women in the United States and other places who have defied the church and gone ahead to be ordained.

As I have said, implementing these solutions are not possible. Nor is it completely proven that any of them will actually solve the problem that we are encountering. Nevertheless, one wonders whether at least the first two might not be tried in the light of the urgency of the crisis and the priority of the mission of the church. One might ask what is more important, that Christians are served and called to ministry, or that the integrity of the priesthood as we have known it for at least a millennium should remain intact. The answer is not simple, but it poses a question well worth pondering. The legitimacy of the question, in any case, is warranted by reversing things: the mission has a church, the mission has ministers.

B. Possible But Ambiguous Solutions

1. Priests from Other Countries

At least three other solutions have been proposed, but have had mixed results. The first, already in place, I understand, in most dioceses in Australia and New Zealand (and in many dio-

ceses of my country) is the importation of priests from countries where, for the moment, there is an abundance of priestly vocations and, if not a surplus of priests, at least a good number. I say that has had mixed results because, on the one hand, parishes are supplied with priests and the Christian people in them have ready access to the sacraments. The fact that people in our parishes have the opportunity to be ministered to by a priest not of their own culture can also be a strong witness to the catholicity of the church, and can make the church more aware of its mission to all parts of the world. This second factor is certainly one of the motives, I believe, that my own congregation (Divine Word Missionaries) has invited missionaries from all parts of the world to minister here in Australia.

On the other hand, there are several negative factors that have been experienced. These priests often have not mastered English, or speak it with such a heavy accent that many people cannot understand them. (This is ironic, I often muse: what is happening to us today is what has happened for centuries in mission lands, where missionaries often had little or no grasp of local languages). Even more distressful, however, is that priests from other cultures do not readily adapt to Australian, New Zealand (or U.S.) culture, and bring attitudes of clericalism, clerical privilege, and even abuse of authority to the parishes in which they work. Priests from other countries often do not respect the lay ministries which have developed in many parishes over the last several decades.

When the lens of mission is focused on this practice, it seems to me that some serious questions emerge, as do some serious recommendations if the practice of inviting priests from other countries is to be continued.

The serious questions revolve around whether the practice actually is driven by *mission*—are such imported priests challenged by their bishops and religious superiors to work to call the church to ministry within the church and the world, or are they invited into our countries so that the church can continue to function

as normally as possible in terms of its sacramental life? If this is so, what is the theology of the priesthood behind such an attitude? Is it formed by the vision of Vatican II, Pope John Paul II's *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, and contemporary thinking on the priesthood? Or is the tridentine understanding of priesthood as essentially powers to offer sacrifice and forgive sins the one that is operative? From another—still missiological—perspective, one can ask the question whether our affluent countries should continue to deprive countries like the Philippines, Nigeria, and India of their own indigenous clergy. Is this not another form of exploitation of natural resources, and a continuation of colonialism?

The serious recommendations also revolve around the reversal of perspective that this paper offers. If the mission has a church, and the mission has ministry, how might these priests from other cultures be challenged and formed to be truly missionary themselves and call forth the missionary ministry of the people they serve? It seems that competence in English would be an essential condition for their work, as well as education in the culture/cultures in which they minister. Generally speaking, clericalism and clerical privilege is on the wane in our countries. Priests from other cultures need to be educated out of such attitudes. Bishops and major superiors need to exercise *episkope* or oversight over these men, to ensure that they continue to grow in their acculturation to the countries and cultures they work in, that they become an integral part of the presbyterate of their new dioceses, and that they continue in improving their language skills. In this way the great advantage of these priests' witness to the church's catholicity and missionary nature will only be enhanced.

2. Promoting the Permanent Diaconate

A second solution that is currently being practiced—or in serious discussion for implementation in Australia and New Zealand—is the greater development of the office of deacon. In many ways this is a laudable solution. The potential of the diaconate has often been neglected

since its restoration at Vatican II, and current literature, both of the Magisterium and in theology, has begun to become quite extensive.⁷

As Vatican II pointed out in its Decree on Missionary Activity, the work of catechists and other men in the church who are actually already *doing* the work of deacons might 'carry out their ministry more effectively because of the sacramental grace of the diaconate' (AG 16). Deacons are able to preside at Baptisms, witness marriages and preach at the Eucharist. In this way they can offer assistance to priests who might have to lead several parish communities, and travel long distances to preside at Eucharists on Sundays and throughout the week. Deacons, many with long experience in business and administration and with theological training and formation, could also administer parishes, as is happening more and more in the U.S.

