Swimming Against the Flow: Language and Political Design in Lay Ecclesial Ministry

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“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”

~ Lewis Carroll

This essay explores the mutually reinforcing relation between language, the practices of participants and the institutional order that houses and embodies both. It is based on four interlocking premises:

1. A change of language is inextricably tied to institutional change. When applied to the church, this means: the ongoing renewal and reform of the church, and the effectiveness of its mission and ministry in the world, is linked, in turn, to the reform and renewal of its established language pattern and form.

2. The nomenclature "lay ecclesial ministry" is an obstacle to ministerial renewal and Roman Catholic Church reform and needs problematizing. It masks and perpetuates a pre-modern form of Roman Catholic institutional life.

3. Constructively, what is required is a reshaped ministerial language that correlates with a re-patterned ministerial design. This is vital to alleviate the dissonance experienced in the practice of church ministry today and the requisite reordering and interplay between diverse ministerial forms.

4. Finally, flowing logically from the first three, and intertwined with them, is the urgent and indispensable need to redesign the current pyramidal hierarchical ordering and polity in the Roman Catholic Church. This is needed to bring it more in accord with “our modern social imaginary” (Charles Taylor, 2008).

These four premises, I believe, are valid and defensible. Each is part of a whole – a larger context of change needed in the Roman Catholic Church. My fundamental assumption is: what is required in our time is a calm, patient and courageous confrontation with the inadequacy of our linguistic form for relating ministry and polity in the church. We need a form of organization and language that cuts across the divisions of clergy/laity, married/singles, men/women, religious/secular, professional/nonprofessional. The nomenclature "lay ecclesial ministry" plays into these divisions and, indeed, solidifies them.

This essay proceeds to explore and probe, in turn, each of the four premises and their relation.
1. Language and Organizational Change

A change of language is at the center of any institutional change. Language is never neutral. It functions to give form to our experience of the world. It acts as choreography for the body. Our thinking and our knowing in all human endeavors is shaped by the language we dwell in and the metaphors we employ. Language, as Martin Heidegger noted, is “our house of being” (Heidegger, 1962). We live, move and have our being within linguistic systems. The language we create and choose can catalyze or polarize our capacity to perceive and receive what is there – no matter how plain or abundant the evidence.

Heidegger reminds us: language serves to cover as well as to uncover phenomena. We must always ask what a language habit hides as well as what it exposes. Words can prompt memories, images and insights. They can also mystify, cloud one’s perspective and impressions. Our thinking (and practice) is curtailed within the perimeters of our language. Language reveals and conceals. It enslaves and liberates. The limits of our world are linguistic limits.

Ludwig Wittgenstein began his career by describing language as the logical representation or “picturing” of the world (1961). Words were kind of windows or transparencies through which to view reality. Later Wittgenstein came to think of language more as a set of related practices than as a picture. He examined language as a movement, as a “game”. To understand a language (or a word) we first need to understand the “game” in which it is situated, with its rules, boundaries, back and forth flow. We understand the meaning of a word only when we understand its use in a particular context. Included in that context are attendant practices related to the communicative act. Both constitute the arena of the language-game. Words, then, are wells of meaning where thought is born. Language is a practice (game) of life (1953, 10 §21 and 11 §23).

However, institutions within society, the church included, prevent certain kinds of change by not allowing for the language that would be necessary to raise questions of that kind of change. If the words are not available to ask the right questions, then, no new answers are possible. Organizations that are pyramidic, bureaucratic, and class-biased remain almost impermeable to criticism and intractable to change when they remain trapped within their own language system. Rhetorical systems get built up and used to hide and legitimate our need to control others. Then, as Gabriel Moran wrote, “Whoever owns the words owns the world” (1974, 31). Whoever controls the language system controls the worldview of the organization.

The first step in institutional reform, then, is linguistic resistance to the prevailing operating terms and categories. This is easier said than done! Nothing is harder than getting human beings to alter the way they speak when: 1. the present is somewhat still tolerable, 2. when the cost of change seems exceedingly high, and 3. when the worst has not happened yet---it’s still in the future.

