Can we speak about a “vocation” to lay ecclesial ministry? This question goes back almost to the beginning of the process that would produce the document Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord. Early on in their deliberations, the US bishops’ Subcommittee on Lay Ministry arranged a consultation with several lay ecclesial ministers serving on parish staffs in a variety of ministerial roles. As the conversation unfolded, several of the lay ministers began to share their experiences of being called to ministry. They spoke of the ways God had worked in their lives, and the many ways God was still at work in their lives. Their words resonated with the bishops who were present. Afterward, the committee members spent some time discussing what they had heard. Do these stories of call suggest a genuinely new vocation in the church? Is this a new diversification of God’s call—a fourth vocation alongside the vocations to priesthood, religious life, and marriage? Is the call to lay ecclesial ministry comparable to the call to ordained ministry? Is it more like the consecrated life? How does the work of lay ecclesial ministers relate to the broader vocation of the laity in the world?

Here lived experience comes up against traditional categories. For centuries, Roman Catholics have practically identified the concept of vocation with priesthood and religious life. To “have a vocation” meant the call to be a priest or a nun—to enter, through vows or ordination, into a
permanent, ecclesiastically approved state of life. The lived experience of lay ecclesial ministry, as a more or less full-time, long-term position of lay ministerial leadership, does not seem to fit neatly within such a definition. It is not a state of life. It does not entail the same kind of permanence or totality that has been historically associated with clerical or religious vocations. Still, these elements are not entirely absent—and this is one of the things that make the phenomenon so complex and so rich. Lay ecclesial ministers do make a significant commitment to ministry, and they enact that commitment in concrete ways (by pursuing education on their own and at their own expense, by moving a family to take a new position, by planning programs or projects that extend into the future, and so on). David DeLambo’s 2003 study reports that nearly three-fourths (73.1 percent) of lay parish ministers believe that they are pursuing a lifetime of service in the church.1 Clearly, their response to God’s call is a life-orienting decision, one that profoundly impacts their faith, their families, and their future. Moreover, their own personal sense of call is consistent and strong. Those few lay ecclesial ministers who shared their experiences with the subcommittee are not the exception but the norm. DeLambo reports that more than half (54.2 percent) of lay ecclesial ministers say that the factor that most influenced them to pursue a lifetime of ministry in the church is a “call” from God. Seven in ten (69.3 percent) list “response to God’s call” among the top three reasons for doing what they do. “So dominant was the response to God’s call as a motivating factor that the next highest factor cited by laypersons totaled only 15.0 percent.2”

To their credit, the bishops acknowledged the reality of this experience. In an initial report of the subcommittee, published in 1999, they wrote, “Lay ministers speak often and reverently of their call or vocation to ministry, a call that finds its origin in the call of God and its confirmation in the appointment to a specific ministry within the Church. . . We conclude that this call or vocation is worthy of respect and sustained attention.”3 Over the course of drafting Co-Workers, those involved continued to struggle with this question of vocation. The final document ends with a frank admission: “The preparation of Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord has already indicated a need for a more thorough study of our theology of vocation.”4 Vatican II unambiguously affirmed the universal call to holiness and, in doing so, challenged the widespread assumption among Catholics that God’s call belonged only to a select few. The recognition that everyone has a vocation loosened up the category. It freed vocation from a narrow identification with priesthood and religious life, thus making it possible for lay ministers to appropriate the language of vocation in coming to understand and describe their own experience. Still, despite this broadening, many of the older theological assumptions have remained in place. The very way in which the bishops responded to those early testimonials (“Is this a fourth vocation?”) suggests the ongoing association in the Catholic consciousness between vocation and state of life. The deep sense of call to direct ministry experienced by many lay ecclesial ministers seems to be something more than the universal call to holiness (even as this ministry—like all ministries—is grounded in the baptismal vocation). But lay ecclesial ministry is not a state of life. It exists somewhere in between. Can we call this a vocation?

