AN UNFOLDING REALITY AFFECTS ALL SYSTEMS

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In 1980, the United States Bishops Conference first noted a new development: “lay persons who have prepared for professional ministry in the church,” whose roles “are not yet clearly spelled out.” The bishops said: “We welcome this as a gift to the church,” and, “we recognize and accept the responsibility of working out practical difficulties such as the availability of positions, the number of qualified applicants, procedures for hiring, just wages, and benefits” (Called and Gifted, 1980).

Two things about this assessment are of interest to me: the welcome expressed, and the very practical list of responses envisaged as needed. The issues that would gradually emerge as central are not yet mentioned: How do we explain this development to ourselves (what is the theology of lay ecclesial ministry)? What is the relationship between lay ecclesial ministers and ordained ministers? What formation do they need? How should this new ministry be ordered?

SYSTEMS

In the late 1990’s, lay ecclesial ministers surpassed the number of priests engaged in parish ministry; clearly, these matters are of increasing importance. We are experiencing a significant change in ministry, a change which in turn is causing further change in the larger system.

It is virtually a truism today to say: everything is connected.

Biologists have helped us to understand ecosystems, quantum physicists invite us to ponder elementary particles that are radically relational, social scientists ask us to think about our families as a network of relationships. We realize that each thing that is, is part of a system, a grouping of things that are interrelated. And each system exists in relation to other systems. A change in any part affects all the other parts of a system, and of the larger systems of which it is a part.

Change creates disequilibrium; systems strive to restore the balance which had been effective, and was comfortable, familiar. Change is often the result of adaptation to a different environment; systems which do not adapt die. Boundaries help parts of a system, and systems in relation to other systems, maintain cohesiveness.

Staying what we are, and changing. It is true of all parts of the universe, and of the church. And in systems which are self-conscious (a family, the church) these processes partake of intentionality and have both cognitive and emotive dimensions, indeed, subconscious and unconscious aspects as well.

The emergence of lay ecclesial ministers is a change which is impacting the church in many ways. It is not just that there is now a body of ministers who are different in some ways from others we have known in recent centuries, but also that there are new relationships with other ministers and therefore new boundary issues to resolve, new roles to develop and stabilize—in themselves and in relation to other persons’ roles—new patterns of interaction to engage and refine, new ways of differentiating one individual role from another, new ways of explaining ourselves to ourselves in light of our tradition. A whole system is in flux.

Let us try to observe this dynamic reaction by noting some discrete aspects of the life of the church system. I will do so by viewing these from diverse angles.

INTERACTIONS

Not so very long ago, the pattern of interaction in our community was rather sharply defined in terms of hierarchical roles, with a clear distinction between laity and clergy, and often between laity and vowed religious. Ordained men, and sometimes vowed religious, exercised authority, taking that role quite for granted; generally, lay men and women accepted that authority.

In the mid-1960s, numbers of men and women were hired as directors of religious education. Often, they had master’s degrees in their field and significant prior experience in education. As part of their role, they developed guidelines, e.g., for consistent student attendance and parent participation in children’s sacrament preparation programs. They assumed that this exercise of authority was appropriate. Privately, parents often said: “Who does she think she is?” or “What
A Whole System Is In Flux.

right does he think he has to tell me what to do?” The DREs said: “Parents don’t understand the importance of their involvement in religious education, and resist efforts to get them involved.” Pastors noted that there were tensions and concluded either that the DREs did not have good people skills, or that parents were not willing to accept the responsibility that was theirs. The complexity of a significant change in the system whereby lay persons were exercising authority relative to other lay persons was generally not examined.

Furthermore, because priests talk to other priests, and to their bishops, sometimes an interpretation began to be made: “It is better not to hire people with degrees, from somewhere else, because it does not work out well. We should identify and train our own people.” Questions about the impact on individuals of being role initiators (both relative to the role of DRE itself, and of a lay person in a position of authority in a parish) and of the dearth of role models for lay leaders were largely unrecognized. Throughout the ‘70s and ‘80s the number of lay persons employed in professional roles expanded; youth ministers, directors of liturgy, and pastoral associates were added to parish staffs.