But there are some disadvantages in the practice as well. First, as New Zealand theologian Susan Smith has written, one cannot help suspecting that a move toward more deacons is a move to exclude women from a more active role in the church's ministry.⁸ Second, in actual practice what has been experienced is that deacons often see themselves as 'little priests,' and are not a little influenced by clericalism. In addition, deacons have not had the more extensive training that priesthood candidates receive, and enter the ordained ministry with a sometimes naïve understanding of both Scripture and theology. As a result, their preaching is sometimes quite shallow (as is the preaching, of course, of priests who do not continue to grow in theology and scriptural expertise).

None of these disadvantages should rule out the wider development of the deacon in today's church, but the development must be done with these cautions in mind. Deacons who are deeply engaged in the church's social apostolate and can bring that consciousness to the people they serve, calling forth that kind of ministry, could be a great advantage to the mission that has a church. It could be a ministry that is called forth by mission.

3. Inviting Religious Priests to Staff Parishes

A third solution is to invite more religious priests to take over parishes that are not able to be staffed by diocesan priests. This is actually a very traditional solution. It has been in practice for many years—centuries even. Religious priests have not always been called upon to work in regular, diocesan parishes, of course. The First Lateran Council, for example, in 1123 forbade monks to ‘celebrate Eucharist in public anywhere,’ and St. Charles Borromeo in Milan, once forbade religious priests to preach in his diocese of Milan.⁹ But practically every diocese has parishes staffed by Franciscans, Passionists, SVDs, Carmelites, Columbans, MSCs, *etc.*

The idea today is to ask these religious congregations to expand their commitment to parish work. For the most part, religious congregations have responded generously, and in many ways are quite happy to establish themselves in a particular diocese. The possibilities for vocations become greater, they can become known by more people and that gives new possibilities for fund raising, and many parishes taken over by religious are quite appropriate to the charisms of many congregations. In the United States, for example, our SVD Chicago Province has expanded to take on multicultural parishes in Memphis, TN and Wheeling, IL, and we have become involved in Latino and Vietnamese parishes in various parts of the country. Here in Australia, I understand, our parishes are highly multicultural and for the most part in poorer neighborhoods. These are worthy apostolates for a missionary congregation like our own. We are happy; bishops are happy.

But there is, of course, a shadow side. Religious working in parishes can certainly develop parish communities according to their particular charisms, they can model community for the people of the parish by their intense community living together, and they can form the parish into a prophetic community, on the vanguard of social justice or ecology. However, the danger is also present that the priests of particular communities can simply run their parishes like any other diocesan parish and become very

much like diocesan priests. Whether a parish is run by SVDs or Benedictines or diocesan priests doesn’t really matter, and the people in the parish might hardly know the difference. This is a real loss of the communal, prophetic and particular character that religious priests can bring to the church. At the same time, when religious priests are recruited to take over a parish it pulls them out of some of the other special work that their communities are engaged in: centers for interreligious dialogue, for example, or retreat ministry, or centers for theological reflection and inculturation. Several years ago, the SVDs went to New Zealand to engage in working with at-risk Pacific Islander youth. Soon the bishop invited us to take a parish. We moved to the Archdiocese of Wellington eventually taking a small parish with the intention of continuing the important, cutting edge, very missionary work with youth. But soon the Archbishop invited us to take an even bigger parish and parish duties soon put the youth ministry on the back burner. We are still doing good work—excellent work—and work much appreciated by the Archbishop. But perhaps our work is more that of maintenance of a parish than the more boundary-breaking work that we as missionaries should be doing.

I’m only signalling a danger here, but it is a real one. If religious congregations are going to take over more and more parishes, perhaps they need intentionally to emphasize the particular charism of their congregation in ordering the parish community. The mission has ministry; a particular charism of a religious community has a ministry.