Lay ecclesial ministry represents a call to a new way of doing ministry, but it also represents a new way of being a minister. For here we have a significant, long-term, and full-time commitment to a position of ministerial leadership outside of the clerical state and distinct from religious life. However, it will not do to imagine lay ecclesial ministry as a new vocation alongside (or overlaid on top of) priesthood, religious life, and married life—if our primary association is that of a state of life. Our theological response will thereby founder if it expects a static status or the kind of lifelong commitment from the individual that marks these other venerable vocations. Lay ecclesial ministry is not a state of life but a living commitment. As a way of embodying a life of Christian service, lay ecclesial ministry has shown a remarkable freedom and fluidity. This reality calls for a theology of vocation to match, a theology articulated in more dynamic, developmental, and relational terms.5

In this essay, I propose an ecclesial theology of vocation as a way to talk about the call to lay ecclesial ministry. By an “ecclesial theology of vocation” I mean to highlight the way in which lay ecclesial ministers are called in, through, and on behalf of the ordered communion that is the church. In order to address the call to lay ecclesial ministry, we must first locate it within the broader context of the call to ministry—a term that I take to include all those actions that serve the mission of Christ. The call to ministry must itself be seen within the broader context of the call to discipleship that it serves. Thus the essay will move from discipleship to ministry to lay ecclesial ministry. But first let me say a bit more about the importance of an ecclesial theology of vocation.

Toward an Ecclesial Theology of Vocation

I suggested above that, for centuries, reflection on vocation within Roman Catholicism was constrained by a narrow identification with
a few, ecclesiastically approved states of life. However, alongside this institutionalization of vocation was a further problem: the interiorization of God's call. Since at least the seventeenth century, seminary textbooks have spoken of the call to priesthood as a kind of "secret voice" whispered by God in the depths of an individual soul. Neoscholastic theologians became increasingly preoccupied with vocation as a kind of supernatural grace hidden within. They debated the duties and obligations of such a call, parsed out its intersection with human freedom, and charted the various marks or signs that would indicate whether a young man truly "had" a vocation. In general, such an approach promoted a certain passivity in the church's vocational efforts. Those responsible for clergy formation were required to sit back and wait for a candidate to approach them and announce that he had heard God's call in his heart. Some went so far as to argue that, if it could be shown that this individual did indeed possess an inner call, his bishop would have no choice but to ordain him.

The problem with this conception of an inner call was not the notion that God speaks to the heart. The truth of God's presence within us is a cornerstone of Christian spirituality and the starting point for any authentic prayer. The problem, rather, was that this genuine spiritual insight was framed within a deficient theology of grace that reified God's call and reduced it to a kind of extrinsic force nudging some souls but not others. The neoscholastic separation of nature and grace made it impossible for theologians at the time to talk about the deep intimacy of God's call without presupposing a dualism that ultimately kept this call at a distance. Thus vocation became something in an individual that was separate from that individual—a supernatural addition to one's natural constitution, a kind of communiqué that could ask of a person anything. Such a notion too quickly separated God's call from the particular human being to whom it was addressed. It overlooked the distinctive constellation of gifts and abilities, experiences and associations, relationships and contexts that make every individual person a unique child of God.

Over the course of the twentieth century, Catholic theologians and magisterial statements largely abandoned the nature-grace dualism that had marred so much of post-Reformation Catholic theology. Today grace is seen not as some "thing" given to a few but as God's own life offered to all. Grace is nothing less than God's loving presence stretching out across the whole world and reaching deep into every human heart. This insight (which is largely a recovery of biblical themes and earlier theologies) has touched virtually every area of contemporary Catholic theology. But its implications for vocation have yet to be thought out.

This essay is a modest attempt to begin some of this thinking. The movement of God in the heart is still very important, for attention to the inner life remains an essential dimension of vocational discernment. But a broader and more generous theology of grace recognizes that discernment is a holistic, embodied, and relational process (something that the great spiritual masters of the modern period—from Ignatius of Loyola to Thomas Merton—recognized, despite the poverty of the theology they had to draw on). It is something that we do with others because God calls us through others. The soul is not so separate from the self for its surroundings. And an incarnational and sacramental sensibility suggests that God's call is never unmediated. Any experience of call, no matter how personal or powerful in the life of an individual, always comes to a person through another person—parents and mentors, pastors and teachers, prophets and friends. Indeed, we only know of the Christ because those first few followers of Jesus described their experiences to others, wrote them down, and passed them on.