But as Peter Steinfels notes, we (Roman Catholics) are a people adrift (2003). Structural change is the great unfinished business of Vatican II. This structural change is stalled due to the current linguistic canopy covering our ecclesial life. The Roman Catholic Church needs to find a reshaped rhetorical form to engage the post-modern mind. A point of entry in this search, this essay argues, is to challenge the terminology “lay ecclesial ministry” as adequately descriptive of the remarkable ministerial developments in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States in recent decades. Ministerial development and reform is inherently tied to institutional
development and reform. And both, as Wittgenstein noted above, function within a context, a language-game, and its set of related practices.

2. Problematizing “Lay Ecclesial Ministry”

In the US Catholic Bishops document, Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry (2005), “lay ecclesial ministry” is a generic term encompassing and describing several professional roles, namely, pastoral associate, parish catechetical leader, youth ministry leader, school principal, director of music and liturgy, and participants who exercise pastoral care, etc. The term itself is not a specific title. The bishops note, “We do not use the term in order to establish a new rank or order among the laity. Rather we use the terminology as an adjective to identify a developing and growing reality, to describe it more fully” (11). The document proceeds toconcisely define each word in the term – pointing out that each reflects key realities. The work is “lay” because it is done by “lay people”. It is “ecclesial” because it is done in, for and on behalf of the church. Finally, it is “ministry”: it participates in the threefold ministry (priest, prophet, king) of Jesus Christ.

Initially, the words and the term seems clear and precise, delineating and giving order to our ministerial lives together. But such is not the case. To date, there is considerable ambiguity about who is a “lay ecclesial minister”. Amy Hoey notes, there is awkwardness to the term. She writes, “The term lay ecclesial ministry does not come tripping off the tongue, and I haven’t met any bishop who would not prefer another term if one could be found which adequately conveys the intended meaning” (Hoey, 10). The reservations some of the bishops have for the term, however, come from a different ideological vantage point than some pastoral ministers. In light of her extensive lived pastoral experience, Sylvia McGeary writes, “there was an intuitive sense that something was not right with the meaning of lay ecclesial ministry” (McGeary, 167). McGeary proceeds to unmask the politics of naming undergirding the creating of the term.

The search for a proper term or a more adequate language may be dismissed by some as mere semantics. Richard Gaillardetz, however, is not convinced. Gaillardetz, reflects on the flourishing of the new ministerial reality in the Catholic Church over the last thirty-five years. It raises, he notes, a host of questions. Among them are: the definition of lay ministry; its scope, its limits, and its relationship to all other ministerial forms. “These questions,” Gaillardetz writes, “are reflected in the struggle to find a nomenclature adequate to this new situation; Should we speak of ‘lay ministry’, ‘the lay apostolate,’ ‘lay ecclesial ministry’, ‘non-ordained ministry’, or perhaps ‘the ministry of the baptized?’ This particular question might seem fairly insignificant, a matter of titles”, Gaillardetz observes, “but in fact our nomenclature generally reflects an operative view of the Church” (2003, 26). In a word, our language reflects our ecclesiology i.e. our perception of church — its ministerial nature, its political design and its mission in the world.

We ought not accept whatever ecclesiastical language seems fashionable today. We need to think through some phrases and claims that surround the ideas of “lay ecclesial ministry”. There is a need to expose the controlling assumptions in the use of the term. Jurgen Habermas has pointed out: we should seek out the human interest behind any kind of knowledge. This means, in our patterned speech, we should seek to unearth and lay bare the relationship of one person to another in any social form or structure (1971). There is a need, then, to uncover and clear the thick institutional brush and undergrowth that now covers the church’s institutional form. Its current linguistic self definition, McGeary asserts, is a “stumbling block to any fruitful
discussion regarding the ways in which ministry can be most effectively carried out in the church in the twenty-first century” (166). So, ironically, the term “lay ecclesial ministry”, on the one hand, epitomizes the vital ministerial dynamic at the center of the US Roman Catholic Church, and, on the other hand, it exposes the dilemma of the form of its current institutional polity.

