

Reconfiguring Priestly Ministry in Times of Epochal Change

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I am deeply honored to be here this afternoon on the occasion of NFPC's Fiftieth Anniversary to share reflections on the opportunities and challenges we face as ministerial priests in an age of mounting change—what Pope Francis likes to call “epochal” change. I am convinced that whatever changes NFPC has witnessed and helped bring about in the Church in the tumultuous half a century behind us is just prologue, a faint shadow of what lies ahead. All indicators point to dramatic and ongoing changes in how people live, communicate, and work--changes that require more than ever an ability on our part as key players in the Church to “roll with the punches.” My words here are not meant to provide a blueprint or even many suggestions regarding the concrete, practical form that priesthood is taking and will continue to take as today's epochal change unfolds. What I propose to do, rather, is provide a context and interpretive framework that may encourage us to enter into long avoided, nitty-gritty conversations about what the Holy Spirit has in mind: the what and how of the ministerial priesthood in flux moving forward. Can anyone deny that “something has got to give” in the face of new opportunities and challenges? Is there any doubt that while holding fast to what is solid in our ecclesial tradition, today's priests must embrace new realities. In addition, we priests must step up to the challenge of leadership that is inherent in our magnificent and humble calling.

For me this means bringing the tradition forward with fidelity, creativity and apostolic boldness (*parrhesia*) rather than retreating into little niches, comfort zones or nostalgia. Priests are gatekeepers, and much of what the Church in our times desires to be and become hinges on the ability of priestly ministers to channel and facilitate the reforms which have been proposed and urged upon us by successive ecclesial authorities for half a century now. No one has made this point more strenuously than Pope Francis. In the key document of his pontificate *Evangelii Gaudium* he does not mince words when he says:

I dream of a “missionary option” , that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything so that the church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity at every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. As John Paul II once

said to the bishops of Oceania, ‘All renewal in the church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion.’¹

In raising the issue of how we conceive of and practice the ministerial priesthood in pursuit of pastoral conversion Pope Francis has unquestionably named at least one of the elephants in the living room which is **clericalism**. My remarks here will echo concerns of Pope Francis and attempt to place priestly life in the context of our rapidly changing world. In discussing priesthood today and raising the specter of clericalism, however, it is important for me to avoid the trap of scolding or wagging fingers at priests, seminarians, or at any other People of God. It’s been observed jokingly, but maybe with a bit of truth, that Pope Francis is a great proponent of God’s unconditional love and mercy for all—except maybe for cardinals, bishops and priests! No doubt, we priests have been beat up enough in recent years. Much more can be gained in my view by tender, loving care than by criticism and complaints. Scolding doesn’t work because it appeals more to guilt and shame than to gratitude and joy. At some time or other, any or all of us may be guilty of not living up to the highest standards of our calling. One of the key insights of Ignatian spirituality gleaned from the practice of the examen of consciousness is the fundamental importance of working on ongoing conversion or change out of an ever deepening sense of gratitude, joy and consolation, and not out of guilt, shame, or spiritual desolation. A fact not mentioned too often is that in general, despite all the challenges and issues we face, priests are in the majority happy in their vocation and enjoy a real sense of satisfaction. My remarks here, then, must be taken in the context of the joy and consolation that marks the priestly lives of most of us despite the headwinds of change and all the crises we face. My reflections here should not be taken in a critical or negative way, but rather aspirationally and with hope.

Retrieving and Enhancing the Missiological Dimension of Priesthood

As Pope Francis makes clear, the starting point for the reconfiguration of priestly ministry so urgently needed today has to be retrieving the *missiological* character of our baptismal and priestly vocation. This means really **owning** the Church’s decisive turn toward **evangelization**-- outreach, “going out.” The concept of evangelization captures the essence, the identity and mission of the Church in its entirety. What does it mean to be an evangelizing Church, and therefore to be an evangelizing priesthood? What *Lumen Gentium* and other key documents of Vatican II teach, reaffirmed by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, by St. John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*, and Pope Francis most emphatically in *Evangelii Gaudium*-- all of this constitutes a clear and unrelenting affirmation of the urgency of **change**, change in tone, in mood and in focus regarding how the Church and her pastoral agents, priestly and lay, think about themselves, conceive of their roles, and pursue their activities. I call this transformation a reconfiguration, that is, a rearrangement of priestly ministry in ways that allow it to function more fluidly, flexibly, and effectively in and for an evangelizing Church.

¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 27.

Perhaps the most toxic of all attitudes affecting our exercise of priestly ministry today is the tendency to think of priesthood as a niche to be occupied. As long as we priests focus more on limiting our job description, circumscribing our labors, or take on an “I-don’t wash windows” mentality the more we become obstacles to doing what really needs to be done. We must roll up our sleeves, do what needs to be done or actively find and enable coworkers, sometimes deacons or religious but usually laity, to do it. This means believing more in the power of baptism by which all the People of God are constituted evangelizers and exemplifying it in how we go about being priests today. For our focus must not be on the jealous defense of our status, prerogatives and protocols but on the carrying out of Christ’s mission. That means a generous desire to take initiatives and engage new situations, challenges and opportunities. Pope Francis neatly sums up this monumental reconfiguration of ministry with the Spanish phrase *Iglesia siempre en salida*, a Church permanently focused on outreach and engagement with reality, a Church imbued with a “culture of encounter” in the spirit of St. John Paul’s *areopagus*, Benedict XVI’s “courtyard of the gentiles,” and Pope Francis’s conception of the “church as a field hospital.” This way of thinking and imagining must permeate our imaginations now as priests.

It is no secret that shifting from a basically defensive and self-referential posture which characterized Fortress Church for centuries to a new posture, attitude and stance toward the world as it is rather than as it ought to be, has been painful and disruptive. Old, exhausted attitudes, paradigms and patterns of life and action for the faithful as well as for ecclesial leadership die slowly. For way too long we have been paying too much attention to ideals at the cost of losing sight of reality. The Church as institution and we as leaders have too often ignored the Second Vatican Council’s wake up call. We just *reacted* to events, made judgments, and drew lines in the sand. We often did not listen, nor dialogue, nor reach out. We saw ourselves as an *ecclesia discens*, teaching first and listening second, if at all. Consequently we have often failed to engage and truly know today’s youth, our major interlocutors. There is no question now that we are losing them in droves.² Some of us all too often allowed ourselves to come across as customs and border agents, ecclesiastical functionaries and sacramental dispensers at the cost of losing contact with the flesh and blood of God’s holy people whom we were called to shepherd, to love and serve. In connection with this, consider that no one less than Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini shortly before his death in 2012 made the startling but defensible claim that in some matters the Church is about 200 years behind the times.³ So what do we do about it?

The Church today in the spirit of fostering a culture of encounter and dialogue is valiantly trying to catch up. Do we priests see and understand our role in Pope Francis’s call for us to go to the peripheries of our local dioceses, our regions, our country and the world—geographical, social, economic and existential? Vatican II proposed to move us in the direction of a fundamentally dynamic, pastoral orientation away from an excessively dogmatic and legalistic

² *Going, Going, Gone: the Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*, A Study of St. Mary’s Press, Winona: MN, St. Mary’s Press, 2017.

³ Reported by John L. Allen, Jr., “Translated final interview with Martini,” NCR Today, September 4, 2012, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/translated-final-interview-martini>.

one. That is why the Latin American Bishops at Aparecida and Pope Francis have called for *conversión pastoral*, “pastoral conversion.” Is there any doubt that we priests are in the cross-hairs of the transformation, the *metanoia*, demanded by epochal change?

The shift has been going on for more than half a century now, and many would say that it is reaching a moment of truth, a turning point, with the bold and energetic reform in attitudes and developments in teaching championed by our first Latin American and Jesuit pope. Two adjectives and a noun stand out as carrying the weight of the substantial change so deeply desired by the Church in our times: the adjectives are *missionary* and *pastoral*, and the noun is *discipleship*. The retrieval of the Church’s identity in terms of a dynamic commitment to missionary outreach not proselytism, to engagement with all cultures including the contemporary cultures of secularity, modernity, postmodernity and beyond, is absolutely fundamental. The late systematic theologian David Powers captured the structural implications of this change in thinking in his study of the theology of ministry titled *Mission, Ministry, Order*.⁴ In his careful review of the evolution of our understanding and practice of ministry since the Second Vatican Council Powers makes the simple but profound point that the Church asks us to conceive of everything including ministry and hierarchy (order and structures) in terms of mission. Mission accordingly must come *first* if, indeed, the Church’s identity and purpose are to prolong and incarnate God’s initial, loving outreach (mission) which took place first of all in creation and continues now in redemption, in time and in history.