Here we begin to enter into the realm of the ecclesial. For believers, our relationships to one another relate us to Jesus. Through baptism we enter into the body of Christ and join the people of God. Christ's call comes to us not only through our lives lived out in a grace-soaked world but also in a special and explicit way through the church. Drawing on the ecclesiological vision of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II offered us this lasting insight:

Each Christian vocation comes from God and is God's gift. However, it is never bestowed outside of or independently of the Church. Instead it always comes about in the Church and through the Church because, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, "God has willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness." (I Will Give You Shepherds/ Pastores Dabo Vobis [1992] 35)

This ecclesial vision of vocation is a far cry from the default individualism of contemporary society and the skewed introspection of past accounts of vocation. It invites us to reflect on the role of relationships in responding to God—an ecclesial theological foundation for the call to discipleship and the call to ministry.
The Call to Discipleship

We cannot speak about ministry—never mind lay ecclesial ministry—until we speak about what it serves: discipleship for the sake of Christ’s mission. In doing so, I link together two notions as so intimately interrelated that they are virtually identified: the call to discipleship and the call to holiness. A certain gap may exist in our minds between these two notions, largely, I believe, because many of us tend to associate “holiness” with a particular kind of piety, usually an “otherworldly” piety focused on the individual believer. But holiness cannot be reduced to piety—otherworldly or not—because holiness is nothing less than what Vatican II called “the fullness of Christian life” and “the perfection of charity” (Lumen Gentium 40). To be holy is to grow in love (caritas) for God and for others. This is the heart of holiness and, at the same time, the goal of discipleship.

The call to be a disciple (literally, a “learner,” a “listener”) of Christ is a call to follow him; it is a call to be in relationship with Jesus. As the gospels repeat in dozens of different ways, to be drawn into relationship with Christ is to be drawn into relationship both with God and with other people. Love is the gospel name for this relationship. Thus we begin to see how discipleship and holiness are linked by the long arc of love: the call to discipleship is the call to relationship with Christ is the call to love God and neighbor is the call to holiness.

Vatican II’s Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, dedicated its fifth chapter to “The Universal Call to Holiness,” a chapter that unambiguously affirms, “It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity, and this holiness is conducive to a more human way of living even in society here on earth” (LG 40). This claim would not be so remarkable were it not for the impression among Catholics, shaped by centuries of spiritual writing and ecclesial statements, that a life dedicated to the public embrace of the evangelical counsels was the superior path—even the exclusive path—to holiness. The council did not deny the value of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, nor did it dismiss the role of religious life in the church; but it did remove any doubt that genuine holiness could be achieved in any walk or way of life. All are called to be holy.

One of the obstacles to affirming a broader call to holiness lay in the negative associations “the world” carried in many traditional Catholic spiritualities. Too often, the monastic impulse was distorted by translating the “flight” from the world into an escape from the realm of sin. Ac-
way each of us is called to serve God and others, and so contribute to the mission of Christ and his church.

This typology helps us to recognize that, within the life of any individual, particular vocations are multiple and overlapping. What I feel called to do is likely rooted in my individual gifts and conditioned by my state of life, and I may be called to do many different things over the course of my life. In this section we will focus on the third way of speaking about vocation: what God calls me to do to contribute to the mission of the church—the vocation to ministry. The point I want to make is that, like the call to discipleship, the call to ministry is an ecclesial call—it comes to the individual in and through the church.

Vatican II used the word “apostolate” to refer to this broader contribution to the church’s mission. Implied in the universal call to holiness and discipleship is a further call, the call to serve, celebrate, and spread the gospel—the call to the apostolate. Some authors today want to limit the word apostolate to a distinctively lay activity of Christian witness “in the world”—separate from the ministry that belongs to the ordained “in the church.” But such a restrictive understanding of apostolate was foreign to the council. In the years leading up to Vatican II, Catholics used the word apostolate in a broad and undifferentiated way to refer to any activity that advanced the mission of the church. It was a word that—unlike “priesthood” or “clergy”—could be comfortably applied to both the laity and the ordained. The council followed this common usage, stating, at the beginning of the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People: “Every activity of the mystical body, with this in view, goes by the name of apostolate, which the church exercises through all its members, though in various ways. In fact, the Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well” (Apostolicam Actuositatem 2).