Five years on, many wonderful things are being done under the rubric lay ecclesial ministry (Cody, 2010). The people who work under its canopy are among the most idealistic and dedicated serving in the life of the church. I do not question the motives, the professional competencies or the religious convictions of the 30,000 plus who identify themselves as such. In the long-term, especially in the cause of church reform, it is, at best, a transitional term. However, caution is needed. With the fervor, passion and commitment driving the emergence of this phenomenon, I’m reminded of the words of an old song: “When you’re in love…smoke gets in your eyes”. Marx named this mystification. When the term lay ecclesial ministry is simply superimposed on the current clergy-laity division, church ministries do not work very well. Not surprising, that is just what happens unless there is strong resistance to the entrenched language of clergy-laity in the Roman Catholic Church. The clergy-laity tension is and should be undergoing drastic changes. However, the category itself is a major impediment and the guiding imagery underneath the words. The category prevents the emergence of new ministerial ways of doing things. There is a world behind the words and their relation to each other.

In the Roman Catholic Church, clergy–lay implies a rigid caste system, especially based on sexual exclusion. If one wishes to belong to the Roman Catholic Church, there are two ways one can do so: clergy or lay. The categories have remained unchanged for centuries and the language shows no tendency to change. It reinforces the very splits that need eliminating. A third category, “the religious” was in time absorbed into the other two (Osborne, 62). Co-Workers, in fact, linguistically incorporates all the non-ordained (e.g. canonical religious sisters and brothers) into the laity. This linguistic absorption reinforces, and, at the same time, hides an impenetrable dualistic system.

Historically, this division of clergy-laity was not part of the Christian Church’s original constitution. This language had emerged in the early church, but it was only in the twelfth century that a two-class system was finally set in place. Paul Lakeland writes, “It is helpful to think of distinct stages in the development of a ‘lay/clergy’ structure in the church. The first stage corresponds to the first two centuries of the church, when there was no clergy and there was no laity. The terms were not much used and, when they were, did not correspond to the way they are used today. The ideas of clergy and laity in any terminology were foreign to the early Christian. A second stage in which ideas of laity and clergy slowly formed can be discerned in the third century and reached its full realization only in the twelfth. From that time onward, the laity are considered in a primarily negative fashion, as those who lived in the world in a lower state of holiness than the clergy” (Lakeland, 10). This twofold division of all Christians was generally accepted only from 1100 to Vatican II. Initially, a clergy-laity structure was a stopgap measure. It was the result of the early Church’s unimaginable missionary success. A minority of well educated members became readers or clerics. The rest of the people (laity/laos) received basic instruction from the readers. A church divided into readers and non-readers may have been a necessity of another age. It is clearly inadequate in today’s world.

A two class system is usually defined by one group having something the other group lacks. The term “laity” originally meant “people”, but it came to be defined as a deficiency. To this day, both in Church circles and in the world of secular professions, a layperson is someone who lacks competencies, knowledge, or skills (Harris, 1982, 99). A perusal of the Oxford and
Webster dictionaries define “lay” by asserting what it is not rather than what it is: lay means “not in clerical orders”, “not ecclesiastical”, “not of or from a profession”, “unprofessional”, “not having special training or knowledge”, “uncultivated”. The functional, operating force of this negative meaning has flown over into all the professions, including the profession of church ministry. The opposite of professional is lay. There is no positive meaning of lay. As Wittgenstein noted: if you want to know the meaning of a word look to its use (1953, par. 212). The split cannot be overcome by “upgrading the laity” or “the liberation of the laity”. There is nothing to build up. By definition a lay person is someone who is deficient in something. The word provides no basis for creating a new relationship.

Vatican II’s Constitution on the Church made an effort to heal the split. It understood the term “laity” to mean “all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church” (LG,n.31). The laity, it said, participates in the People of God by baptism. But the Council could not overcome a language of negation in defining “laity”. There was no available language for overcoming the division. In the 1987 Synod of Bishops attempts were made to resolve this problem by giving a positive meaning to the word ‘laity’. It defined laypersons by means of their ‘secularity’ or involvement ‘in the world’. This raised a host of other anomalies. Were lay persons in the world but clerics were not? Do the secular and the sacred function in different arenas? Bishop Geoffrey Robinson asserts that this perspective fosters a debilitating dualism between clergy/lay. He writes, “This must be called a misguided attempt to give a positive meaning to an essentially negative term.” He asserts, “it is not possible to give a positive definition to an essentially negative term” (295). The nomenclature “lay ecclesial ministry,” then, simply perpetuates this negativity and class division.

