



*As One Who Serves
A Pastoral Statement on Parish Leadership*

*Cardinal Roger M. Mahony
Archbishop of Los Angeles*

*Los Angeles, California
Feast of Our Lady of the Angels
September 15, 2005*

In their dispute about greatness, the apostles are reminded by Jesus that the leader is one who serves, adding "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27).

Leadership in the Church is a response to God's gift and giving. "Charism" is a gift given and received for the good of the Body of Christ, the Church. Among the many charisms is that of leadership, which is given by the Holy Spirit for the service of the common life of the Body, for its mission, and for its future. What is the charism of leadership?

At the heart of the charism of leadership is vision. We are reminded in the Book of Proverbs: "Without a vision the people perish" (29:18). The leader must be able to hold up and hold out a vision, inviting others to live with, in, from and for that vision. For the Church, our vision is shaped by the word and the work, the meaning and the message of Jesus Christ.

Central to any Christian vision must be the Reign of God, which is at the heart of the word and the work, the meaning and message of Jesus. In the preaching and prophecy of Jesus, holiness, truth, justice, love and peace will prevail in the Reign of God. In our own time and place, we become heralds of God's Reign when we work here and now to safeguard and promote the dignity of the human person, the rights of workers, the person in relationship and community, opting for the poor, building solidarity among persons, nations, races, and classes, and caring for creation.

To this must be added an ongoing commitment to forgiveness as a basis for a new world order, the seedbed for the flourishing of God's Reign of holiness, truth, justice, love and peace. This is the mission of Jesus, the mission of the Church. As we affirmed in our Archdiocesan Synod, all who are baptized are called to a share in this mission.

"Participation in the mission of the Church is rooted in Baptism, strengthened in Confirmation, and nurtured by regular celebration of the Eucharist. All receive gifts from the Spirit that call them to build the Church and advance the Reign of God" (Gathered and Sent: Documents of the Synod of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, p. 24).

One Who Served

The charism of leadership in the Christian community is recognized in the one who is able to spell out the contours of the vision of the Reign of God in light of the changing circumstances in which we live.

Saint Paul himself serves as an example of one who gives shape to a vision in light of the needs of diverse communities living in different circumstances. Paul struggles to spell out his understanding of the new community graced by God's gift of enduring love through Christ and of the Spirit's love dwelling within us. Paul gives shape to a vision bit by bit, here and there, rather than all at once. In addressing the Church at Corinth, his vision is of a new community that he likens to a human body. No part or member is less essential than any other. On the contrary, the lesser, weaker, or more vulnerable parts are to be given special care and attention so that the body may flourish. In such a vision, the new community's members are to relate differently to one another and to the larger human community because of new sense of holiness moored in discipleship of Jesus Christ, rather than through strict adherence to the Law.

In this new community, holiness is not relegated to the few, to the ritually pure, or to those thought to be set apart for specifically religious activities. Holiness lies in living fully those virtues which are the hallmarks of the new community: faith and hope and love. No aspect of human life and living is outside the concern of the baptized who seek to be conformed to the person of Christ, the center of Christian holiness. Paul helps others see what he has come to see so that they might be inspired by his vision and carry it forward to the next generation, putting whatever gifts each one has to the service of this understanding of the new community, the Body of Christ.

Given very different circumstances among the earliest Christian churches, at Ephesus Paul emphasizes Christ's headship, as he does with the Colossians. In the Church at Philippi, however, his emphasis is on Jesus Christ in his self-giving as the example of Christian life. If there be one way of seeing the new community in Christ in the writings of Saint Paul, it emerges from his effort to express this vision in response to the particular needs of diverse communities.

Emerging Gifts

We are living amidst enormous changes in the world and in the Church. Our situation in the Archdiocese is in many ways so very different from what it was when I came to this Archdiocese as Archbishop twenty years ago.

As men and women who are neither ordained nor vowed Religious have continued to put their gifts to the direct service of the Church, we have grown in the realization that some of them have been blessed with a share in the gift of leadership. We recognize that they have been given a charism to lead the Christian community, responding to the needs of the Church and the wider world at this time.

As lay persons assume positions of parish leadership, perhaps nothing is more important than cultivating, nurturing, and sustaining collaboration between and among priests, deacons, vowed Religious and lay leaders. Such collaboration is more readily assured as each one has a clear sense of the distinctiveness and particularity of his or her vocation, recognizing the importance of bringing different gifts to bear in the common mission of the Church.

In the Pastoral Letter on Ministry, *As I Have Done for You, I*, together with the priests of the Archdiocese, provided a description of the specific ministry of bishop, priest and deacon within the context of a more broadly-based understanding of ministry. The distinctive charisms of the various Religious communities of women and men in the Archdiocese, which have enriched the life of our Local Church for generations in ministries of education, healthcare, social service and leadership, have been given ever greater attention since the Second Vatican Council called vowed Religious to a deeper appreciation of the charism of their founder or foundress. As laypersons assume new ministries in the life of the Church, some assuming leadership of the life of the parish, it is time to clarify the distinctive contours of the charism of lay leadership in the Church.

Of the World for the Life of the World

In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, *Christifideles Laici*, baptism is the source for the participation of everyone in the Church --- whether lay, Religious, and ordained --- in the mission of Christ (John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici: Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World*. December 30, 1988, no. 15; hereafter CL).

John Paul II looks to the particular role of the layperson in the realization of Christ's mission, emphasizing that the distinctive character of lay life is to be a sign of the Reign of God in the world. (CL, no. 23 citing Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 70. AAS 68 [1976] 60). He understands the lay state not just in human or sociological terms, but as a theological and ecclesiological reality. It is a positive reality, not to be understood in negative terms such as "non-ordained" in contrast to "ordained" (CL, no. 9). It is the lay faithful who, in seeking the Reign of God by engaging in everyday, ordinary affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God, are the presence of God's Reign in the world (CL, no. 15).