C. Greater Development of Lay Ministry

There is no doubt that one of the solutions to the shortage of priests in our countries is the commitment to a greater participation in the ministry of the church by religious women and men, and women and men who are lay persons. Of course, these are all technically considered lay persons. This is certainly a practice that is current here in Australia, and it is one that is flourishing in the United States. The American

journalist and religious writer Paul Wilkes, for example, writes glowingly of religious and lay women who administer parishes in various parts of the United States,¹⁰ and several parishes I know in the Chicago area are alive with lay ministry and truly missionary parishes. But let me give two particular examples here.

1. Lay Ecclesial Ministry

The first example is the development of what has come to be called ‘lay ecclesial ministry’ (LEM). The U.S. Bishops’ document that formally introduced this kind of ministry to the U.S. Church, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*,¹¹ was the product of years of meetings and several drafts and was finally issued in 2005. While it insists on a difference in essence between ordained and lay ministry—ordained ministry is not simply a more perfect or more intense form of lay ministry—it does in a way create a new category of ministry in the church: one that is still thoroughly *lay*, and yet one that participates in some way in the pastoral office of ordering the church and calling it to ministry. The bishops did not create this kind of ministry. They are only describing a phenomenon that has emerged in the U.S. Church (and no doubt others) in the last several decades, particularly in the light of the Second Vatican Council.

The document begins by recalling the fact that all Christians are called to ministry, and many serve in specific ministerial positions within the church, most often on a volunteer basis. There has emerged a smaller group of lay ministers, however, that is distinguished by being *authorized* by a local bishop for *leadership* in a particular community in a way that involves a *closer collaboration* with ordained ministers that requires more extensive *preparation* and *formation*.¹² Although the bishops hesitated to speak of lay ecclesial ministry as a *vocation*, and therefore something that is more permanent in the church, many LEMs understand themselves as truly called in a permanent way to real leadership in the church. The bishops’ document does not lay down a law or a

policy, and it does not limit LEM to particular positions in the church. It does give several examples: LEMs could be ministers who are pastoral associates, directors of religious education, directors of liturgy, directors of youth ministry, and even ‘participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish,’ although this latter ministry exists, the document says, only because of the shortage of priests.¹³

It is this last point that is relevant for what we are reflecting on here. lay people, sanctioned by canon law (517.2) can actually function as genuine pastoral leaders of Christian communities. This means that they can, in the name of the bishop and the priest that is assigned the official title of ‘pastor,’ actually call forth ministries in the Christian community, that they can make sure that the mission does indeed have a ministry.

The U.S. Bishops are quite cautious about this new role that they are describing, and they clearly do not want people to get the impression that these lay people are some kind of ‘unordained priests,’ or ‘priests in everything but name.’ But the great advantage of this move, through the lens of mission, is that people other than ordained men can do something that is at the heart of what the ordained do: call people forth to ministry. No, they cannot preside at Eucharist (although they may be able to preside at Baptisms and perhaps even marriages). But by the bishops calling forth *this* ministry, the mission is able to have ministry. This may be dependent on the present crisis of the shortage of priests, but one wonders how things will develop as LEMs continue to work closely with clergy and continue to reflect on their particular identity. This may be a practice to watch. It may at least be a partial solution to the shortage of priests.

2. A Lay-Run Community

A second example of a possible solution is one that I myself am involved in. In Chicago, where I live, I have served in the last seven years as a regular Mass presider for the St. Giles Family Mass Community in the west Chicago sub-

urb of Oak Park. The community traces its origin to the early 1970s, when several families in St. Giles parish asked if the parish could provide a special Mass on Sundays that was more participative and geared to families with children. The pastor at the time agreed to the idea, but he agreed only on the condition that the group find their own priest to preside regularly. This they did, and from small beginnings the community grew both in size and independence. Today the community numbers about three or four hundred, and in the community are second and even third generation women, men and children from the original group. While the Archbishop of Chicago has recently curtailed the community's independence somewhat, it is totally organized by the lay members of the community, although now with much more dependence on the pastor of the parish.