In some circles, however, there is an emerging perspective that the term needs to be reconsidered. Richard Gaillardetz writes, “the term ‘lay’ is only with difficulty shorn of its past historical associations with a kind of ecclesial passivity. To define ministry as ‘lay’ is almost reflexively to define it by what it is not, a ministry proper to the ordained. Since the time of the council, laudable attempts have been made to develop a positive theology of ‘lay ministries’, and/or ‘lay ecclesial ministries’”. I suggest,” he concludes, “that qualifying ministry as ‘lay’ tends to vitiate the construction of such a theology” (Gaillardetz, 2003, 43-44). Paul Lakeland adds his voice. The very division between the two groups, clergy and laity, he notes, is at the root of the many problems and challenges facing the church. “It will be necessary perhaps,” he writes, “to abandon the very terms themselves” (Lakeland, 2009, 242).

Finally, and briefly: When a word is one of a pair, addressing the first has implications for the second. The clergy-lay duality borders on a dualism. This division is reflected in the imagery beneath the words. Too often we make the mistake of accepting this imagery instead of challenging the categories. Clergy-lay gives rise to the following imagery: one is “elevated” or “admitted” into the clerical state and “reduced” or “demoted” to the lay. The image moves upward and higher, and, the reverse, downward and lower. The net effect is a pyramidal hierarchical church – split between priest and people. The language transmits implicit values and behavior models to all who use it. It evokes dysfunctional relations on both sides of the divide. Edward Hahnenberg asks: “How can we help clergy and laity work together?”. The question, he notes, is “so deceptively simple”. On the other hand, he writes, “[the question] masks a mess of complicated issues that touch on institutional structures, psychology, patterns of socialization and socializing, the exercise of authority, theological vision and so on” (Hahnenberg, 2007,181). These are not simple issues! Nor is the answer a simple one. However, I would venture a forthright one: eliminate the category clergy-lay and create new
terms for the emerging forms of ministries in our midst. A new pattern of church life emerges when some key terms are changed to name and correlate with our new ministerial practices. This is what we explore in the next section of the essay.

3. Linguistic Renaming and Ministerial Ordering

No adequate theology of ministry or comprehensive ordering of ministry is present in the Co-worker’s document. Roman Catholic efforts in recent decades have crystallized around the term “ministry”. Co-workers, after some hesitation by the US Bishops, moves in the same direction. Initially, the US Catholic Church imported the word ministry from Protestant Churches. The move was fine but not sufficient. In Protestant circles, the word ministry is hampered by its narrow base. It has never been sufficient to overcome the split of clergy and lay.

It is important to keep in mind that the word ministry has almost no currency in the American English language outside of church circles. In the British language, the case is different. Ministry in the UK has political and educational significance. For example, the British have a Prime Minister and a Minister of Education. However, the language of ministry has acquired an ascendancy in Roman Catholic circles. In Walter Brueggemann’s terms, it now functions as the prevailing language “behind the wall” (Brueggemann, 1989.) Recent theological efforts have re-rooted the term in scripture and established it as a categorical common based for all the baptized (O’Meara, 1999; Osborne, 2006). In light of these developments, to place the qualifier “ecclesial” within the term “lay ecclesial ministry” seems redundant. All church ministries are precisely as referenced, namely, all are ecclesial.

However, the effort to develop a theology of ministry, re-rooted in baptism, sends nervous chills down the spine of Vatican official and Episcopal conferences. Their fear is a collapse of distinction between ordained ministry and the ministry of all the baptized. The alarm bell was sounded with the 1997 publication of a Vatican decree titled, “Some Questions Regarding the Collaboration of Non-Ordained Faithful in Priests’ Sacred Ministry” (Origins 27, November 1997: 397-410). A certain blurring had occurred, they feared, between the clergy and the laity in some pastoral initiatives in Western and Central Europe. The decree sought to sharply reestablish the distinction in terms of roles, titles, and functions. The goal was to guard the special place of ordained ministry, its unique possession of sacred power, and to reassert that the fullness of ministry resides in the ordained. The result was a very negative document that pictured the non-ordained to be rivals of the ordained or usurpers of their prerogatives. Its focus was to carve out anew the activities and ministries reserved for the clergy and beyond the perview of the laity. The net effect was to heighten the distinction between the two.

