

Reflections

by the

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Lay Ministry In The Church Today - II

Theoretical principles must become a reality if they are to affect the life of the community and the Church. This is especially true regarding the principles for lay ministry in Eastern Montana today. All baptized Catholics are called to lay ministry, a ministry we live out as a worshiping community when we celebrate the Eucharist or the ministry of witness we give to Gospel values in our daily lives.

In so many ways today at the parish and diocesan level, the Church fulfills its mission through the gift of lay ministry. In the past, such ministry was the responsibility exclusively of religious women and men, as well as priests. But today, there is not only the need for lay ministry, but it is obvious how the total Church is enriched by such ministry. How do we apply the principles for lay ministry written about last week to Eastern Montana?

First, the parish and the diocese must prepare people for lay ministry by education and prayer which must be ongoing and sustained. Moreover, the Christian community which is served by their fellow Christians must also be prepared to understand and appreciate the gift of lay ministry. In practical terms, this means that a person asked, for example, to exercise the ministry of Special Minister of the Eucharist, Lector, or teacher in the religious education program of a parish, should expect initial and ongoing guidance and help from the local pastor and parish staff. There are excellent resources at the Diocesan level as well as countless good books, tapes, and programs on instruction and formation. While this is happening with those involved with lay ministry, the parish community is prepared by the written and spoken word to support the gift of lay ministry shared with them. To ignore preparation and continued education and prayer of the ministers and the parish community reduces lay ministry to a task or function - and that would be tragic.

Lay ministry in Eastern Montana must be ecclesial which follows the guidelines and expectations of the universal Church. Lay ministry is not an isolated phenomenon in Eastern Montana. It is happening and developing all over the world. At the same time local needs must be met. For instance, when Mass is unable to be celebrated at a parish or mission, the laity are asked to assume the responsibility for leading the community in prayer and worship. But even here, the Church offers an approved liturgical format to be used, and the local pastor must prepare the community for these occasions.

Lay ministry is not to be in competition with the ministry of the ordained person. Rather, the gifts shared by the religious woman or man, the lay parson or priest in a parish are meant to enforce and enable each other. All those involved in ministry in a parish should come together on a regular basis for dialogue, prayer and education to build up a sense of community. In many ways, the parish priest as the ordained minister is being asked to exercise a ministry to ministers.

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Finally, lay ministry must relate to the Bishop of the Diocese of Eastern Montana. As that person, I want to encourage and support lay ministry in every way possible. But I also want such ministry to respond to the expectations of a Church and the norms which that Church sets out for us. Such norms and guidelines are not impediments to freedom, but rather aids and helps to preserve an identity. Critical to an understanding of lay ministry is its relationship to ordained ministry. The Roman Catholic Church is not an amorphous gathering of people without distinct roles and responsibilities. The Roman Catholic Church is a hierarchical Church and a diocese is described by Vatican II as "a section of the People of God entrusted to a Bishop to be guided by him with the assistance of his clergy, so that loyal to its pastor and formed by him into one community in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist, it constitutes one particular Church in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active."

Let us pray together that as lay ministry grows and develops in our Diocese, it may help that definition of a Diocese in Vatican II become a reality.

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These days I am in Dallas attending a study session for Bishops on Medical-Moral issues. I hope and pray it proves to be a learning experience. I also will be attending a workshop on Shared Ministry with Reverend Henri Nouwen as the keynote speaker.