But as in the time of Saint Paul our understanding of the Reign of God, and what is entailed in living for God's Reign, must be formulated afresh in light of changing circumstances and in view of the shifting perceptions of different cultures and diverse communities.

One such shift involves the realization that the Church-world divide is not as neat and clean as we once thought. The Second Vatican Council brought us to a deeper realization that the Church is a sacrament not only to the world but in the world.

In the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* John Paul II, with an eye to the Reign of God, articulates the mission of Christ entrusted to the Church in light of an "overall view of the human race" maintaining that "this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1. Encyclical on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate. December 7, 1990; hereafter RM). He looks to a changed and changing world. It is here and now that the Good News of the Reign of God is to take root. The vast array of cultures are both challenged and enriched by the Gospel. Of vital importance is his treatment of "the modern equivalents of the Areopagus" (RM, no. 37).

The Areopagus in Athens represented the cultural center for dialogue and exchange of ideas (cf. Acts 17: 22-31). Pope John Paul employs the Areopagus as a symbol of the new "places" in which the Good News must be proclaimed, and to which the mission of Christ is to be directed (RM, no. 37). Of these various "places," John Paul singles out the world of communications, of culture, scientific research, and international relations which promote dialogue and open up new possibilities. Solutions to the world's pressing problems are to be studied, discussed and worked out precisely in these and other "places," problems and concerns such as: urbanization; the poor; the young; migration of non-Christians to traditionally Christian countries; peace and justice; the development and the liberation of peoples; the rights of individuals and peoples, especially those of minorities; the advancement of women and children; safeguarding the created world (RM, no. 37).

John Paul also takes stock of the desperate search for meaning, the need for an inner life, and a desire to learn new forms and methods of meditation and prayer (RM, no. 37). The mission is to take up these and the other pressing concerns precisely here, in these new "places" in the world in which we live, bringing the Gospel of Christ to bear even and especially there. In so doing, the Christian community is at the service of "furthering human freedom by proclaiming Jesus Christ" (RM, no. 39).

In all these "worldly places" the Reign of God is coming into being. And this is precisely where the laity, particularly lay leaders, have a crucial role to play. But what of the parish? What is it that the lay leader brings to the role of leadership of a parish community?

The parish, too, is a "place" very much part of this world. Like the Areopagus of old, it is a center of encounter and exchange. But here, the encounter is with God in Christ through the gift of the Spirit given to us in Word and Sacrament. And the exchange is based on an economy of gift, in which all in the parish community know themselves to be given the gift of God's love in the sending of the Son and in the pouring out of the Spirit in our hearts.

The lay leader of the parish is poised between two places:

- 1) the place which is the parish and
- 2) those other worldly places of the "new Areopagus" wherein the Christian is engaged in the struggle for justice, promoting solidarity, supporting the hopes and aspirations of youth, using the ever-expanding worlds of communication for the good of Christ's Gospel.

The lay leader brings the life of the world and its noblest concerns to the heart of the parish and, in turn directs the lifeblood of the parish --- strengthened and sustained by celebration in Word and Sacrament --- so that the world is more fully infused with holiness, truth, justice, love, and peace.

It is from the position of being in the world, in these worldly "places," attentive to "the joys and the hopes, the grief and the anguish of the people of this age" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1), that the lay leader must give shape to a vision of the Reign of God, inviting others in the parish to live from and for this vision of a world transformed by holiness, truth, justice, love, and peace.

The lay leader, above all the lay leader of the parish, is not someone whose ministry is to be understood as filling in the gaps, doing the many seemingly incalculable tasks that the priest once did, but does no longer, so that he can be "freed up" to celebrate Mass and hear confessions. "Without a vision, the people perish." There is an abundance of gifts flourishing in the Body. And the one who is designated to be the leader of the parish community is above all the one who holds fast to the vision of the Reign of God central to the meaning and message of Jesus. And then calls others to be faithful to that vision through the charism of leadership.

Much more is called for from a leader than being an effective administrator. Or a "human resources manager." And more still if one is to spell out the vision of the Reign of God --- shaped through and through by immersion in the "worldly places" of the new Areopagus --- in a way that is both respectful in dialogue and persuasive in the face of doubt and ambiguity.

Gifts for the Task

How, precisely is the lay leader to do this?

First, the lay leader must have competence in the enterprise at hand. In parish leadership, this competence entails not only a thorough knowledge of the workings of the parish but also --- and even more importantly --- a measure of competence in theology, scripture, ethics, spirituality, Church history and canon law. Second, the life of the parish leader is to be marked by a deep passion for parish ministry, for the persons served by it, as well as for those --- priests, deacons, Religious and other lay ministers --- who, together with the leader, serve the parish. Third, the parish leader

must have an ability for communication of the vision of the parish --- and the vision of the Reign of God which is at its heart --- to one's colleagues and collaborators, as well as to those well beyond the world of the parish.

It is the lay leader who, precisely as a sign of the Reign of God in the world, must be attentive to the heartbeat of God in the new Areopagus, alert to the undertow of the Spirit's draw upon every human heart, even and especially in those who live in very different "worlds" of meaning, purpose and value than those who bear the name Christian.

As we mark the 40th anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council and of its final document, *Gaudium et Spes*, lay leaders must redouble their commitment to be a sign, indeed a sacrament, of the Reign of God in the world, calling us to see that "the joys and the hopes, the grief and the anguish of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and the hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1), the One who, even now, remains among us "as one who serves."

This is the lay leader's gift and task, preparing the way for the next generation, and the next, to find new ways of serving the life of the Church and its mission from which will emerge new leaders to carry forward the vision in their own time and place.