While Co-workers is much more positive in tone and affirmative of diversity of ministries and charisms in the church, it too acts as guardian of a firm distinction—if not a separation. The document states: “within this broad understanding of ministry, distinctions are necessary… The primary distinction lies between the ministry of the lay faithful and the ministry of the ordained, which is a special apostolic calling. Both are rooted in sacramental initiation, but the pastoral ministry of the ordained is empowered in a unique and essential way by the Sacrament of Holy Orders” (20). Those who are ordained to the priesthood, the document notes, “receive in the Sacrament of Orders a participation in the priesthood of Christ that is different – not simply in degree but in essence – from the participation given to all the faithful through Baptism and Confirmation” (24.) The terms utilized in the document warrant noting, namely,
“essentially different”, “uniquely constitutive”, “in the forefront of the Church,” as applied to the ministry of the ordained.

Pope Benedict XVI endorses this perspective in a recent address to bishops from North-Eastern Brazil on September 17, 2009 in Castel Gandolfo. Benedict insisted on a strict demarcation between clergy and laity. He warned the bishops not to allow the severe shortage of priests to blur the difference between the roles of the laity and ordained clergy. The distinction, he said, was “one of the most delicate issues in the existence and life of the Church” today. “It is necessary,” he noted, “to avoid the secularization of priests and the clericalisation of the laity.” The role of the laity, he continued, was to take the “anthropological vision and social doctrine of the church” in society and politics. While the “specific identity and indispensable role” of the ordained was “for the proclamation of the gospel and for the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist” (The Tablet, Sept 26, 2009, 31). This assertion and accentuation of a separate and distinctive ordained ministerial identity “stems in part,” according to Katherine Schuth, “from the increasing number of lay ecclesial ministers who are required to take on more and more ministries that were once the domain of priests” (Schuth, 11). This has led in some quarters, to regard the non-ordained participating in ministry competitively, relative to the ordained. One important issue at stake in this debate is the meaning and function of ordination. What seems critically needed to emerge from these discussions is a new theology of ordination. In this regard, Bradford Hinze writes, “the theology of ordination and of offices and their exercise must be reformulated within a larger field of vision. This will require that the theology and exercise of office holders in the church be repositioned and more fully articulated in terms of a set of relations with all of the baptized faithful” (Hinze, 265). This essay proceeds to take a step in that direction by viewing ministry through the lens of the term uniqueness.

Ministerial Uniqueness

The word unique is filled with ambiguity. It carries a richness and a thickness that lends itself to critical distinctions. Unique is one of the chief ways people wrestle with the paradoxical relation of sameness and different (Moran, 1992.) From the beginning, unique denotes difference. But how things (people, movements, ministries) differ is vital. The how of uniqueness runs in two opposite directions. It is these opposing directions that give rise to two strongly contrasting meanings of uniqueness. In one case, what is unique differs from all others by a process of exclusion, in the other, by a process of inclusion. Both represent two very different ways of engaging the world. Both also represent two very different ways of relating ordained and non-ordained ministry.

a) Exclusively Unique

When we speak of something being unique we are dealing with cases of limits. That is, there are always degrees of differences. Nothing is ever absolutely unique. In this first meaning of uniqueness, one moves toward uniqueness by a process of exclusion. A thing is unique if it is separate, isolated, sharing no common notes with other things. Here one protects one’s (individual) uniqueness by (intentionally) preventing others from intruding into one’s space. For example, in the sequence 3, 3, 3, 9, 3, the number 9 is unique in this sequence of numbers. If we change the sequence to 3, 3, 3, M, 3, then M is even more unique – it is different in kind (Moran,
19.) In Vatican and Episcopal documents, and papal pronouncements, noted above, it is the claim to difference *in kind* that distinguishes ordained ministry from the ministry of all the baptized. Ordained ministry, they assert, is different, different in essence, substantively, ontologically different. In terms of uniqueness, it is exclusively unique. Vatican II, however, reoriented our thinking on Christian vocation by renewing an ancient theology of baptism as the foundation of all callings in the church. But in the pre-Vatican II restorationist move, noted above, ministerial vocation is demarcated by difference rather than founded on the common calling of baptism. The emphasis is on the need to keep distinctions sharp and the differences of “states of life” visible. This claim to exclusive uniqueness pushes away the similarities ordained ministry has with the ministry of all the baptized. It defines itself over against all other diverse ministerial forms. In doing so, it erects an unbridgeable demarcation barrier between clergy and laity. In a word, it conflates small differences in degree into large differences in kind — and, in doing so, legitimates the existing system of clerical privilege and class structure. Or, to state it another way, to superimpose the term pastoral or church ministries on the clergy-laity division simply does not work well. It offers no linguistic or collaborative way foreword.

