

The Holy Spirit's Call:  
The Vocation to Lay Ecclesial Ministry

Edward P. Hahnenberg

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The U.S. Bishops' Conference published *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* almost two years ago. Since then, the document has been well received by lay ministers, ministry associations, and dioceses around the country. But if *Co-Workers* has been received well, how well has it been *implemented*? How is it being put into practice? How will it be incorporated into the ministerial life of the church? That implementation is the concern of this symposium. That is why we have gathered together this week. We are here to reflect on the reality of lay ecclesial ministry, to explore options, and to suggest concrete recommendations that we can commit to carry out—all in order to improve and sustain excellence in lay ecclesial ministry for the sake of serving the reign of God. In other words, our question is: How will we take *Co-Workers* and step forward into the future?

I would like to address this question through three sets of comments, which serve as the outline of my presentation. The comments have to do with: (1) history, (2) theology, and (3) practice.

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

We begin with a caution: There is always the temptation, for us as human beings, to overstate the importance of our own time. (It is a temptation dwarfed only by the temptation among academics to overstate the importance of our own particular area of research.)

There just seems to be something about what is happening right now, about what I am doing, that seems so very significant—not because of what is happening or what is being done—but because it's happening to *me*, it's being done by *me*. I guess that is human nature—a kind of self-centeredness that follows from our fallen condition. It is hard to resist the pull of self-importance. It is hard to avoid the danger of over-estimating our own time and our own projects.

And yet, when we think about our own project here this week, when we think about our own time in the ministerial life-story of the church, it is hard to escape the conclusion that we are living in one of the most significant periods of ministerial transformation in the history of the church.

The emergence of lay ecclesial ministry over the past forty years stands out as one of the top three or four most important ministerial shifts of the past two-thousand years. It is on a historical par with—and in fact may even eclipse—the changes to the church brought about by

the rise of communal forms of monasticism in the 5th century, the birth of mendicant orders in the 13th century, or the explosion of women's religious communities in the 19th century.

The examples are not arbitrary. The breakthrough of new forms and new families of religious life provide, in my mind, the best historical parallels to the rise of lay ecclesial ministry. For each of these new movements offered a way of living out the gospel and serving the church's mission that was at the same time both traditional and radically new.

The Jesuit historian John O'Malley has argued brilliantly that how you see the history of religious orders in the church depends greatly on your interpretive lens.<sup>1</sup> If you look at this history through the lens of the *evangelical counsels*—the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience that structure a particular way of life—what comes through is the continuity across time and across different religious communities. But if you look at the same history through the lens of *ministry*—the service these communities actually provided—what comes through is the diversity, the novelty and originality. The first lens prompts a question: *What change?* I do not see it. The second lens prompts an exclamation: *What change!* I can't believe it!

O'Malley takes to task David Knowles' classic history of religious life, titled *From Pachomius to Ignatius*.<sup>2</sup> If you start with Pachomius, that ancient forefather of Western monasticism, you tend to see all new religious orders as slight variations on the monastic ideal. You set yourself up to tell a story of sameness. But what if, O'Malley asks, the title were not *From Pachomius to Ignatius*, but *From Paul to Ignatius*? Then the story is not one of sameness, but of constant innovation in ministry.

Who could imagine, prior to Francis or Dominic, mobile monks free from the monasteries and exempt from the bishop's supervision, living in the cities and begging for a living—preaching the gospel wherever folks were at? Not even the ever-adaptable Ignatius could anticipate the plethora of ministries his companions would invent: books and sacred lectures, schools as a form of ministry, spiritual direction, retreats, adult religious education, preaching to prostitutes, sitting with the sick, singing with orphans, and the many, many missions—from village parishes to the imperial court of China.

In the history of religious orders, each major wave brought a richness of ministry. But each new wave also brought a challenge to the current ministerial order, a challenge to the way things had “always” been done. Often these new forms did not fit. How could you have religious community without choir? Don’t all priests in a diocese have to answer directly to the bishop? What do you mean nuns outside the convent, helping sick soldiers or teaching algebra? It’s madness!

It is good for us—particularly those of us so often discouraged by this church that we love—to remember that the institution's initial response to such ministerial innovation is almost always: “No! Don’t do that!” (It is only later, after the ministry takes off and becomes successful that the magisterium says: “See, I told you it was a good idea.”)