The most significant shift at Vatican II with regard to the apostolate was not the idea that the laity could join in it. This had been repeatedly affirmed over the first half of the twentieth century. Instead, the most significant shift was the council’s recognition that the apostolate of the laity comes not from the hierarchy but from Christ himself. In 1927, Pope Pius XI had affirmed the lay apostolate in the form of “Catholic Action,” giving this movement its classic definition as “the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the Church’s hierarchy.” Compare this to Vatican II’s Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People:

Lay people’s right and duty to be apostles derives from their union with Christ their head. Inserted as they are in the mystical body of
According to Vatican II, participation in the mission of the church does not belong to the hierarchy, which is then beneficently parcelled out to the laity. It belongs to all members of the body of Christ by virtue of a common baptism.\textsuperscript{14}

If the source of our participation in the mission of the church lies in baptism, then it is important to recognize that baptism is not a personal endowment or private possession. It is an initiation into a community. Prior to Vatican II, a number of theologians interested in promoting greater lay involvement in the life and liturgy of the church turned to baptism. In particular, they turned to Thomas Aquinas’s notion of the “character” imparted at baptism. Typically, seminary textbooks at the time described this character as a kind of invisible imprint on the soul, a “seal” that helped to explain why the three sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and ordination were never repeated. Aquinas, however, had evoked a richer theological vision by describing this sacramental seal as a participation in the priesthood of Christ.\textsuperscript{15} That insight provided a rich resource for proponents of liturgical reform. They argued that, by virtue of the character imparted at baptism (and confirmation), the laity share in Christ’s priesthood and so actively offer the sacrifice of the Mass along with the ordained priest—an insight confirmed by Pope Pius XII’s 1947 encyclical \textit{Mediator Dei}. The argument was soon extended beyond the liturgy to provide a theological rationale for the broader lay apostolate.\textsuperscript{16}

The downside of this development, however, was that by describing character as an invisible mark on the soul, baptism continued to be presented rather individualistically. Yet developments toward a more ecclesial consciousness were already underway. And by mid-century, Catholic theologians had begun to break out of this interiorized and isolated treatment of the sacramental “character.” The work of Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner, and others pursued character not as an individualistic and invisible imprint on the soul but as a real relation with the church, one diversely determined by baptism, confirmation, and orders. Karl Rahner wrote,

\begin{quote}
The teaching of St. Thomas on baptismal character does not necessarily contradict this view. It is sufficient to ask why through the baptismal character a human being shares in the priesthood of Christ and how
\end{quote}

According to this developing consensus, participation in the church’s mission does not come by way of personal entitlement. Rather it comes via one’s presence and participation within the community. It was the discussion of “character” that opened up space, within the constraints of neoscholasticism, to make this shift from sacramental theology to ecclesiology. Through baptism and confirmation one becomes a member of the body of Christ, and as a member one is called to contribute to its life: one enters into a community with a mission and therefore takes up this mission. Throughout the documents of Vatican II, whenever baptism is mentioned, what comes to the fore is initiation into community. Baptism is less about the mark on an individual than about the relationship of the baptized to Christ, their entrance into the royal priesthood described in 1 Peter, and their incorporation into the church, the body of Christ and people of God.\textsuperscript{18} The baptismal call to serve the mission of Christ comes through the community.