b) Inclusively Unique

As noted above, in the two uses and meanings of the term unique, there is a simple assertion of difference. But *how* things (people, events, ministries) are different is the key. *How* they are different reflects two ways of encountering the world. How they are different sends us in two opposite directions – one toward exclusion and the other toward inclusion. The inclusive meaning of unique takes the latter path. Here the paradox of sameness and difference is maintained by affirming the real is relational. Here a thing is unique because of its non-isolation. A thing becomes its unique self as it interacts with everything in its environment. To be is to be in communion. The greater the openness and receptivity to others, the more distinct, the more unique, is the self. Of course, there are varying degrees of openness. However, a person, a movement, or a ministry becomes more unique by letting more of the world flow in.

This inclusive way of being in the world can be captured in a letter sequencing. Moran (1992, 20) writes: In the sequences a, ab, abc, abcd, the fourth member of the set is inclusively unique. It is different from all the others because it includes all the others. In fact, each member is unique. However, each successive member in the sequence becomes more (inclusively) unique. This, I propose, is the direction the development of a theology of ministry ought to take. So instead of ordained ministry pushing away the similarities it shares with the other diverse forms of ministry, its distinctiveness ought to depend on opening and responding to the plurality of forms all around it. Ministry is diverse in its forms, but, of its historical and geographic nature, needs to be inclusively relational. To reappropriate this original Christian impulse, a new linguistic starting point is needed to re-shape a comprehensive ministerial language for our time.

Reshaping a Ministerial Language

Comprehensive church reforms have always been progressive and traditional simultaneously. The reforms have been liberal (open to development) and, at the same time, deeply conservative. The strategy has been neither to reject tradition nor to foreclose it, but to be radically traditional. Radical here means a return to classical sources (ressourcement) and origins. To reappropriate
the insights in some of our original Christian sources and writings, then, may hold the exit key out of our current linguistic cul-de-sac.

Thomas O’Meara (1999) has developed a comprehensive theology of ministry. He begins by grounding his work in New Testament sources, particularly Paul’s Corinthians (12:4-30) and Acts (2:32, 42-47). “Ministry”, writes O’Meara “is a horizon within the life of the Christian Community” (5). It is an ecclesial reality, the work of the Church community. This work is constituted by a core set of practices: teaching, preaching, worship, social outreach, pastoral care and administration. These set of practices have been continuous throughout the tradition and, at the same time, adaptive to the historical and cultural conditions of time and place. While each of the ministerial practices are distinct, taken together as a whole, they build up the Body of Christ and incarnate it in the world today (21). Seminal to O’Meara’s conceptual shift (away from reducing ministry to the ordained priest) is his emphasis on baptism as ministry’s foundational sacrament. Baptism grounds all ministerial forms — ordained and non-ordained. From this common base and calling, distinctions in roles and identities can be made. “Ministries differ in importance,” O’Meara notes, “and distinctions among ministries (and ministers) remain, but they are, according to the New Testament, grounded upon a common faith and baptismal commissioning” (29). Ministry, then, is pluriform and multiform (rather than dual in form) and is rooted in our common baptism.

However, there is a tendency (and temptation) today to inflate the meaning of the term ministry. A misguided use of the term is to spread it over everything a person/parishioner does as a Christian. Ministry, on the other hand, needs form — institutional form. This is crucial in relationship to and in reshaping the church’s overall institutional form. (This is explored in section four below). If the term is to have substantive meaning, it has to involve designation and commitment by the local church, and accountability by individuals involved. A vital move in this direction calls for conceptual clarity with appropriate design and ordering of baptismal ministry. We find key elements of that design especially in Jewish and Christian histories.

