

## The Movement of the Spirit: Challenges and Reasons for Hope

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In the Acts of the Apostles we read: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:1-4).

This scripture passage has continued to be present to me not only during these days but ever since I received the invitation to participate in this symposium. The Holy Spirit came upon those gathered in that upper room, and certainly upon all of us in this room. As I have tried to listen intently to the sharing in the symposium groups, I have been touched over and over again by this important Pentecost experience, and how the Spirit is not outdone by generosity. How many gifts have been generously given to all, men and women, young and old, ordained and lay.

I have heard many accounts of how God’s call has touched each of us. The rich stories of how others prepared the way for some to recognize that the Spirit was calling, beckoning so quietly or ever so persistently. For others the experience of working as a volunteer in the Church invited them ever more deeply into ministry. Or how the encounters with the poor, the needy gave them a glimpse of the “Broken Body of Christ” and moved them to want to mend those broken bodies...the Vietnam vets in hospitals, the undocumented, the rejected, those who felt misunderstood even by the very Church they loved. How illness or loss of job and security offered another moment to stop and reflect on what we wanted to do with our lives? How living in other countries served as an invitation to see the presence of God in different ways through the eyes of others. The Spirit has made her presence known in the ordinary circumstances of our lives and moved us to accept a call to step forward and become part of the Mission of the Church.

We heard accounts of how ordinary men and women were inspired by the Second Vatican Council’s universal call to holiness to work toward the transformation of the world and to live out their baptismal commitment. During these days, on this campus of Saint John’s University, the fruits of this journey have been shared and reflected upon. We have been reminded of how the rise of the laity over the past 40 years has been very significant, enriching, and challenging to existing ministerial forms. And I have heard how the history of lay ecclesial ministry has taken shape in the personal lives of so many. How it has made itself know in families, parish communities, and on local and national levels. How this emerging experience found its way in creating new terminology, and in searching for ways to determine competency for lay ecclesial ministry.

In the midst of this story telling, another story has been bubbling to the surface. A story that is also inspired by the Second Vatican Council and by the meeting of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Columbia. The Spirit moved within the growing Latino/Hispanic population in the U.S. and Hispanics searched for ways to live out their baptismal call and be part of the Church they love. The chapters to this story begin in 1972 when Hispanic leaders first gathered in Trinity College in Washington, D.C., to identify the pastoral needs of their communities and how the Church could respond to them. A series of “*encuentros*” followed in 1977 and 1985. These moved from identifying not only pastoral needs, but also some of the urgent issues impacting the health and vitality of Hispanic Catholics. At the same time, Hispanic Catholics looked for ways to participate in the life and mission of the Church. Terminology such as “pastoral agents” (*agentes pastorales*) and “committed laity” (*laicos comprometidos*) were created to describe the engagement of men and women in Hispanic ministry in the Church. Across the country, significant numbers of lay pastoral institutes were created to provide pastoral formation and training for Hispanic ministers. A process of theological reflection following the steps of “See, Judge, and Act” became the process not only for discernment for ministry, but also for understanding how to make the kingdom of God ever present. Methods for doing pastoral work were developed. The value of bringing together in an organized way all the gifts and talents of the faithful in ministry finds expression in the term *pastoral de conjunto*. And the ongoing development of ministers continued to be pursued. This story is also part of the unfolding history of “Lay Ecclesial Ministry” and this ethnic community along with others is part of the Catholic experience.

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each” (Acts 2:4-6).

We have enjoyed and been challenged by the diversity within this assembly. This kind of gathering represents another significant moment in the writing of the sacred story of lay ecclesial ministry. It is important that such care has been taken to insure that ethnic representation from the Latino and African-American communities are part of the conversation. It is important because it has broadened the conversation and has made it possible for us to consider other realities that have enriched our understanding of what “lay ecclesial ministry” might mean within these cultural contexts and the challenges that they face and how all of us are part of that challenge. In this symposium we have begun a new kind of dialogue, a new conversation that may have at times left us bewildered. Why haven’t I been understood? Or I thought I was making myself clear? Why are alternative educational and formational approaches necessary? What role does culture play? How are we the same and how are we distinctly different from each other? What degree of standardization is helpful? What must be done to insure inclusivity? What degree of flexibility is necessary? How do we avoid contributing to the formation of a second-class citizenship in the Church where some have more than others? And how do we avoid placing unnecessary burdens on those whose hearts are on fire to serve the

Church? In this way, we have all been helped to become more Catholic and to experience close at hand the beauty of such a Church.

This is also the movement of the Spirit among us, sometimes experienced as “a sound like the rush of a violent wind” filling the entire house of this assembly.

I have also heard conversations acknowledging the importance of mentors that informally or formally guided us in ministry, and the need for intentional mentors to insure that the journey of others will also be guided. What a responsibility it is to be a mentor for others and educate and support those called to that service. The question of formation has surfaced throughout these conversations. For some, experience of being part of a base Christian community has shaped them as ministers. Others have found that volunteer service started a process of formation, which was later supported by study in formal lay ministry programs. Some have had the good fortune to link lay ministry programs with local universities. For others, the question is how to assist dioceses and communities that have more limited access to educational resources? The questions around how to determine the necessary skills for ministry abound. Who to invite to ministry? How to invite? What is necessary? But in the midst of all these conversations, the importance of formation and education has been affirmed by all. The question is how to do it? What shape should it take? And what needs to happen to respond to cultural realities? How can it financially be supported? What opportunities can be provided especially for the under-represented? How do we insure that our programs reflect the life of the local Church and that they are attentive to its needs and cultural diversity? But all have affirmed the need for an integrated and adequate formation and education for lay ecclesial ministry.

In what sometimes has appeared “messy” there is great reason for hope. The depth of understanding of the issues facing this new reality of lay ecclesial ministry demonstrates the maturity of those present in this symposium. The range of experience extends from local to national levels. So many are seasoned in “lay ecclesial ministry” and others offer us a fresher experience. The links to major groups involved in lay ecclesial ministry is impressive. The willingness to listen, to change one’s opinion, to consider another’s point of view with deep respect are reasons for hope and signs of the presence of the Spirit among us. And in the midst of such richness, I believe that through the struggle to understand the call to lay ecclesial ministry the Spirit is pushing us to examine anew the vocation of both the ordained and non-ordained. And what relationship exists between them? We struggle with the question of authorization and certification, and that is a good and healthy sign. Because ultimately it is the work of the Spirit. And all of this fills me with many reasons for hope, and a felt assurance that we are living a New Pentecost and that the Spirit is among us.

There are on-going reasons for hope in the certain promise that the Spirit will continue to guide us in our efforts to understand more clearly what it means to be a lay ecclesial minister, and to address the issues regarding formation, authorization and what needs to be done in the workplace to sustain and promote excellence in ministry. There are reasons for hope in the certainty that other conversation partners will not only enrich

this conversation, but also shed greater light on our endeavor. And that this will be done in the service of the Mission of the Church, to make the Kingdom of God ever present.

In Acts, it tells that when those gathered heard others in their own language speaking about the wonders of God.

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “what does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.” But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams...Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit” (Acts 2: 12-18),

And if, indeed, we are drunk, let it be because we have experience how intoxicating it is be filled by the Holy Spirit.