My involvement, together with several other priests, was originally only to preside once or twice a month at Mass, but in many ways I have become integral to the community. I am not the pastoral leader of the community, but I do participate in that leadership—of course, always under the direction of the pastor (with whom I have a very good relationship). Besides the weekly liturgy, the community has organized its own catechetical program, a men's group, a women's group, a group that works on liturgical matters, and several groups that do outreach both in Oak Park and as far away as Appalachia and even Nicaragua, Haiti and South Africa.

This is a community of Christians who are able to call forth a variety of ministries that serve the mission. I wonder how many other communities like this there may be or could be if Christians were given the freedom by their pastors and bishops to do so. It would demand close oversight, of course, but, except for the Eucharist and other liturgical services, it could get along quite well without the leadership of an ordained person.

Such communities, probably, would be the exception. In fact, the St. Giles Community is made up of quite highly educated women and men, many of whom even have theology de-

grees (going for study, though, has often been a *consequence* of their involvement in ministry, rather than a strict preparation for it). Might the bishops discern the possibility, however, of such communities? Might the leaders of such communities share their wisdom with the wider church and help other communities to be formed? True, the role of the ordained person in the community is greatly reduced, but the community would still come under the *episcopate* of the pastor and bishop. The point is, though, that in such a community like St. Giles the mission is being served by ministry. If this is the case, being church is being done well.

D. Solutions from a 'Missiological Imagination'

In this final section I want just to throw out two ideas out of what I might call my 'missiological imagination.' If the mission really has a church, and not *vice versa*, and if the mission has ministry, and not *vice versa*, would it be possible to 'think outside the box' from this perspective. I am not necessarily advocating these ideas, but I'm hoping that they might provoke you to think imaginatively within your own Australian context.

1. Non-Ordained Presiders?

Does, for example, the presidency of the Eucharist and other liturgical functions need to be tied exclusively to ordination? Raymond Brown pointed out in his classic work, *Priest and Bishop*, that the New Testament never tells us who presided at Eucharist.¹⁴ Somebody must have, of course, but since a clear understanding of bishop, priest and deacon only emerged clearly at the beginning of the second century, and since priesthood was only attributed to bishops at the beginning of the third century, one might speculate that a number of people might have presided. My colleague Carolyn Osiek suggests that since early Eucharists were held in house church settings, it would have been natural for the host or hostess to preside over the meal and to have recited the eucharistic blessing.

Given these conclusions by scholars, and given the urgency for Eucharist to be celebrated by and within the Christian community, might it not be possible to designate proven community leaders as presiders at Eucharist, or women and men who might celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation (another practice rooted in lay leadership)? We might call these ministers 'extraordinary presiders at the Eucharist,' like we speak of 'extraordinary ministers of communion.' When a priest regularly visits the community, he would preside at Eucharist in the bishop's name, or occasionally the bishop would visit and preside as the pastoral leader of the diocese.

These eucharistic communities would not necessarily be parishes. There would still be a ministerial priest who would lead the parish. But his ministry would be that of the one who orders all the communities, helps discern who would be worthy presiders, who might be insightful preachers, who would fulfill other ministries that would engage the world in mission.

I admit such an idea is far-fetched, but I think it is not, theologically, outside the realm of possibility. I hope it is not heretical, since I'm just proposing it out of my imagination. We would have to do much more serious study as to the historical precedence of the practice of non-ordained presidency, and we would have to think differently about the organization of parishes. They might look more like small dioceses—like North African dioceses at the time of Augustine. But if the mission has ministry, this might be something seriously to think about.

2. *Non-Eucharistic Catholicism?*

My second idea is perhaps even more radical. In many ways so far we have been presupposing that Eucharist is the center of the church's life, and one of the main reasons we need ordained ministers is to ensure the regular celebration of the Eucharist in our Christian communities. What if we would conceive of a non-eucharistic centered Catholicism? The absolute need for ordained ministers would be lessened dramatically in that case, and lay

ecclesial ministers or lay ministers could work with bishops, priests and deacons in calling for the ministry of the church for mission.