Historically, in Jewish and Christian culture, there are two overarching components of any genuine ministry, namely, the priestly and prophetic. The priestly and prophetic are always in tension, which alerts us to the political dynamics in ministry. These (priestly, prophetic, and political) are variations of the threefold ministry of Jesus and benchmarks for all ministries in the church. Tension between the priestly and prophetic is needed and good. Politically, when these two important forces (and practices) are held in creative tension positive conditions are created. This is the mark of religious intelligence and a mature religious community.

The two overarching components of Church ministry, the priestly and prophetic, should not be associated with any class or the prerogative of any persons. Both are roles and functions to perform. They describe a set of practices and the quality of a community’s life. Traditionally, the priestly role is concerned with the past (as it flows into the present). The work is the work of traditioning i.e. conserving, guarding and passing on the tradition. This responsibility is expressed in the present by specific activities or practices within priestly ministry. Chief among these practices are a) catechetical instruction (didache), b) acting in ritually remembered ways (leiturgia), and c) gathering up the community (koinonia)(Harris, 1989:43-45). Some people may be gifted, trained or credentialed to exercise these roles. Others may be appointed, ordained or elected to the priestly role. However, the focus on priestliness should be on the character of the community, and its distinctive practices, not the position of the individual ordained priest. The community, if it is inclusively unique, will generate a wide sharing of priestly possibilities.
Priestly ministry, however, needs a corrective balance with prophetic practices. When this corrective is absent priestly ministry can collapse into self-absorption, bypass the chastening work of critical examination and become idolatrous. Kenan Osborn writes, “In the conserving, guardianship role, priesthoods are prone to try and maintain traditions with which they are comfortable even when cultural change makes the outward forms of the tradition seem antiquated and uninspiring” (27).

Traditionally, the prophetic role is concerned with the present and its orientation toward the future. The work is the work of transforming, challenging and calling into account. It is “disruption for justice” (Brueggemann, 1982:40-66). This responsibility is expressed by specific activities within prophetic ministry. Chief among these practices are a) pushing back the current boundaries of the tradition (diaconia), b) speaking the word no one wants to hear (kerygma), and c) challenging society by disquieting actions (diaconia). Prophetic practices provoke engagement with issues. It is a ministry of “troublemaking” (Harris, 145). It is that aspect of ministry where the community emphasizes its responsibility beyond itself, turns its critical judgment upon its current order and insists that personal and structural evil must be confronted and condemned. Biblical prophets called people back to renew their covenantal promises. Their words and deeds were never currently fashionable. We should expect no different today. It’s the work of fearless risking for a new future. It’s directed toward mending a broken world. It’s an array of practices for a just and compassionate church and society. However, once again, we need to resist the temptation of exclusively identifying propheticness with any category or classification of persons (eg. a band of rebels). Some people may have the charisma to work in this area; others credentialed to do so; still others may be commissioned or ordained to do so. But, if the community is inclusively unique, it will generate a wide sharing of prophetic possibilities.

A final word here: No one ministerial work is exclusively priestly, or exclusively prophetic. Instead, they tend to overlap. Also an individual could step in and out of both roles. One might be prophetic in one part of life and priestly in another part. A parish or congregation may likewise emphasize different aspects at different times. The key to a mature religious life, however, requires a constant movement and interplay between these two ministerial polarities. They are not contradictions, but complementary opposites in need of integration in our personal and communal lives.

4. Institutional Re-Ordering and Re-Design

Ministry, as O’Meara demonstrates, has historically undergone a metamorphosis (1999, 80-138). Its development has been pluriform and multiform. Ministries now exist and function within a network of relationships. However, not every ministerial relationship is the same. Richard Gaillardetz writes, “There are certain ministries in the church which, because of their public nature bring about a certain ‘ecclesial re-positioning’ or reconfiguration. In other words, the person who takes on such a ministry finds themselves in a new relationship within the church. … These ministers are public persons who in some sense are both called by the community and accountable to the community…Some will be repositioned by virtue of ordination into apostolic leadership, others into alternative ministries with or without ordination” (1999,135,139). But how are we to envision this new repositioning or reconfiguration?