The rise of lay ecclesial ministry brings something new. Simply put: Ministry has not been done in this way, on this scale, before. *Co-Workers* affirms that lay ecclesial ministry is in

continuity with the church's theological tradition and doctrinal history. And there is much truth in this claim. But lay ecclesial ministry also brings a challenge to the way things have "always" been done, a challenge to the ministerial order of the church just as radical as that brought by the mendicant friars or the active sisters.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that one of the great things about lay ecclesial ministers is that, in important ways, they just don't fit. It has been hard to find categories to describe what they are doing. But that is not their fault. The fact that lay ecclesial ministers do not fit does not make them misfits. It does not mean that there is something wrong with lay ecclesial ministry. It may very well be that there is something wrong with the categories into which we are trying to fit them. Maybe it's not the peg that is the problem. Maybe it's the hole.

History, then, suggests a kind of caution. Let's not rush to force lay ecclesial ministry into some imagined normative shape of ministry. Let's give ourselves as a church enough time to reflect on the ways this new reality is inviting us to rethink the very categories we use.

I offer these historical reflections to make two further points. First, I want to emphasize the importance of this national symposium on lay ecclesial ministry. Some day down the line—100 years, 200 years, 500 years from now—historians and theologians will be studying the rise of what we are now calling lay ecclesial ministry. They will be looking over *Co-Workers*, the studies of Phil Murnion and David Delambo, maybe even the proposals of this symposium. What will they see? What will be the legacy that we leave them?

That is the scope of what we are about these few days together, the challenge that we face: to think really big, to think long-term, to think, as we like to say, outside the box, as we try to serve the future of the church's mission

But we are called to do this (and this is the difficult part) through realistic steps and concrete recommendations that are workable. We face a challenge that is actually much more difficult than just thinking big. We have to articulate our dreams within the parameters of our current reality and our present ecclesial situation. Working, as most of us do, within the context of the institutional church, we have to think outside the box . . . inside the box.

That is much harder to do. It will take a lot of creativity to imagine a future for lay ecclesial ministry that is, in the words of *Co-Workers*, both "faithful to the Church's theological and doctrinal tradition" and responsive to "contemporary pastoral needs and situations."<sup>3</sup>

Second, each of the ministerial transformations brought about by new religious orders can be traced back to a charismatic individual, someone who responded to the Spirit's call in a unique way at the right time, and so shaped the face of the church—whether that be a Benedict, a Francis, or an Elizabeth Seton. The cloud of witnesses is immense. But in the case of lay ecclesial ministry, there is no single charismatic individual, no founder or foundress. Instead, it seems the Spirit is spread out.

The Spirit is spread out. This brings us to our second set of reflections, the theological.

## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

I believe the single most important line of *Co-Workers* is buried in the middle of the third paragraph on page 14: “Lay ecclesial ministry has emerged and taken shape in our country through the working of the Holy Spirit.” Whether or not the bishops realized it, here they committed themselves to an important theological claim: This thing is of God.

Later in the text, the bishops state: “Continually, the Spirit calls forth new ministries and new ministers to serve evolving needs, as the history of the Church shows.”<sup>4</sup>

The Spirit calls. It is an unusual expression. We are familiar with the language of God calling—calling the people Israel and individual prophets. We are familiar with the language of Christ calling—calling sinners to conversion and disciples to follow him. But the Spirit calling?

Usually we think of the Spirit as a gift, a grace descending on us, a presence in us. The Spirit calling? It is unusual. In fact, talking about “the Spirit’s call” can even be theologically problematic if we lose sight of the broader trinitarian context for the Spirit’s work.

Surely the bishops did not intend this problem. Surely their theological consultants were not confused. The statement must presuppose the trinitarian context that is explicitly stated elsewhere in the document. “The Spirit’s call” here is simply shorthand for the richer trinitarian phrase, “the call of God through Christ in the Spirit.”

Despite the potential for misunderstanding, speaking of the Spirit’s call does have its advantages. The phrase evokes not just a gift, but an invitation, even a challenge. The phrase also encourages us to think about the relationship between Spirit and call, between our pneumatology and our theology of vocation. I would like to reflect on this relationship, and ask: How might our theology of the Spirit illuminate our theology of call? And how might the two together illuminate this new reality of lay ecclesial ministry?

A good place to begin is with the work of the French Dominican Yves Congar. Congar—whose progressive writings on ecumenism, the laity, and church reform got him silenced and literally exiled in the years before Vatican II—was rehabilitated by Pope John XXIII’s council. He became a theological advisor and a major force at Vatican II, helping to shape its vision and its documents on revelation, the church, the laity, priesthood, religious life, ecumenism, and missions.