In this context we can note a second relational shift in the system of parish life, that between the new ministers and priests. The new lay leaders tended to see themselves as co-workers with the parochial vicars and pastors in their parishes; they sought opportunities to reflect together with the clergy on the work of the parish, for example, by having staff meetings. The priests, who lived together, were used to a more informal pattern of interactions, over meals, or in the common room; they did not have a felt need for formal meetings. The research on parish ministers indicates that there has been an expansion of staff meetings in parishes, but that lay persons consistently desired this development more than their priest colleagues.

At times, there has been significant tension between individual priests and LEMs. Of course, some of this is to be expected in the normal course of human interaction. But some could be understood better if the challenge inherent in the shifting patterns of relating were explored. For example, when a newly ordained priest joins a staff with one or more credentialed and experienced lay leaders, he might draw upon the pattern of relating with lay persons known from his youth, expecting that his authority is primary, even in their area of competence and responsibility. At the same time, the lay leader might expect a recognition of the parameters of her role, or the authority of his expertise. Confrontation between them might be subtle or overt, but often it would not engage a central part of the issue: the system has changed, and the interactions between the individuals within the system are under stress as a way to adapt is sought.

More recently, laity have at times been appointed to the role of pastoral care of a parish without a resident priest, a provision of Canon 517.2. Research has shown that individuals who were publicly installed as a Pastoral Life Coordinator were more readily accepted by parishioners than those who were not. One interpretation of this is that the clear mandate from the bishop, publicly executed, influenced the interactions between the people and the new leader. Such a mandate enabled the individual to more quickly get beyond the “By what right does s/he do these things?” The system was better able to adjust to the change, and the life of the community, leader and parishioners together, better able to unfold in a vibrant way.

BOUNDARIES
Each social system is held together by an invisible boundary which defines it. Boundaries may be sharply defined, making quite clear who is and who is not within, or they may be porous or indistinct. In families, at times we negotiate the question of our boundaries. Should the new girlfriend be invited for Sunday dinner? To visit at the summer house? For Christmas Eve? Should the fiancé be asked to visit the sick grandfather in the hospital? Read at the grandfather’s funeral? Should the parents of the girl friend/the fiancé be invited to the funeral repast? Questions such as these guide us, and sometimes they can be quite complex.
as these both recognize a change in
the family system, and struggle
with finding the response which
both maintains the system and
adjusts to the change. Often, there
are incremental stretchings of the
boundary to include the new per-
son more and more. Too rigid a
boundary is detrimental to the
growth of the extended family, too
loose a boundary means that little
holds people together to draw sup-
port from one another and to treas-
ure family custom and ritual.
In the Catholic community, the
clerical system has a sharply
defined boundary. The process of
gradual inclusion into the clerical
world is long, with a shared life in
seminary, and several “entrance”
steps celebrated with great moment
and ritual. The customs which keep
the cohesiveness strong include
various gatherings (clergy days),
rituals (funerals of priests’ moth-
ers), and theology (priests are dif-
ferent from laity in essence). This
boundary is often described pre-
cisely as a division in the church
into two groups: clergy and laity.

One consequence of this is
considerable ambivalence
about when to include lay
staff in gatherings with priests. In
one diocese with a tradition of
inviting nationally renowned
speakers to address the clergy, the
lay ecclesiastical ministers petitioned
that they be included when the
topic involved parish ministry. The
decision was no, because “the
priests need time to be together.” A
separate lecture would henceforth
be given by these speakers for any
interested laity.

The professional needs of the lay
ecclesiastical ministers relative to the
priests, and to the laity in general,
were not recognized. The bound-
aries were maintained, the changes
in the system not acknowledged,
the anger of the lay ministers at
their exclusion not even recognized.

In another diocese, the bishop
noted that the topography of
parish ministry has changed and
he instituted a ministerium, a gath-
ering once or twice a year of all
parish ministry leaders—priests,
deacons and lay persons—to con-
sider topics of import for parish life
today. These events draw strong
and enthusiastic attendance. A
more permeable boundary has
developed between lay ecclesiastical
ministers and priests.

There is not a clear boundary
as to who is, and is not, a lay
ecclesiastical minister. In fact, this
has been a key question as the
bishops seek to discern the leader-
ship needed relative to this new
development. At a theological col-
loquium framed to discuss precise-
ly the reality of professional lay
leaders in ministry, some bishops
thought that no separate category
among the laity should be devel-
oped. They were concerned lest a
new elitism arise, or that the pri-
mary role for laity, the transfor-
mation of the world, be lost. One bish-
op wondered whether his commit-
ted janitor, who worked diligently
and with dedication, should be
designated a lay ecclesiastical min-
ter; another expressed concern about
the impact on vocations to priest-
hood and religious life that recog-
nition of lay ecclesiastical ministers
could have.