My colleague Gary Riebe-Estrella has suggested in several of his writings that a eucharistic-centered Catholicism is only *one legitimate form* of Catholicism.¹⁵ He points out that, because of the lack of priests in Latin America, the church there has been effectively non-eucharistic for the last five hundred years. And yet, Catholicism has thrived, and the faith of Latin Americans is deep. It is not, however, a eucharistic faith. It is a faith based more on lay-led devotions and celebrations and prayers in the home, often presided over by the *abuela* (grandmother) of a family. He proposes that this situation evidences another kind of Christianity that has developed in Europe and North America, an authentic *Latin American Catholicism*. One might also refer to the church in Japan, after the violent persecutions of the seventeenth century. For some three hundred years a small group of Catholics in Nagasaki secretly kept the faith, especially devotion to Mary, until Catholic missionaries were able to return in the nineteenth century. For well over a quarter of century, the church in China was not able to have regular eucharistic celebrations due to the persecution of the church there. And yet, it seems, the number of Christians, including Catholics, continued to grow, and the faith of the people thrived.

Recognizing that, due to the shortage of priests we are close to becoming a non-Eucharistic church, does not at all mean that Eucharist could never be celebrated. Eucharist would be celebrated, however, less frequently than once a week as a general rule. In its place there might be Bible Services, Communion Services, or Celebrations of the Liturgy of the Hours. But all of these could be done by lay women and men, or by religious women and non-ordained religious men. The prayer of the church would still be celebrated, but it would not be eucharistic. Priests would not have to frantically travel to two or three parishes on a Sunday, and the need for a large number of priests would be

greatly lessened. Priests could concentrate more on calling forth the ministry of the community for mission in the world, giving more time to homily preparation, and personal prayer and study. Lay men and women would enjoy an even closer partnership with the priest and his ministry of ordering.

Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to think theologically and missiologically about a pressing problem in our church today—my church in the United States, and your church in Australia. I hope you will take what I have said about the mission having a church and the mission having a ministry very seriously. I think this is a crucial reversal of how we have usually

thought about these ideas and doctrines. But I hope you will take what I have offered as solutions—to paraphrase Reinhold Niebuhr’s famous comment about symbols—seriously but not literally. In many ways theology is play, and what I’ve done is to try to play with some ideas in the light of the important truths about mission and ministry. If what I have presented is something that is provocative, something that helps you think a bit more differently about church and ministry my reflections have achieved their purpose. These are hard questions, and there are no easy answers. But now it is time for you to reflect on these ideas yourselves—from a theological and missiological perspective, but also from your own context as Australians.

NOTES

¹Leonardo Boff, ‘Trinity,’ in Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY Orbis Books, 1993). Whitehead’s remark is found in the final chapter of his *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Free Press, 1978). The original edition was published in 1929.

²Emil Brunner, *The Word in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1931), 11.

³Thomas F. O’Meara, *Theology of Ministry* (New York, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).

⁴*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1537-1538*, see http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4S.HTM.

⁵Dennis C. Smolarski, *Sacred Mysteries: Sacramental Principles and Liturgical Practice* (New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 134.

⁶Stephen Bevans, ‘The Service of Ordering: Reflections on the Identity of the Priest.’ *Emmanuel*, 101/7 (September, 1995): 397-406.

⁷Congregation for Christian Education and Congregation for the Clergy, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons and Directory of the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/

[ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19980331_directorium-diaconi_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc_doc_19980331_directorium-diaconi_en.html). For a good survey of the literature on the diaconate and a bibliography, see James Keating, ed., *The Deacon Reader* (New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006).

⁸Susan Smith, ‘The Permanent Diaconate,’ *Tui Moto* (May, 2008): 10-11.

⁹John W. O’Malley in ‘One Priesthood: Two Traditions,’ in Paul K. Hennessy, ed., *A Concert of Charisms: Ordained Ministry in Religious Life* (New York / Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 10-11.

¹⁰Paul Wilkes, *Excellent Catholic Parishes: The Guide to the Best Places and Practices* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).

¹¹U. S. Bishops, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, <http://www.usccb.org/laity/laymin/co-workers.pdf>.

¹²*Ibid.*, 5.

¹³*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970).

¹⁵See Gary Riebe-Estrella, Editorial in *Theology Today* (1995).