

**February Book Recommendation:  
Reviewed by Dan Brent**

***Forward in Hope: Saying AMEN to Lay Ecclesial Ministry***

Bishop Matthew H. Clark, 2009, Ave Maria Press, 115pp., \$11.95

In November, 2005, the American bishops were discussing a draft of *Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, a document on lay participation in pastoral ministry. Cardinal Avery Dulles spoke to the meeting to assure the many anxious bishops that endorsement of the concept of shared ministry was not a betrayal of the church's history.

Lay ministry, in fact, connects the church to its earliest traditions. And Vatican II (in *Lumen Gentium*) connects all Catholics to ministry by reason of their baptism. Lay ministry does not supplant the sacramental role of priests; it complements the priests' work. And it makes possible more than church could otherwise accomplish.

Clark recounts his early priesthood—canon law studies and seminary spiritual director—before his 1979 appointment as Bishop of Rochester. Here, he says, “I have tried to encourage people to share their ideas, hopes, and dreams, and to bring their thinking to the pastoral issues and decisions that we so frequently face.” (p.19) The job didn't make him arrogant. “Ordination leaves one a pilgrim with everyone else. . . . We know that our communities will be less than what God wants them to be if we do not share our gifts.” (p.21)

So “collegiality became a benchmark for the shared ministries of all,” (p.29) and the sharing calls for a flexibility in judging how ministries can be made to fit together. Bishops are not just rule enforcers. “Pastoral judgments have always taken precedence over an absolutely perfect outward compliance with the ecclesiastical laws.” (p.31)

In this, “Somehow we have to help one another realize Church as the People of God.” (p.33) “I am optimistic about the future. In my view, the emergence of lay ecclesial ministry in the Church is not just a sign of innovation or revision but is a work of the Holy Spirit.” (p.35)

Bishop Clark includes a chapter that reviews the history of ministry in the early church. Needs were met as they were recognized and the solutions varied greatly from area to area. It was chaotic. “In the first two centuries, at least, there was not a distinction between ordained and lay.” (p.50) Then, over time, church began to copy the civil models of governance. Authority drifted to the bishops. Priesthood became a separate—a caste-like—state of life, with women excluded. Celibacy grew as did the demand for clerics. And the “sacred” (clergy stuff) started to get separated from the “civil” (lay stuff).

Contemporary history looks to Vatican II where *Lumen Gentium* presents church as the People of God. Baptized members bring a variety of “charisms” to the service of church. The baptized share the roles of Jesus as priest, prophet, and king. The council also inaugurated the “permanent diaconate” and did not require celibacy of participants.

Clark expresses a concern about the financial dimensions of lay ecclesial ministries. The training is costly and is rarely subsidized. Since it usually requires a graduate degree, many baptized Catholics are thereby screened out from lay ministry. Bishop Clark expresses pride that the pastoral administrators in Rochester have been integrated into the priests' prayer and planning days.

He laments that the church has not carved out a liturgical role for pastoral administrators. In fact, they are forbidden to sit with the Eucharistic minister in the sanctuary!

Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have both forbidden theologians to even discuss the possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood. On this issue, Bishop Clark says, "I assent completely to the definitive teachings . . . following the example of Jesus in choosing only male apostles." (p.93) However, he observes that many Catholics still hope for a day when this intransigent position will soften.

Interspersed in the book are short chapters by five lay ecclesial ministers from the Diocese of Rochester. They add their "Amen" to the book's insights into the satisfactions and frustrations in serving a traditionally clerical church. "More than one pastoral administrator has been surprised to receive from the diocesan office a form letter beginning *Dear Father*." (p.42)

One pastoral administrator says, "Pastoral minister . . . wife . . . mother . . . They are not jobs. They are who I am." (p.45) Another says that his roles were assumed to put him "in charge" and "in control" of the assigned ministry. But the reality was never that.

Another was concerned about what she would be "allowed" to do. Then, after making the commitment, she was fired when the new archbishop discontinued lay ecclesial ministry altogether. One woman compared her experience to her young, tomboy days when she couldn't play baseball unless one of the boys didn't show up!