Each of these positions is at least
in part a question of the boundary
between clergy and laity. They are
entertained precisely because a
change has already occurred in the
system, and we are trying to adjust
to it, seeking a new, or, in some
cases restored, equilibrium.
Certainly, the debate is rational,
and to be expected. But the rational
debate also has emotive and psy-
chological aspects, which are gen-
erally not acknowledged. Will we
lose our treasured comradeship, if
it is diluted with new members?
Will these new members be like a
Trojan horse, bringing those who
are not-like-us into our company?
Will others have the commitment,
dedication, ability, that we have?
What will the inclusion of women
do to our group? If I do not stand
solidly within this group which is
so much a part of my identity, who
will I be? Boundaries are not unim-
portant realities!

**DIFFERENTIATION**

System theorists describe the
growth of individuals within a cor-
porate group as a process of differ-
entiation, of growing to be more
who each one is (or, speaking spiri-
tually, who one is called to be).
This process, whether of the mid-
marrige couple exploring ways
that each partner will become more
fully an individual person, or a
teenage boy seeking more autono-

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**Boundaries**

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Sometimes in reference to parish life, people speak of turf battles between different ministers—the liturgist and the religious educator, the youth minister and the pastoral associate, for example. In part these battles are due to the effort the new ministers are making to differentiate themselves one from another in the system. If the conflict is constructively handled, it can contribute to both clearer work identities for the ministers and greater vibrancy in the ministry.

An example of differentiation that is having considerable impact in ministry today is the identification of competencies needed for particular ministerial roles. The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry was the first to enter into a process of analysis and consultation with its members in an effort to say, this is what we do, and what we need to do it well. They were struggling to define themselves relative to the two other large groups of lay ministers, religious educators (the first, and largest group) and pastoral associates (of growing influence, and seemingly less marginalized than they were). Their process of differentiation positively impacted the system, causing other organizations to follow similar paths. Then corporately, the groups worked toward a statement of competencies needed for all arenas of lay ministry.

This, a further differentiation, has influenced leaders in ministry formation, diocesan and academic, to work with the common competencies in shaping their programs. And, the document which the bishops’ subcommittee on lay ministry is preparing references these competencies in significant ways. The well-being of the entire system is influenced by the differentiation of individuals and groups within it.

THE GRACE OF THIS MOMENT
Believing that Jesus is always with his church, and that the Spirit is always present in what is, are there insights from systems theory which could help us discern God’s action in our midst today?

The theorists say that change in one part of the system affects all other parts. Change in parishes affects the diocese, change in the diocese affects the church in the United States, change here affects the world church. Vatican II proposed an understanding of the church as the people of God. Prior to all particularities of role and function, we are one body, with a common call to holiness.

The history of recent centuries which emphasized classes within the church and too often saw holiness as possible only within certain states of life, needs considerable unlearning if this vision is to be fulfilled. The influence of lay ecclesial ministry on the rigid boundaries between clergy and laity is itself a growth toward a less dichotomized church. The differentiation of individuals and groups within the church is a movement in our time toward a fuller sharing in the mission and ministry of Jesus by all his disciples. The increase of interactions characterized by mutual respect and granting of appropriate authority to many helps the authority of the church to grow.

Edwin Friedman, who has explored the relevance of family systems theory for congregational life, has analyzed the import of times of passage in human life—births, marriages, deaths. He notes that at these times, the system is in disequilibrium, and therefore more open to the healing of old losses, wounds and hurts, more open also to the manifestation of the sacred in our midst.

Furthermore, the ritual developed by the tradition for marking the passage is the locus in time and place of particularly powerful healing and encounter. Perhaps it is so in our system, the church, as we adapt to the change in our ministerial leadership. Already, the incorporation of lay people in roles at liturgy (lectors, cantors, etc.) signals that we are not simply clergy and laity, two separate groups with two separate functions and places, but a diversity of ministers, carrying forward the mission of Jesus. We are reminded that God is present in all persons in the community, in all places in the world.