

Ministry

The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught. (Mark 6:30)

When asked about the laity's role within the mid-nineteenth century church, Monsignor George Talbot, an Englishman who had served as secretary to Pope Pius IX, responded, "*To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters, they have no right at all.*" This quote is a good indication of how Catholic clergy viewed lay people in the years leading up to Vatican II, when there was a marked division between clergy and laity, between the sacred and the secular, between the eternal and the temporal. Under this model of church, ministry was the exclusive work of the ordained.

Anyone trained in Catholicism before Vatican II, as I was, would be familiar with this concept, referred to as the "pyramid or *hierarchical* model of church." This pyramid reflected one's place in the church. At the top, of course, was the pope followed by cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, religious (no deacons, since the order hadn't yet been restored by Vatican II), and –at the bottom – the laity. The higher you were on the pyramid, the holier you were (or were supposed to be). As with holders of the American Express card, rank had its privileges. In this model of church, those at the top "had" the truth; those below "received" the truth. The job of the *non-ordained*, folks like you, was, derisively, said to be to "*pray, pay and obey.*"

Among the many changes brought about by Vatican II was the *re-definition* of church. Harkening back to scriptural sources, including today's gospel, the pyramid model of church was replaced with a "*communio*" model, rooted in the presence of the

Holy Spirit in *every* member of the community. Most of us today refer to this model as “People of God.” According to the “Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People” promulgated in 1965, one of Vatican II’s sixteen documents, Christ himself calls *every* baptized believer to serve in the mission of church. Ministry, therefore, belongs not to the hierarchy alone, not just to the ordained like Fr. Mike, Deacon Mike and yours truly, but to all of us.

In last week’s gospel, Jesus commissions the twelve for discipleship, sending them off, two by two, to preach the Good News. Jesus knows his time on earth is short; the need is great; and his mission must go on once his human life ends. In today’s gospel, also from **Mark**, the twelve return to him from their first missionary endeavor for a debriefing session. Jesus urges them to eat and to rest a while, but so many people show up on the scene that their ministry work continues without pause.

Two people are discussing religion, one says to the other: “Sometimes I’d like to ask God why he allows poverty, famine and injustice when he could do something about it.” “What’s stopping you?” asks the second. And the first replies: “I’m afraid God might ask me the same question.”

Believers aren’t supposed to be spectators on the sidelines; we’re supposed to be participants on the playing field -- loving and serving others, especially the poor, the weak; the disenfranchised. A simple way to define “ministry” is – *“the work of God by the people of God.”* Ministry, as Vatican II reaffirmed in 1965, is the calling and responsibility of *every* baptized member of the body of Christ, not just of the ordained.

A benefit, quite frankly, that has resulted from our current shortage of priestly and religious vocations is that more lay people have stepped up to assume ministerial

functions within the Church. Imagine, if you will, what would happen here at Transfiguration, without lay ministers, *particularly* women. There would surely be one less church in the Diocese of Rochester, which, incidentally, without lay ministers, *particularly* women, no doubt, couldn't exist either.

How does God answer prayers today, both spoken and unspoken? How does God work miracles? Through people like you and me. And if one of us fails to act, a prayer goes unanswered; a miracle doesn't happen. Remember the Jimmy Stewart character *George Bailey* in the Frank Capra film classic *It's a Wonderful Life*? If George Bailey hadn't been born, as his guardian angel *Clarence* demonstrates, how different the lives of the people of Bedford Falls would have been.

With every act of kindness we perform, just like Jesus and the twelve, we do God's work and help bring about the Kingdom on earth. Modern examples? Taking a covered dish to someone grieving a loss; visiting an elderly person in a nursing home; writing a friendly note to someone struggling with illness; going the mountains of Maine or the hollers of Kentucky to work with the poor; volunteering at Bethany House, Pittsford Food Cupboard; participating in Transfiguration's ongoing partnership with the St. Andrews community and neighborhood in the inner city.

It doesn't take heroic acts to make a difference in people's lives. Ordinary ones do just fine and with God's grace those ordinary acts may, very well achieve heroic, extraordinary results.

Young brothers and sisters, you too can make a difference. How? Being a friend to the kid at school who doesn't quite fit in; getting help for the classmate who's using drugs; taking the car keys away from a young driver who's been drinking; listening

compassionately to someone who's hurting. Bringing it to the attention of an adult when someone you know may be struggling with depression or anger and may be considering harm to themselves or others.

A religious education teacher asked her confirmation class which part of the Mass was most important. She wasn't prepared for the answer she got from one of her female students.

The youngster said, "The dismissal rite is the most important part of the Mass."

"Why do you say that?" asked the teacher.

The youngster replied, "The purpose of the Eucharist is to nourish us with the Word and the body and blood of Christ, so that we can go forth to bear witness to the Lord and to bring the Kingdom into existence"

The student continued, "The Eucharist doesn't end with the dismissal rite. In a sense it begins with it. Because after Mass is ended, we must go forth and proclaim to the world what the first disciples did. We must proclaim that Jesus is risen. We must proclaim that Jesus lives on in us."

Clearly, this precocious young woman had to be one of our very own confirmation kids here at Transfiguration! And, as we Catholics well know, *she*, most assuredly, was *not* ordained!

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Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34.

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