While Vatican II used the language of apostolate to describe broad participation in the mission of the church, in the years after the council, this language all but disappeared. In its place came “lay ministry.” This terminological shift followed an appropriation by Catholics of ministry language then current among Protestant theologians. It had some papal support, particularly in Paul VI’s letter \textit{Ministeria Quaedam} (1972), which established the lay “ministries” of lector and acolyte. But what fueled the rapid and wide embrace of ministry language was a changing reality: lay Catholics began to take up activities in liturgy and in education that had until then been reserved to priests or nuns. If this history blurred the neat linguistic distinction that had held between clergy and laity, it was because more and more Catholics were active in the church and its communities. Those who saw in this movement the work of the Spirit and who sought to encourage such activity pointed to the broader ecclesiological themes of the council: the church as the whole people of God, baptism as an initiation into the community and its mission, and an expectation of active participation as the norm. A broad and inclusive appeal to “ministry” captured these themes in a forceful and positive way.

In a perceptive early essay, John Coleman pointed out that by the end of the 1970s the term “ministry” had become a pervasive catchphrase among Catholic religious professionals. He underlined the fact that the
term was already so taken for granted that it was rarely defined. And he noted that it is precisely those things that are taken for granted that constitute the existing theological culture. “What we do not need to define itself defines our world and charts our view of reality.” Coleman called the term ministry a “motivational symbol” for active laity. Its use reflected a shifting view of life in the church and new expectations on the part of many American Catholics.

Thus ministry has become the way in which Catholics today talk about what Vatican II meant by apostolate. Avery Dulles points out that, even in official Catholic documents, “there has been a growing tendency to apply the term ministry to lay activities where the council would probably have used apostolate.” “Ministry” is simply how Catholics today name a broad participation in the mission of the church. This semantic shift is not uncontested, as some voices in the church want to limit the terms “ministry” and “minister” to the ordained. While I take such a restrictive use of the terms as unfounded, I do recognize that the call to ministry is a specification (and thus a certain “narrowing”) of the broader call to discipleship. To speak of Christian ministry is not to speak of every good thing that disciples do; rather, it is to speak of those activities that build up the body of Christ and serve its mission in the world by witnessing, celebrating, and advancing the reign of God. Moreover, within this definition, distinctions among ministries can still be made.

In what follows, we explore some of these distinctions in order to bring to light what is distinctive about the vocation to lay ecclesial ministry. We have seen how the call to discipleship and ministry comes in and through the church community. Now we turn to consider those who are called to serve on behalf of this church.

**The Call to Lay Ecclesial Ministry**

The bulk of this essay has been devoted to demonstrating the ecclesial context of vocation. According to the Second Vatican Council, we are called to holiness in the context of church communion; and we are called to mission and ministry through our participation in this communion. Baptism—as a fundamentally relational sacrament that initiates believers into the body of Christ—stands as the touchstone and criterion for any theology of vocation. We simply cannot understand the call to lay ecclesial ministry apart from this foundation.

Like all Christians, lay ecclesial ministers are called to lives of holy discipleship and to participation in the mission of the church. They too are baptized and thus called into a relationship with God that is oriented outward to relationship with others. However, the call to lay ecclesial ministry brings with it a further dimension, the call to minister on behalf of the church in a public and professional way. By virtue of their preparation, leadership, close collaboration with the ordained, and authorization, lay ecclesial ministers are called into a new set of relationships, a new position within the ecclesial community: they minister in the name of the church.

Another way to say this is to recognize that every contribution to the mission of the church—every ministry—is ecclesial, in the sense that it is rooted in baptism and flows through the church community. But not every ministry is ecclesial in the sense of serving formally and publicly in the name of the church. Lay ecclesial ministry is ecclesial in both senses. It is rooted in baptism, in the call to holiness and mission incumbent on every believer. And it involves a formal and public service on behalf of the church. Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord evokes this twofold meaning when it explains that this ministry “is ecclesial because it has a place within the community of the Church, whose communion and mission it serves, and because it is submitted to the discernment, authorization, and supervision of the hierarchy” (11).

The ecclesial in lay ecclesial ministry, then, evokes a new set of relationships. Richard Gaillardetz describes lay ecclesial ministers as an example of an “ordered ministry” whose call to serve publicly in the name of the church entails an “ecclesial re-positioning.”