Priests as Facilitators of a Totally Missionary Church

In practice this means that our method for reflecting on every form of ministry, including priestly ministry, must put the demands of mission *first* rather than make mission the application of a changeless organizational scheme cast in granite. As John O’Malley has demonstrated in his study of the ministerial priesthood’s historical evolution, our way of understanding, exercising and configuring the priesthood has developed markedly over the millennia in the face of new challenges and opportunities. He notes, for example, the obvious distinction between diocesan priesthood and priesthood among religious orders. O’Malley speaks of two distinct traditions, one for the so-called regular or religious clergy and one for the diocesan clergy. For men in consecrated life, priesthood is often exercised outside parish or diocesan structures in schools, hospitals, associations of the faithful, or in international missions. Diocesan priests, in contrast, have become increasingly identified with the parish, a fundamental instrument of evangelization but a rather static one that simply cannot respond to all of today’s pastoral challenges.

Fr. O’Malley notes that the word “presbyter” as taken up by the Second Vatican Council is underused in English even to this very day. “Presbyter” suggests the three-fold function of priesthood in terms of a vocation to preaching the word, administering the sacraments and governing--prophet, priest, king; while “priest” is more narrowly construed since the Council of

⁴ David N. Power, *Mission, Ministry Order: Reading the Tradition in the Present Context*, New York: Continuum, 2008.

Trent as “the power to consecrate, offer and administer Christ’s body and blood, as also to remit sins.”⁵

My point is that before Trent the priesthood was understood more broadly, and that only after Vatican II was there an effort to define priesthood more broadly, but if anything that definition has become narrower because it is increasingly identified with the parish. In past ages O’Malley maintains that priesthood was simply not as confined as it is today to parish ministry. I raise this matter because I am convinced that one of the implications of the Church’s missiological turn toward outreach, evangelization, engagement, in our times requires a more expansive, robust vision of priesthood. I don’t mean returning to the lack of proper formation and corruption that unfortunately afflicted the priesthood at certain times in history before the reforms of Trent, but rather recognizing the need for new expressions and methods in the way priesthood is lived beyond the structural confines of territorial parishes or even dioceses. The rise of social media, rising human mobility, globalization of various kinds as well as pluralism and diversity demand a priesthood that is anything but rigid or shackled to one paradigm, model of outreach, to one instrument of evangelization. I say this not because I think the parish is outmoded—we know that it can exist in different ways and be quite effective. But the times require a more flexible and wider range of ministries, *differentiated* outreach that parishes often cannot deliver. Pope Francis gives us a hint of what is needed when he refers to the Church as a “field hospital,” hardly a static territorial silo, but a place permanently adaptive and mobile. Hence the challenging question: Do we have priests whose imaginations correlate with such a fluid and dynamic vision of the Church?

What I am saying is that presbyteral evolutions have happened in the past, are happening now, and will continue to happen on a remarkable and dramatic scale as a result of profound changes in the world that Holy Mother Church cannot run away from. In addition to the ones already mentioned, the pursuit of equality for women is particularly dramatic. Whether this will lead to women priests or, at least, to women deacons, is difficult to predict. But whatever be the outcome of such conversations the worldwide, relentless drive toward the achievement of radical equality of women will require opening up more roles of leadership for women, inclusion in Church governance, in seminary formation, and a more credible recognition of women’s roles in Church and society. Indeed, the Latin American bishops have recently called upon the Holy Father to convene a synod on just this matter where women’s roles in Church and society will be tackled with realism and openness.