Congar continued to write after the council. And later in life, he grew increasingly interested in the theology of the Holy Spirit, or pneumatology. One of his last major projects was a three-volume work titled *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*.<sup>5</sup> In this work, Congar pointed out that the Catholic theology of the Holy Spirit was in sorry shape. For centuries, Congar argued, Catholics had all-but ignored the role of the Spirit in the church. And when the Spirit did come up, it came up in one of two places.

On the one hand, the Spirit was treated in spiritual writings. These mentioned the Holy Spirit (or its spooky pseudonym, the Holy Ghost) in the context of the divine indwelling in the human soul, and then set out to tabulate the various graces or fruits of the Spirit that this presence brought. Here the Spirit moved in a private, quiet, and hidden way, locked up in the depths of an individual soul—with little reference to others.

On the other hand, the Spirit was treated in ecclesiology—but not as a life force permeating and inspiring the community. Instead, theologians brought in the Spirit only at the end to guarantee the authority of the magisterium. When the question was asked, “How do we know the hierarchy teaches the truth?” theologians answered, “The inspiration of the Holy Spirit guarantees it.”<sup>6</sup>

So, in the middle of the 20th century, the Holy Spirit was caught between these two extremes. The Spirit was either a secret serum coating the soul or a divine notary rubber-stamping papal decrees. It was trapped in the individual and trapped in the institution.

Elizabeth Groppe—a colleague at Xavier University who is an expert on Congar—points out that Congar’s real contribution to the field of pneumatology lay in his transcending this divide between the individual and the institution, in developing what he called a “pneumatological anthropology” and a “pneumatological ecclesiology” and in arguing that the two are inseparable.<sup>7</sup>

Why is this split between individual and institution a problem? Congar saw that it can easily pit the charismatic individual against the inspired institution. He even admitted that his earlier work leaned in that direction. In those early writings, Congar spoke of Christ, who founded the church in choosing the Twelve Apostles, as the principle of structure and order in the church (institution). The Spirit, who still comes to believers, is the principle of life and newness (individual).

Later in his career, Congar downplayed that division between structure and life, that dichotomy between the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit. He argued that the Spirit does not simply confirm an institution already set up by Christ. Rather, from the very beginning, the Spirit co-institutes the church with Christ. Thus charisms are not the odd endowments of spiritual superheroes and saints—powers that spice things up, but that are always competing with Christ’s appointed ministers. Instead charisms are widespread and ordinary, permeating the community and lifting up every ministry in the church.

Congar overcame the split between individual and institution by emphasizing that human beings—created in the image and likeness of a triune God—are fundamentally relational beings. Congar finds the middle ground between individual and institution in community, in the concept of communion. Congar’s thought here is rich and extensive. I point to it simply in order to draw an analogy. It is not a perfect analogy, but it invites some reflection.

I think we face a similar split between individual and institution in our theology of vocation. It seems God’s call is trapped in the individual and trapped in the institution.

If for Congar, the Spirit had been reduced to a quiet indwelling in the human soul, isn't it also true that vocation is too-often reduced to an inner voice, whispered by God directly to an individual in the depths of her or his soul?

And, at the other extreme, just as Congar saw the Spirit trapped in the institution, don't we still see vocation caught up in a hierarchy of static states of life, with the task of authenticating a ministerial vocation placed almost exclusively in the hands of the ordained?

I do not intend to question the profoundly personal dimension of God's call. Nor do I deny the important role of church leadership in recognizing and ordering ministerial vocations. I am not challenging either individual or institution. But I am challenging their isolation and their separation.

The danger of this separation is that it can easily pit the two against each other. On the one hand is the individual's sincere conviction that "I have a call." On the other hand is the bishop's unwavering insistence that "Nobody has been called until I call them." Such language imagines two calls and struggles to relate them. It masks the fact that the path into ministry involves not two separate calls, but at least two elements in one multifaceted process of calling.

An even more subtle danger is this: One could easily see *Co-Workers*—or even this symposium—as nothing more than a *response*, separate from the Spirit's call, the institution's way of responding to the individual. But doesn't that forget the fact that the church, the whole people of God, has been involved from the beginning in calling forth this ministry. And doesn't it overlook the way the Spirit is still at work in what we are doing here now.

In the 19th and early 20th century, there were extensive discussions and intense disputes among theologians about the nature of vocation. Is vocation an interior illumination, an antecedent or an efficacious grace? What is the proper role of ecclesiastical authority? What are the moral obligations of following a vocation? What are the criteria for assessing a vocation? But with the Second Vatican Council, and its affirmation of the universal call to holiness, those debates dropped off. We seemed content to say that "Everyone has a vocation!" and leave it at that. Meanwhile, vocations work passed from the theologians to the psychologists, and the older theological assumptions were left largely undisturbed.

