

Role of lay ministers

Question: Do you think that since the Second Vatican Council there has developed confusion between the roles of laity and clergy in the Church? Some commentators seem to think so. Now we have lay ministers of all sorts. What do you make of all this?

– **Name withheld**, South Bend, Ind.

Answer: As you suggest, a great deal of development theologically and practically in the role of laity in the Church has occurred since Vatican II. The word “minister” is applied to lay roles today in a way that was not the case before Vatican II. I think this can be overdone (ministry of gardening, coffee ministry, etc.); but essentially the application of the term “minister” to laity who serve the Church in extraordinary ways is quite appropriate.

I do not think there has been significant confusion in the Church – and among Catholics in general – on the differences between ordained clergy (bishops, priests and deacons) and lay ministers. For one thing, priests do very different things from the laity: They celebrate Mass and the sacraments; preach the Gospel; administer their parishes; and are ultimately responsible for the pastoral care of their communities. Clergy dress differently; live in rectories; are celibate (except for some Eastern Catholic clergy and some ordained Protestant minister converts). The central identity of the bishop, priest, and deacon has a clear character to it.

Lay ministers, on the other hand, are clearly laypeople. Their ministries are based on their baptism. For the most part, their ministries are specific (distributing Communion, serving Mass, teaching religious education, carrying on works of charity). They mostly have other secular jobs, are generally married and have families, dress in lay clothes (though they

may wear albs in the [liturgy](#)). Practical experience and observation tell us that clergy and lay ministers are different.

Yet, the ordained and those in lay ministry do not live in separate worlds. There is no chasm between them, and there is considerable overlap. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, quoting the [Constitution on the Church](#) (Lumen Gentium) of Vatican II states: "The ministerial or hierarchical priesthood of bishops and priests, and the common priesthood of all the faithful participate, 'each in its own proper way, in the one priesthood of Christ.' While being 'ordered to one another,' they differ essentially. In what sense? While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by an unfolding of baptismal grace – a life of faith, hope, and charity, a life according to the Spirit – the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians" (No. 1547).

The ordained clergy exist for the laity, to build them up as a priestly people, to bring them to real and living participation in the mystery of Christ. Lay ministers depend on the ordained for their training, direction and effective working. The sign of a good pastor is that he is able to build up many ministries and apostolates in his parish. Likewise, a lay minister properly answers to the ordained and depends on the latter for validation and sustenance.

In the Church, especially with the growing shortage of priests, many laypeople are taking on full-time work as parish administrators and more generalized lay ecclesial ministers. But I have never heard any of these suggest that they are in competition with the ordained.

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