

The Church needs to empower and equip the lay priesthood



Pope Francis recently created the new secular “ministry of catechist.” As a secular ministry, the role is neither meant to be seen as a stepping stone to the Sacrament of Holy Orders nor intended to clericalize the laity in any way. This is an interesting distinction, because it could be viewed as one of the first steps the Church has ever taken to officially define responsibilities integral to what is known as the lay priesthood.

The “priesthood of the laity” is a well-established concept, but it remains a poorly defined and even more poorly understood role. All Catholics who have received the sacraments of initiation (particularly baptism) participate in the one priesthood of Christ – even if they never receive holy orders. Catholicism teaches that there are two complementary priesthoods in the Church: the ministerial (ordained) priesthood and the lay priesthood. The ministerial priesthood is responsible for administering the sacraments and, in particular, consecrating the Eucharist. The lay priesthood is responsible for taking up that sacramental grace and consecrating the world to Christ.

The Catholic Church is literally a “kingdom of priests” (Ex 19:6). Every single Catholic is a priest in some sense. Because of its intimate tie to the Eucharist, it’s true that the ministerial priesthood plays a featured role in this ecclesial priestly kingdom, but contrary to most of our experience of the Church, it is the lay priesthood that is meant to do most of the heavy lifting when it comes to building the kingdom of God. It is the lay priesthood’s job to make the world holier by modeling Christ’s sacrificial love in

all of our relationships, prophetically witnessing to a dynamically Christian approach to work, love, leisure and a living faith, and serving with Christ to use our gifts to build a more just, grace-filled, godly society for the greatest and the least. This is simply too big a job for the ministerial priesthood. The ministerial priesthood exists to equip the lay priesthood to go out and bring the world to Christ.

Frankly, the biggest vocation crisis is the tragically underdeveloped sense of the role the lay priesthood is meant to play in the life of the Church. The fact that almost every pastor struggles with burnout because he feels like everything is up to him, as well as the fact that some studies suggest that only 3-5% of Catholic parishioners could be considered "intentional disciples," are two signs of this real vocation crisis. The cause of most of the stagnation in the Church is directly due to its failure to equip the lay priesthood to fulfill our rightful role.

You could easily make the case that every single Catholic who has received the sacraments has been given at least as much spiritual authority as any Protestant minister to preach the Gospel, evangelize, catechize and even consecrate if you understood consecration as the act of taking the normal, everyday "stuff" of life and relationships, raising it to Christ and using it as an opportunity to grow in and promote holiness.

I don't say this to diminish our Protestant brothers and sisters. I make this comparison because too many Catholics look at men and women who lead Protestant congregations and use this to argue that Catholics should be more liberal about who we ordain to the ministerial priesthood. What these individuals don't realize is that unless a particular Protestant minister can lay claim to apostolic succession (and most cannot), that minister's activities are rooted in the same lay priesthood that every baptized, confirmed and

communed Catholic shares in. There is absolutely nothing the average Protestant minister does – lead prayer, proclaim the Gospel, engage in charitable service, teach the faith, form Christian persons, build godly community, etc. – that the average Catholic is not only called to do, but responsible for doing in the normal exercise of his or her lay priesthood.

Declaring a ministry of catechist is good and important, but it is still too inwardly focused and (frankly) clerically scented. The lay priesthood is meant for so much more. For our own good, we need to stop solely focusing on training laypeople for parish ministry and put real energy into equipping the lay priesthood to minister in the world – for instance, by learning to celebrate the [Liturgy of Domestic Church Life](#) in our homes, and to live the Catholic difference in our work, our politics, our lives, and relationships. Almost 60 years after Vatican II, it's time to teach the lay priesthood to become what it is. We are not second-class servants in the parish. We are the heart, hands, feet and face of Christ in the world.

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