Clearly there are certain ministries in the Church which, because of their public nature bring about a certain “ecclesial re-positioning” or re-configuration. In other words, the person who takes on such a ministry finds themselves in a new relationship within the Church and the assumption is that they will be empowered by the Spirit in a manner commensurate with their new ministerial relationship. These ministers are public persons who in some sense are both called by the community and accountable to the community.

“Ecclesial re-positioning” applies clearly to the ordained ministries of bishop, presbyter, and deacon who, through ordination, enter into a demonstratively new relationship within the ministerial structures of the church. But Gaillardetz’s point is that an analogous repositioning occurs for the lay ecclesial minister. “This ‘lay’ minister, is called by the community, based on a recognised charism, to take a new public role in the Church. She is called to enter into a new ministerial relationship...
within the community. This new ministerial relationship may or may not be ritualised, but the repositioning is clear and obvious to those active in her community.  She goes on to argue that this new position becomes evident, for example, in the community’s tendency to hold lay ecclesial ministers to a higher moral standard. “We recognise the possibility that their moral failings, because of their public character, might be a cause of scandal.” By framing “ecclesial” in such explicitly relational terms, we see more clearly how the “vocation” of the lay ecclesial minister is not some special state of life or particular function. Rather, this calling takes shape as a distinctive set of relationships within the ministerial life of the church.

The public nature of the ministry is an important component of this “ecclesial re-positioning,” but I would argue that the “place” of the lay ecclesial minister is also determined by (1) the minister’s commitment to serve and (2) the church’s recognition of her or his ministry. In other words, the vocation of the lay ecclesial minister depends on a call that is both experienced by the minister and extended by the community. On the side of the minister, this call is first and foremost a call to serve, thus it primarily concerns Cahalan’s third question: What does God call me to do? Without a doubt, the call to serve—to help others, to teach the faith, to facilitate worship, to walk with young people, to lead other ministers—is the core of the call to lay ecclesial ministry. Yet this call is not separate from the questions, How does God call me to live, and who does God call me to be? For the minister, what is done in service to the reign of God is shaped by and, in turn, shapes her way of living in the world, her lifestyle and lifelong commitments—just as the ministry draws on each individual minister’s unique constellation of charisms and, in turn, draws that minister into the special relationship with Christ that constitutes his personal holiness. Identity, lifestyle, and service are wrapped up in the call to lay ecclesial ministry.

On the side of the community, the question of call is a little more complex. To say that lay ecclesial ministers serve in the name of the church demands some clarity on what we mean by “church.” Historically, a certain dichotomy has entered into Western Christianity on this question. Since the earliest days of the Reformation, Catholics have tended to associate “church” with the clergy. Protestants have tended to associate “church” with the congregation. The implications for an “ecclesial call” follow from these differing ecclesiology. Luther reacted vigorously to what he saw as the episcopal and papal absolutism of the Roman Church. He argued that, on the question of appointing ministers, it is the local congregation of Christians that is paramount: “Therefore, when a bishop consecrates it is nothing else than that in the place and stead of the whole community, all of whom have like power, he takes a person and charges him to exercise this power on behalf of the others.” Luther went on to tell the story of ten brothers who appoint one of their number to lead in the interest of all; or of a group of sincere laymen who are taken hostage and dropped in a desert somewhere. According to Luther, should this group elect one of its members to lead the prayer, this man “would be as truly a priest as though he had been ordained by all the bishops and popes in the world.”

Luther’s position modulated over time, and the various Protestant churches emerging out of the Reformation took a variety of approaches to appointing and ordaining ministers—often involving some combination of episcopal oversight and local involvement of congregations. But Rome reacted strongly to Luther’s challenge. The Council of Trent stated in no uncertain terms:

The holy council further teaches that in the ordination of bishops, priests, and other ministers neither the consent nor calling nor authority of the people or of any secular power or functionary is so required that without it the ordination would be invalid. On the contrary, it declares that those who are raised to the exercise of these ministries when called and appointed only by a secular power and functionary, and those who have the temerity to assume such office themselves, are to be regarded one and all, not as ministers of the church, but as thieves and robbers who have not entered by the sheepgate.

