

Diocese of Great Falls - Billings

P. O. Box 1399 • Great Falls, MT 59403 • (406) 727-6683

TEMPUS PROGRAM

September 20, 1986

St. Leo's School

Lewistown, Montana

Most Rev. Thomas J. Murphy

Bishop of Great Falls-Billings

INTRODUCTION OF TEMPUS PROGRAM FOR DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

To welcome you here for this opening session of the TEMPUS Program is a joy and a privilege. As Bishop of a diocese, I have many hopes and dreams as I try to exercise the responsibility of the office I hold in trying to be the Shepherd, Teacher and Leader of worship in the local Church we know of Eastern Montana. Among my priorities for the past eight years has been the desire to awaken within the laymen and laywomen of our diocese a greater sense of their role and responsibility within the Christian community.

For over twenty years, since the conclusion of Vatican II, more and more lay people have heard the call and challenge of lay ministry, a commitment to service within the Church by reason of our Baptism and Confirmation. Lay ministry is more than just a general awareness of and a commitment to be of help to others. Rather, lay ministry is becoming more and more understood as a service given by a lay person who has been designated for such service by the Christian community as a result of natural gifts and/or study, reflection and prayer. For a while in the past decade or two, almost every good action of a Christian was being called a "ministry," where "ministry" meant everything and wound up meaning nothing for many people.

Yet, within the Church universal and our own local diocese, ministry as a form of designated service began to grow. The evidence is found in our liturgical celebrations with the presence of Readers, Eucharistic Ministers, and Ministers of Hospitality. We see the ever growing awareness of parish pastoral council members and parish finance council members appreciating their service as ministry. We see the outreach to youth, the chemically dependent, the separated and divorced, the family, the elderly, the sick and the dying as further expressions of ministry shared generously by men and women in our diocese today. As we are ever more conscious of religious education and formation as essential ministries shared with people of all ages from adults to children in our religious education programs, our Catholic schools, and our parishes today.

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As this explosion of ministries by lay people has taken place, the greatest challenge has been to see these ministries as more than tasks or functions. For some, these ministries are but a practical response to get things done quicker, the fulfillment of a functional task. For others, such ministries are only temporary until we have enough religious men and women and priests back to do these "things" like the old days. But in reality, these ministries are but the practical response to an understanding of who we are as baptized and confirmed people who have the responsibility to build up the Body of Christ by sharing our gifts with the Christian community, each of us according to our role and responsibility.

At the heart of all ministry in the Church, however, is not only service to others, but also a growth and development by those who minister in the life of the Spirit. Ministry which does not include growth in Christ, which does not seek a deeper spiritual life with a commitment to prayer and even sacrifice, which envisions its responsibility only in terms of tasks or functions ---- all such ministry becomes lifeless and barren. It drains the person who ministers in this context and it becomes a disservice to the faith community.

As a Church today, we have the responsibility and obligation to call people to ministry - a ministry of service designated by the Church and assisted by the Church through opportunities for spiritual growth and development, greater understanding of our faith tradition, and a commitment to Word and Sacrament which gives us our identity as a Roman Catholic faith community. That identity also makes us realize that within the Church, there are different ministries with distinct roles and responsibilities. We all share in the priesthood of Christ by reason of our baptism, but there is the essential difference between the ordained person and the lay person, just as there is the difference in the charism of religious life and the charism of conjugal love of married people as the basis for holiness. Such differences and distinctions are not meant to be the basis for division, but rather a call for collaboration with the awareness that together - laity, religious, deacons, priests, and Bishops - we are the People of God, a Pilgrim Church making its way through time to the fullness of the Kingdom of God already present among us. If we take an egalitarian approach to ministry, we do an injustice to all ministers of the Church today, and we are not faithful to what the Church asks of us at this moment in time.

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I realize full well that these reflections are difficult to accept for those who see the male/female and the ordained/non-ordained issues as the center of concern in ministry today. Yet, the Church in its teaching through the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, and our tradition has expressed a clarity of teaching in these areas which leaves little room for ambiguity. As we approach this new stage of ministry development for lay people in our diocese, I believe it is also a time to re-emphasize the call for people to serve as religious, deacons and priests to serve the Church of Eastern Montana. It is only when we have the broad ecclesial appreciation of ministry with its distinctive roles and responsibilities, but with its focal point of continuing the mission and ministry of Jesus, that we are able to build up the Kingdom of God and the community of faith.