Co-worker’s suggests a pattern of a circle of ministry in an “ordered, relational, ministerial community” (2005, 21). A number of scholars have developed this image into the
“concentric circles” model (O’Meara, 157, Hahnenberg 2003, Chap.3, Groome, 169,184). This model is rooted in a trinitarian theology and seeks to capture the unity (oneness) and the diversity (manyness) of positions among persons in ministry today. This “relational ontological” approach, Gaillardetz writes, is to be preferred over a “powers” approach. He asserts, “a theology of ministry based on power...inevitably puts various ministries in a competitive relationship with one another. Each is defined by what one group can do that another cannot. … A powers-oriented theology of ministry encourages a view of hierarchy conceived as a top–down command structure… a spiritual trickle-down theory” (2006, 139). It is at this point, I believe, that systemic structural reform and significant ministerial repositioning fails to have deep traction in the ecclesia. The two boulders in the road, in Gaillardetz’s statement, are 1. his negative conception of human power, and, 2. his reductionist image of hierarchy.

Power, for many in the church, is a dirty word. Liberals are particularly suspicious of the word. Church officials like to substitute the word service in its place, and play delusional games as if power (and politics) does not operate at every level of the church’s life. Power here is identified with force and command, coercion and domination. It is a negative to eliminate. This, however, only leads to impotence. Power is ubiquitous. It is an inescapable dimension of human relations. It is fluid, flowing through the entire network of human (ministerial) relations. It is what Daniel Finn (2007) calls “the software of daily life.” Its reality must be attended to if it is to play a part in the reshaping of ministerial relations and the institutional re-patterning of the Roman Catholic Church. And it has the capacity to do so. The chief reason is: the real paradox of human power is that power can be almost the exact opposite of force and control. Human power can be an invitation to cooperation, interdependence and receptivity (Scott, 2010, 103-106). People in our churches and society at large yearn for expressions of power that are mutual and communal. They may find it in a refashioned meaning of hierarchy and in its embodied communal forms.

Hierarchy is a form of order and design. It describes an authority patter in an institution. The Roman Catholic Church is exhibit A in a type of hierarchy, namely, hierarchy as pyramid. The image is clear and unambiguous. All power flows from the top – down. Worldwide, at every level of its life today, the Roman Catholic Church has a problem with this form of hierarchy. To attempt to place concentric circles of ministers into this pyramidal structural form simply will not work. This institutional pattern reproduces class structure and authoritarian concepts of leadership. It obstructs any deep rooted reform. However, the church needs order and patterns of power and authority for carrying out its work. Its challenge is to re-imagine a different form and structure of hierarchy that honors the past and, at the same time, resonates with our post-modern sensibilities.

“Hierarchy”, Gabriel Moran writes, “need not imply an exercise of power from the top to the bottom” (2009, 70). Hierarchy can be based on participation in power. The term literally means sacred order. Moran traces how the term hierarchy, first coined by Pseudo-Dionysius, a Syrian monk of the fifth century, referred to the divine plan of creation: God at the center, surrounded by a choir of angels. Further out on the circumference come the humans and then the other earthy creatures (2009, 70). Moran writes, “The image of the divine or sacred order was circles inside circles”. “This image,” he claims, “makes a lot of sense today for ecology as well as theology, for organizational theory as well as metaphysics.” (2007, 23). It is also the image captured in Ezechials’ mystical vision (1:15-16) of divine order of “a wheel within a wheel”.

For over half of its history, hierarchy in the Catholic Church referred to a system or pattern of order. It was a what rather than a who – a design rather than a designated group. The
current practice, originating in the twelfth century, of referring to bishops as “the hierarchy”, Moran writes, makes no sense historically, logically or practically. Linguistically, it presents an insuperable obstacle to ministerial and church reform (2009, 69). However, recovering a richer meaning of hierarchy as circles within circles, with men and women imagined at the center of life and at the center of ministry, allows us to envision hierarchy as a sharing of power with mutuality and reciprocity. The Roman Catholic Church is hierarchical, a holy order. The key to its survival, health and mission is to replace its medieval institutional (hierarchy) pattern with another institutional (hierarchy) pattern. A Christian Church that wishes to engage in education today has to examine its whole organizational pattern. Redesigning its structure as concentric circles of interdependent communities, with each part of the body having its role to play (1 Corinthians 12: 4-30), and each church minister commissioned to uniquely and inclusively practice their vocation, is the vital ministerial reconfiguration needed today. Within this institutional reshaping of its holy order, the term “lay ecclesial ministry” can be laid to rest in the Roman Catholic communion.

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