Along with the question of the proper role of women in the Church and society comes another major concern about the proper role of the laity. Need I say anything about the central importance of lay ecclesial ministries in the United States, the rise of more and more qualified laity doing essential work of service and leadership in parishes, in schools, in Catholic associations including the administration of parishes? As we know all too well, in the face of uncertainties and change, a fearful, “culture warrior” mentality can arise in which ecclesial leaders including us priests, seminarians, and faithful retreat into a romanticized and nostalgic

⁵ John W. O’Malley, SJ, “One Priesthood: Two Traditions,” *A Concert of Charisms: Ordained Ministry in Religious Life*, Paul K. Hennessy, CFC, ed., New York: Paulist Press, 1997, 12.

image, even a caricature of the Church, that militates against the openness, mutuality and dialogue demanded by a Church which is *incarnational*, seeking to engage the world as it is with a focus on mission. Something new is coming about and while remaining faithful to revelation, we cannot remain stuck and resist new developments in Catholic tradition. Ministerial priests today and even more so tomorrow will be asked not to assume a narrowly apologetic “circling the wagons approach,” in their preaching, teaching and activities. Nor should they be swayed as Cardinal Joseph Tobin recently warned by the idea that the Church is just fine as an elite remnant and will somehow be more pure by holding out for past rules and regulations.⁶ In this connection, I must mention Father Louis Cameli’s marvelous analysis of where the Church stands today, and what he calls “an authentic direction for the future and one we ought to take,” namely, to evangelize secular culture but also allow ourselves in some ways to be evangelized by it. Cameli insists that the whole Church and we priests as ecclesial leaders will be challenged to foster a spirituality of discipleship and accompaniment that requires openness to the other in a world of secularity and pluralism.⁷

Pope Francis makes the point that the Holy Spirit is always at work but we often do not cooperate. In an interview given during his time as Archbishop of Buenos Aires Jorge Bergoglio remarked in his evocative language that sometimes “our certainties can become a wall, a jail that imprisons the Holy Spirit.”⁸ The presbyterate today must see itself more and more missiologically and pneumatologically as taking risks just as Jesus did. This means mediating the encounter of the Risen Christ here and now existentially with shifting human realities. Jesus exemplified this so remarkably in his encounter with the Samaritan Woman at the Well: in dialogue and with a fascinating “give and take” between them (Jn 4:1). Pope Francis’s concept of samaritaness (*samaritanidad*) speaks to us of a Church like Christ focused on the other, especially the poor, the marginal, and the excluded as modelled precisely by the Good Samaritan (Lk.10:25) and the Samaritan Woman. In such a world the moralistic emphasis on rules, regulations, dogmas and rigid boundaries, who’s in and who’s out—what Pope Francis recently called “idols of abstraction”—dissolves because such insistence is inimical to the openness that is required of missionary disciples.

It is in connection with this fundamental openness to the other, to the existential encounter and to the concrete reality before us, that Pope Francis raises the issue of *discernment* in the truest Ignatian sense. This does not mean jettisoning what the Gospel or the Magisterium propose, but on the contrary doing the serious work of shepherds and pastors: applying what the Church teaches to real situations, for example, to the circumstances of divorced and remarried Catholics or the poignant struggles of the LGBTQ community to lead happy, fulfilled, and holy lives. This means developing more engaging, nuanced, and inclusive pastoral approaches rather

⁶ Christopher White quotes Cardinal Tobin in “Pope’s biggest fans celebrate five years of Francis at Vilanova,” *Cruce*, April 16, 2018.

⁷ Louis J. Cameli, *Church, Faith, Future: What We face, What We Can Do*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017, 65.

⁸ Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, “What I would have said at the consistory,” Interview with Sefania Felasca, 30 Giorni 11 (2007).

than exclusivist, legalistic ones, and doing all of this in *creative fidelity* to the Gospel. Is there any doubt that we priests are positioned to either be key players in this bold evangelizing outreach or to be barriers holding out for some elusive, pathetic return to “the way things used to be,” or some mythical “good ol’ days” when ostensibly things were black and white. Pope Francis pleads for the development of a capacity for discernment in seminarians and clergy whereby we will be equipped to help God’s people freely exercise their consciences rather than try to resolve consciences for them.⁹