I share the above with you as the initial participants in a lay ministry program designed for the People of God here in Eastern Montana. It is a program which will not bring you entrance into religious life or ordination at its conclusion. Rather, it is a program that asks you to take time over the next two years on a once a month basis to grow in understanding your faith, to deepen your relationship to Christ, to appreciate the power of Word and Sacrament, and to experience community with others who share this journey with you. And once you have completed this experience, and even during it, what you have learned, what you have appropriated, what new and deeper relationship you have to Christ - all this and so much more, you will be asked to give away in service to others by the ministry you share.

This weekend we begin the TEMPUS Program, an initial pilot program for lay people designed to help lay people in our parishes to acquire a deeper understanding of and an appreciation for the ministry of lay people in service to others to build up the Body of Christ. This program is made possible through an endowment fund established by Mr. Math Theiltges of St. Mary's Parish in Chester, Montana - a German immigrant who came to North Central Montana early in this century and who committed himself to his Church, the land, and his community. Math had acquired much in his lifetime as a result of his own personal labor and shared much of his resources during this life, as well as after his death at the age of 96. One of his two desires for the use of his legacy to the Church was to provide a means to assist the laity of our diocese in using their gifts and talents to build up the Church, especially in our rural communities.

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In response to this first desire, with Math Thieltges' gift to the diocese, we have established two programs of assistance to laity. First, we have begun the Thieltges Lay Ministry Grant Fund to help lay people attend ongoing programs of formation and education. This past summer, in the second year of this Grant Program, 70 lay persons utilized this Fund through grants of almost \$10,000.00 to attend workshops on the RCIA, Liturgical Music, A School for Cantors, Religious Education, and the Stephens Ministry. However, the major portion of the commitment to lay ministry from the Thieltges bequest is committed to an Endowment Fund for the Office of Lay Ministry to serve our Diocese. With the reduction in interest rates on the Endowment Fund in recent months, we must look for other ways to supplement this budget to meet our needs.

The plans for a diocesan based ministry program has been a priority for the past few years. With over 90% of the parishes and missions in the Diocese committed to RENEW from 1982 to 1985, the decision was made to postpone the program until RENEW was completed. There was also the realistic need to acquire the finances to fund the program as well as to obtain the services of a Director of the Program itself.

Last year, the estate of Mr. Thieltges was finally settled and we had the finances to initiate the Lay Ministry Program. We were fortunate in being able to acquire the services of Sr. Mary Frances Shafer, BVM, to be the first director of this new diocesan service. Sr. Mary Frances has served in many areas of Church life and has held numerous leadership positions, including the Presidency of her own religious community, one of the largest in our country today.

I believe our diocese and this program have been enriched by the presence and ministry of Sr. Mary Frances. Her first year in the diocese was spent in listening to the laity, religious and priests regarding the need for lay ministry. She has committed herself to working with nine other dioceses and people who hold the same position as she does in a special program based in Kansas City, and funded by Extension called the Institute for Pastoral Studies. Hopefully, her leadership with the help and assistance of each of you will make this pilot program a meaningful and grace-filled experience.

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TEMPUS has begun. It could well be the best of times, the worst of times to initiate this program. Whatever time people perceive this to be, I believe it is a time when we ask and challenge laity in the Church today to acquire a deeper understanding of their faith, to discover a closer relationship to the Lord, a more profound respect for Word and Sacrament, a willingness to acquire new skills, especially in leadership, and an experience of community with and through one another. And as these gifts are shared with you, the ongoing challenge will be for you to share your gifts of ministry with others in your parish and in our diocese.

But you might well ask if the response we are giving to developing lay ministry is adequate. There are so many needs and there could well be countless more people present here if it were not for distance, time and other commitments. Why can't we just package everything that will be done over the next two years and give crash courses in lay ministry in every parish?

A few weeks ago, I was driving back from Circle to Great Falls on a Sunday afternoon. I encountered the worst rainstorm I had ever experienced. I had to stop the car and wait until it subsided. To the casual observer, such a downpour could well be the answer to prayers for a parched land. But as we know, such downpours swell our streams, leave puddles of water in the fields, and run off the land. In contrast to that experience, last weekend as I drove from Glasgow to Great Falls and then down to Big Timber, for two or three days, there was a constant gentle rain which touched the earth and promises to give it life for the coming year.

We could offer programs that could literally drench people with a downpour of facts, information, and instant skills. If we were to do so, I would suspect it would run off us as a downpour runs off the land. We have chosen to take the time to create the space for us to discover our gifts and talents, to enrich them with a process of education and formation which responds to human and spiritual growth, and to ask God to bless this harvest of dedicated and committed people. We have chosen to take time, which makes the name of the program even more appropriate.

In conclusion, my hope is that TEMPUS will give you the time and the opportunity to find God in the ministry you share; and paradoxically, this whole experience hopefully will allow you the space and time for God to find you. I pray this mutual experience of discovery will enrich your lives.

Thank you.