We are still waiting for a truly post-conciliar theology of vocation. It is no surprise that the bishops end *Co-Workers* with a call for "a more thorough study of our theology of vocation."<sup>8</sup> What the reality of lay ecclesial ministry has done is wake us up to the fact that, for almost fifty years now, our view of vocation has been caught in a coma—kept on life support, but not fully alive.

To get beyond our present over-individualization and over-institutionalization of vocation, we need to recover that missing middle, the community. We need an adequate ecclesiology of call, a vocational ecclesiology. We need to flesh out that evocative description of Pope John Paul II, who called the church a *mysterium vocationis*, a "mystery of vocation."<sup>9</sup> That is what I see as one of the important "next steps" in our efforts to respond to lay ecclesial ministry, a step already indicated by the bishops themselves.

I have indicated elsewhere the direction I think such an ecclesial theology of vocation might lead.<sup>10</sup> It moves toward a vision in which the whole church community is not only called by God, but also involved in the calling.

The history of the rise of lay ecclesial ministry illustrates a complex process of call, one in which Christ's Spirit has been active in various places within the community as a whole. This ecclesial call can be heard in the words of the Second Vatican Council affirming the baptismal dignity of the people of God; it can be heard in the lives of individuals responding to needs and seeking out ways to participate; it can be heard in colleges and schools developing programs for lay ministry formation; it can be heard in pastors and other leaders inviting and encouraging new roles on the parish staff; it can be heard in parishioners and whole communities welcoming lay ecclesial ministers into their midst; it can be heard in the affirming words of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard*, and it can be heard in the conversations and concrete proposals of this symposium. The Spirit is spread out, calling lay ecclesial ministers through the voices of many members.

And lest we separate out too-neatly pathways from formation from authorization from workplace, let us keep in mind that these are all parts of a whole, moments in one continuous movement in which we are not just responding to a call but also involved in the calling. The Spirit permeates the whole process—and each element is a moment in which, through us as a church, the Spirit of Christ calls forth co-workers to serve the reign of God.

## PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

The temptation is to end with that tidy conclusion. But I feel compelled to mess it up a bit, to point out some of the difficulties ahead. Joining with Christ's Spirit in calling forth co-workers will mean facing at least three broad challenges. The list is not meant to be comprehensive, only to indicate a few areas of pastoral concern.

*1. Ministry for Mission.* The first challenge is to always keep before us the church's mission. This challenge is not new. In 1977, forty-seven prominent midwestern Catholics issued a statement known as the Chicago Declaration. They argued that the post-conciliar focus on lay ministry was distracting the church from the more fundamental responsibility of the laity to work toward transforming the secular world.<sup>11</sup>

In the past, I tended to dismiss the concerns of the Chicago Declaration, conscious of the fact that the "secular character" of the laity is all-too-often pulled out in order to curtail or constrain the laity's place in church ministries. While I still reject the Declaration's underlying assumption that we are dealing with a zero-sum game here, more and more I see the importance of explicitly affirming the church's mission in the world.

Church ministry necessarily implies church mission, baptismal discipleship, and the work of building the reign of God in the world. It is a given. But have we taken it for granted? Recently, Kathleen Cahalan has drawn our attention back to discipleship as the fundamental context and goal for all ministry.<sup>12</sup> It is an important reminder of those key categories that we all

assume, but maybe need to articulate more clearly and reflect on more deeply. After all—despite my own particular area of expertise—the theology of ministry is not the most important thing. Ministry itself is not the most important thing. It takes its value from what it serves. Ministry exists in order to foster the baptismal discipleship of all believers, so that together we can transform the world in the light of Christ. Ministry serves mission.

*2. Ministering Together.* The second challenge is to do this together. Everybody talks about collaboration, but few of us actually know how to do it well. What can we do concretely to foster greater collaboration between lay ecclesial ministers and others, especially ordained ministers? How can we help clergy and laity work together?

The question is so deceptively simple. It masks a mess of complicated issues that touch on institutional structures, psychology, patterns of socialization and socializing, the exercise of authority, theological vision, and so on.

The fact is—that even though our theology rejects it and pastoral experience does not bear it out—there are still many who see raising lay ecclesial ministry as lowering the ordained. That is how it *feels*. Again, we run into the human condition, that self-centeredness that follows from our fallen condition. Attention to *anybody*—even my closest confidant or co-worker—takes attention away from *me*. Or, as Gore Vidal put it so sadly: “Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies.”

