



Creating Ministerial Communities

Reflection

Scriptural Vision

Mark's no-nonsense gospel begins with the baptism of Jesus and continues along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. For Mark, the boat is the Church and Jesus guides the activities of the community from the stern. He multiplies fish, calms storms, and gives direction. As a result, the disciples are both affirmed and challenged. After one missionary excursion, Jesus invites the disciples, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). At other times, he challenges them to cast their nets or feed huge crowds. Both realities are at the heart of serving in today's parish as well. Stepping back from the immediate tasks we face becomes the key to staying afloat and unlocking the power to feed the multitudes. We can do this by choosing to build ministerial communities through regular sharing (talking freely about God and about life experiences), learning (understanding of the gospel, the Church, and ministry skills), mutual support, a sense of mission, and prayer.¹ When we choose these elements of ministerial communities we imitate the way Jesus cared for, taught, and guided the disciples.

It is important that what we do together reflects who we are as Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers several images for Church that underlie a vision of shared faith in ministry. We are called together as part of the Body of Christ, the New Jerusalem. We are a sheepfold or gateway to unfailing nourishment. We work in a choice vineyard, a building of living stones. We are part of the people of God that gathers throughout the world.² When we strive to see our efforts and tasks as deliberately rooted in these scriptural images then ministry is transformed. Choosing ministerial community as a foundation for ministry equips us for challenging tasks and helps us grow in faith at the same time. Ministry becomes faith-filled and infused with a kind of electricity, a fire born of the Holy Spirit who sustains and sends us.

Community as a Tool for Ministry

At a workshop on ministerial communities a new volunteer leaned over to a friend and commented, "What's she talking about? I just wanted to help out at church." And that's the point. The desire to serve is rooted in many different levels of faith and different personal gifts. It takes a concerted effort to combine individual helpers so God's reign becomes intimately woven with the service we offer. The more we rely on community prayer and an understanding of the Scriptures, the more effective our service. The more we discover one another's skills and charisms, the more we can offer to the parish and to the world. Faith and service are both communal, and as we consciously tend our relationships, we become stronger together. Even though we may have started with doing things, we end up with being Church together for the sake of those around us.

In the document, *Called and Gifted for the Third Millennium*, the U.S. Catholic bishops explain that serving God as lay people involves four calls: the call to holiness, the call to community, the call to mission, and the call to Christian maturity. For most of us, the answer to these calls is lived out in day-to-day life. Being part of a parish group is just one small facet of our lives, and that's as it should be. The bishops remind us that "the presence [of the laity] within the web of society can be a source of solace and strength in the face of enormous human need."³ In this way of thinking, ministerial communities are the places to learn about bringing our faith into the world, and are opportunities to grow in community, holiness, maturity, and mission all at once.

Successful ministry is rooted in formation, transformation, and evangelization. We become disciples with a mission and together we move beyond "helping out **at** church" and into "helping out **as** Church." Our activities become instruments of personal and social transformation. We become evangelists, involved in

a "process whereby the living Lord is experienced in flesh and blood in the joys and tears of everyday life—because we are bold enough to live as if God is [alive]." ⁴ Whether we are lectors, nursing home visitors, catechists, or soup kitchen workers, we have a part to play in making the Good News of Jesus, the Christ, take flesh in our parishes and neighborhoods.

Ministerial communities become living cells within the Body of Christ, living stones in God's temple and a vital part of the New Jerusalem. Ministerial communities can also be prophetic in a world that is activity oriented. Growing in community as we serve, trains us to look beyond driving, shopping, working, and relaxing. We are apprentices of a deeper life. Our ministry meetings can be intentionally structured to reflect that life. Then we are equipped to bring this vision of a deeper life into daily life. Pope John Paul II explains the ultimate goal that we pursue together. "It is no exaggeration to say that the entire existence of the lay faithful has as its purpose to lead a person to a knowledge of the radical newness of the Christian life." ⁵

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² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 752.

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⁴ Excerpted from *News that is Good: Evangelization for Catholics* by Robert J. Hater, p. 16. Copyright © 1990 by Ave Maria Press, P.O. Box 248, Notre Dame, Indiana, 46556, www.avemariapress.com Used with permission of the publisher.

⁵ *Introduction to Christifideles laici in Origins*, February 9, 1989.