Over the course of the modern period, any participation of the local community in the selection of its ordained ministers gradually disappeared within Catholicism. And in its official structures today, the Catholic Church still struggles to find ways to incorporate the whole people of God in calling forth ministers to serve.

This is unfortunate for at least two reasons. First, our earliest and best theology affirms a more holistic and comprehensive vision of vocational discernment rooted in a notion of the church as an ordered communion. The great Dominican ecclesiologist Yves Congar often pointed out that the modern divide between a Roman Catholic preoccupation with hierarchical institutions, on the one hand, and a Protestant fascination with a structure-less society of equals, on the other, would have seemed strange to the early church. Christ did not appoint a hierarchy that then created the church. Nor did he inspire a community that later elected its leaders.
In his gathering of disciples and choice of the Twelve, we see the birth of a church that from the beginning existed as an ordered communion, a structured community. As the church evolved over the course of the first millennium, the call to ministry came from both congregation and clergy. In his exhaustive ecumenical study of ordination rites from the third century to the present, James Puglisi argues, "In the early Church, the vocatio of the minister was mediated by the other Christians and ministers, according to the needs of the service of the Gospel, in a particular time and a specific place; in later times this vocatio no longer is seen as the business of the people as bearers of the Spirit, but rather a very personal reality." The loss was not the institutionalization that Luther deplored; rather, the loss was an individualization and an interiorization of the whole process of vocation. Discernment became less and less something that the whole community did together; instead, it was something that the individual worked out alone with God. Puglisi continues, "All these changes tended towards the separation of the subject and the object, towards the progressive autonomy of the person of the minister in relationship to his ministry rooted in its ecclesial context, a disastrous direction which will result in the disarticulation of the Church as a concrete structure of communion."

Puglisi is not suggesting that we replace sacramental ordination with congregational elections. Rather, the call of the community—what the early rites call electio or vocatio—reminds us that the process of calling forth ministers "includes a complex of actions and roles which inaugurate new, personal, and enduring relationships between the new minister, his Christian brethren, and God." This point brings us to a second reason to encourage a more holistic and comprehensive process for calling forth ministers to serve: it works. If we turn from the experience of ordained ministry in the first millennium to the experience of lay ecclesial ministers today, what strikes us immediately is the breadth of the call. The rise of lay ecclesial ministry is one of the great success stories of the postconciliar period. This ministerial transformation and expansion was not the coinidence of a thousand points of light. Nor was it the result of some Vatican directive or a national pastoral plan. Instead it was—as the US bishops have said—the work of the Spirit, calling through the voices of many members. The whole church, clergy and community, played a role in calling forth these ministers. We hear this call in the words of the Second Vatican Council affirming the baptismal dignity of the people of God; we hear it in colleges and schools developing programs for lay ministry formation; we hear it in pastors and other leaders inviting and encouraging new roles on the parish staff; we hear it in small Christian communities and Cursillo groups lifting up leaders; we hear it in parishioners welcoming lay ecclesial ministers into their midst. If we were to return to the beginning of this essay and continue the conversation with those lay ecclesial ministers we met there, what we would hear, no doubt, are the many ways in which their personal call to ministry came to them through others: through the invitation of a pastor or a fellow parishioner, through the response of the children in the First Communion class or of the teens in the youth group, through the example of another lay ecclesial minister, through the needs of the community that nobody else was addressing. The call to lay ecclesial ministry is a call through and into relationships. It is a dynamic and communal process. It is an ecclesial vocation.

**Conclusion: Ecclesial Discernment**

What distinguishes the vocation to lay ecclesial ministry from the broader call to discipleship and the broader call to ministry is the call to serve publicly in the name of the church. Obviously, lay ecclesial ministers are not the only ones who minister in the name of the church, but they are the ones who so minister as laypersons in collaboration with the ordained, in positions of ministerial leadership, with the preparation and authorization appropriate to such a role (Co-Workers, 10). What does it mean to be called to serve in the name of the church? As the church and its leaders continue to promote and receive this vocation, our attention will increasingly be drawn in the direction of discernment.