Here we do not need a theologian, we need a therapist. We need psychologists, those schooled in group dynamics and organizational change, pastoral practitioners, and others to help us negotiate the historic ministerial shift through which we are passing. Together we can—we must—discover a spirituality and a practice of collaboration.

This effort toward greater collaboration demands that we face head-on an issue we try so hard to avoid: power. In June, Daniel Finn delivered his presidential address to the Catholic Theological Society of America.<sup>13</sup> The talk got a lot of press because, near the end of it, Finn suggested that the CTSA should not issue so many statements critical of the magisterium. But the address was hardly a call to be more compliant or complacent. It was instead a strong challenge to theologians to attend more carefully to the reality of power. Finn’s larger thesis argued that power is often invisible—especially to those who have it. Parents are often more conscious of their love for their children than their power over them. So too, we as church leaders—ordained and lay—are often more aware of our care and concern for those in our charge than we are aware of our power over them. Power in itself is neither good nor bad. But it is there. And we only hurt our efforts toward collaboration when we pretend that it isn’t.

*3. The Next Generation.* Finally, the next generation. Friends, we’re not getting any younger. The median age for laypersons in parish ministry rose from 45 in 1990 to 52 in 2005.<sup>14</sup> Who will be the lay ecclesial ministers in 15 years, in 30 years?

The reality of lay ecclesial ministry was shaped and is still sustained by the Vatican II generation, who have brought into their ministry a real enthusiasm for the council and the renewal it sought. If I can use “we” language and include myself in the generation of my

mentors, our story is one of liberation, of windows opening, of breaking out from the closed Catholicism of the past.

Kids these days see things differently. Their story is not one of liberation, but one of lack. They do not need to break free; they need to find some identity in a world that is wide open. The Vatican II generation has a responsibility to mentor this post-Vatican II generation. We need to find a way to pass on our story—not so that our children can repeat it, but so that they can tell their own.

This openness to a new story will involve a profound letting go. And it takes us back to where we began, with history, with what Pope John XXIII called that “great teacher of life.” We will work hard this week. But for all our plans and proposals, we will not be able to see what shape lay ecclesial ministry will take in the future. For all its value in the life of the church today, lay ecclesial ministry is not the culmination of the Spirit’s activity in history and in the church. Like all major ministerial transformations, it will have an enduring effect. But it will change.

Early this morning, on the other side of campus, a group of men gathered together to pray in basically the same way they have prayed together for 1500 years. But looking at the façade of St. John’s Abbey Church and thinking about the many ministries of these monks today, the inflection is clear: *What change!*

Who knows what shape lay ecclesial ministry will take in 1500 years, or in 15 years? The shape of the Spirit in the lives of the baptized will find new forms as new needs arise. Change is not worrisome, it is wonderful. It is exciting to see God at work in the world.

Congar was fond of saying that it is more important to live in the Spirit than to theologize about it.<sup>15</sup> It is a good reminder. I have argued that the significance of this historical moment prompts us to rethink our theology of vocation, which brings with it certain challenges. But far more important than talking about the Spirit’s call is to live it out, and to join in it.

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<sup>1</sup> John W. O’Malley, “Priesthood, Ministry, and Religious Life: Some Historical and Historiographical Considerations,” *Theological Studies* 49 (1988) 223-57.

<sup>2</sup> David Knowles, *From Pachomius to Ignatius: A Study in the Constitutional History of the Religious Orders* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> USCCB, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 2005) 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Co-Workers*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Yves M.-J. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> A helpful summary can be found in Yves Congar, “Pneumatology Today,” *American Ecclesiastical Review* 167 (1973) 435-49.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Teresa Groppe, *Yves Congar’s Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Summarized in “The Contribution of Yves Congar’s Theology of the Holy Spirit,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001) 451-78.

<sup>8</sup> *Co-Workers*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *I Will Give You Shepherds/Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1992), n. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Edward P. Hahnenberg, “When the Church Calls,” *America* 195 (9 October 2006) 10-14; “Wondering About Wineskins: Rethinking Vocation in Light of Lay Ecclesial Ministry,” *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture* 40 (2005) 7-22.

<sup>11</sup> “On Devaluing the Laity,” *Origins* 7 (29 December 1977) 440-42.

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen A. Cahalan, “Toward a Fundamental Theology of Ministry,” *Worship* 80 (2006) 102-20.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Finn, “The Catholic Theological Society of America and the Bishops,” *Origins* 37 (21 June 2007) 88-95.

<sup>14</sup> David DeLambo, *Lay Parish Ministers: A Study of Emerging Leadership* (New York: National Pastoral Life Center, 2005) 46.

<sup>15</sup> Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2.92.