Discernment cannot be reduced to an individual enterprise. If we are to take the ecclesial nature of vocation seriously, then we have to recognize that discernment is an ecclesial affair (see Co-Workers, 27–32). It is something that involves the whole church in calling forth ministers to serve. This recognition will require, first of all, continued reflection on the role of the bishop in calling lay ecclesial ministers. All ministry (understood broadly as participation in the mission of the church) finds its ultimate source in Christ, its ultimate empowerment in baptism. But those who minister "in the name of the church" take on a new relationship to the community, signified and further empowered by some form of authorization. At present, in most dioceses, the bishop is involved in authorization only indirectly: usually the pastor hires a lay ecclesial minister and, in doing so, authorizes this minister. The connection is further removed for those lay ecclesial ministers who serve outside of parishes.
in hospitals or prisons, schools or college campuses. If the bishop is to get more involved, it will be important to locate authorization within the broader ecclesial call—remembering that authorization does not create the call to ministry whole cloth, nor does it simply confirm a call already arrived from elsewhere. Instead, authorization is one element within a more organic and involved process of cultivating, recognizing, challenging, and celebrating the call to serve the reign of God. Thus any formal authorization is a designation, a naming of an ecclesial relationship that both already exists and, at the same time, is enhanced in the naming. But such a designation only makes sense within a broader communal context in which the whole church—the whole people of God—are involved in calling forth ministers to serve.

This brings us to the final, and perhaps most important, point. Ecclesial discernment of the call to lay ecclesial ministry cannot be reduced to two players: the individual minister and the bishop. Rather, it involves a number of agents through whom the Spirit of Christ works in the life of the local church: ministers and mentors, pastors and parishioners, formation programs, family ministries, professional ministry associations, universities, lay movements, religious networks, and diocesan offices. In a number of places, formal processes have been implemented and informal practices have appeared that help to foster broader ecclesial discernment. Dioceses and parishes partner to identify and sponsor individual ministers; Catholic colleges coordinate classes for ministry formation programs; campus ministers write letters of recommendation; pastors encourage volunteers to enter certificate programs; diocesan convocations draw lay ministers and ordained ministers into conversation. Much is being done, and lay ecclesial ministry would not exist were it not for the Spirit calling forth individuals in this broad and diffuse way. But much, much more needs to be done to expand the call to ministry—particularly in this time of ecclesial contraction—to strengthen the vocation of those laywomen and laymen who serve in the name of the church.

Notes

2. Ibid., 72.
6. The interiorization of vocation is treated at length in Awakening Vocation, 47–90.
14. We will have to address the role of ordained leaders in coordinating this mission. The paragraph from Apostolicam Actuositatem cited above concludes, “It is for the pastors to pass judgment on the authenticity and good use of these gifts, not certainly with a view to quenching the Spirit but to testing everything and keeping what is good (see 1 Th 5:12, 19, 21).”
15. Thus for Aquinas, it was not just ordination that draws one into Christ’s priesthood: In an analogous way, baptism and confirmation also draw believers into this priesthood. And he went on to describe character as a spiritual power
of the soul oriented to action—specifically action in divine worship. This action consists either in receiving divine things (a power granted in baptism and confirmation) or in giving divine things (the power granted in ordination). For a fuller treatment, see Ministries: A Relational Approach, 162–75.

16. An interesting early study of this development is the doctoral dissertation of Fr. Theodore M. Hesburgh, later president of the University of Notre Dame, titled “The Relation of the Sacramental Characters of Baptism and Confirmation to the Lay Apostolate” and reprinted as Theology of Catholic Action (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1946).


18. A sampling of baptismal references underscoring the ecclesial include Sacrosanctum Concilium 6, 14; Lumen Gentium 7, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 21, 31, 32; Gaudium et Spes 22; Ad Gentes 7, 14, 15; Unitatis Redintegratio 2, 3, 22; Apostolicam Actuositatem 3; Presbyterorum Ordinis 5.


24. Ibid.

25. Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord points toward just such a relational approach in the way it grounds lay ecclesial ministry in the communion of the triune God and develops its treatment of the relationships between lay ecclesial ministers and bishops, priests, deacons, and the lay faithful.


28. Ibid.