Priests as Evangelizers of Cultures and Inculturaters of Faith

Another term that flows from the missiological character of our ministerial or hierarchical priesthood is “inculturation.” In an age of globalization characterized by the continuing encounter of cultures, social classes, races, ideologies, and religions, the priestly function of *connecting* or *bridging* diversity and differences takes center stage. The trinitarian mission of Christ entrusted to us is all about the creation of a communion of people, the Mystical Body of Christ, in which differences and diversity are not suppressed by the misguided tendency to favor conformity, but rather find ways to co-exist in a deeper harmony. One of the glories of the mission heritage of Catholicism is precisely the way in which cultures, languages, races and social classes—realities that so often divide people—have been reconciled in the creation of a truly global Church, a Catholic Church. In this sense there has always been a powerful drive toward diversity and pluralism in the Church’s catholicity, in the remarkable missiological project of bringing about communion while respecting differences, rejoicing in diversity rather than in conformity.

Pope Francis re-affirms the teaching of Blessed Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and refers to the Church’s central task as “the evangelization of cultures and the inculturation of the faith.” What that means is that the church in its entirety must become more and more expert in cultures, that is, in the ways of feeling, being, thinking, and acting of people. Culture is accordingly focused on the core of our humanity, on what makes people real human beings. The Church and we priests at the forefront of its outreach must also be “experts in humanity.” To become expert in humanity requires, on the one hand, *affective maturity* on our part and on the other the ability to engage others, especially the faithful, but also humanity in general. The word to emphasize is “engage.” What does it mean to really engage people? A priesthood that is missionary to the core demonstrates spiritual leadership which can walk the walk of engagement with others. Priests need to cultivate a basic curiosity about people, know who they themselves are, have a sense of their human and priestly identity, and, above all, have a capacity for dialogue. This means being able to “give and to receive” and create a real sense of mutuality in relationships.

When a sense of entitlement or a narcissistic tendency overcomes a seminarian or the priest, one has a formula for disaster, the “ongoing train wreck” that diocesan personnel boards sometimes face as unsuitable men sadly fail in their priestly assignments. Hence a more robust

⁹ Cindy Wooden, “Pope speaks to Jesuits about discernment, vocations, poverty,” Catholic News Service, November 28, 2016.

and effective human, spiritual and intellectual formation of the priest is crucial. Self-centeredness and traces of narcissism distract from the nearness and the tenderness of God which priests are called to radiate and mediate. For the ministerial priest by virtue of his calling is a key player along with all the faithful baptized in sharing the kerygma which brings about nothing less than a “revolution of mercy” that the Church proposes as the foundation of Christian identity. We are at the frontline of these “**missionary** disciples” who have been called and chosen to reach out to others unrelentingly.

In 2012 the Catholic Bishops of the United States produced a formation program called *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers*. In five modules or workshops the program addresses the basic challenge of developing cultural competence among all ministers, first of all among priests, but for anyone else involved in parishes, schools, hospitals or Catholic organizations today as diversity grows in virtually every nook and cranny of the United States.¹⁰ The shared or multicultural parish has rapidly become the norm in so many places throughout the church. How competent are we priests in navigating the currents of all this diversity? Skills, languages, and aptitudes usually required of the international missionary are now required of all priests because that exotic mission out there in Asia, Africa, Latin America or Oceania came to us and is now planted at our doorsteps. Even more challenging is the fact that in so many dioceses throughout the country the cultural make-up of the presbyterate itself has drastically changed. Bonds of priestly fellowship developed in common life and seminary experiences have disappeared as a result of the local U.S. Church’s dependence on international clergy. Attitudes, abilities and skills formerly associated with the missionary priest are now more and more required of diocesan priests who will probably never serve beyond the confines of their own diocese.

Priests as Pastors Today

The second adjective that defines the change of epoch we are witnessing in the world and in the Church is *pastoral*. Here more than anywhere else we see the legacy of *Gaudium et Spes* as exemplified in the strong pastoral orientation of the Church in Latin America since Vatican II. Pope Francis is a gift for the whole Church whose vision and leadership flows from his decades of collaboration with brother bishops and the faithful of Latin America who through their unprecedented reflections on the nature of the Church and its mission today have modelled a church focused on “seeing, judging and acting” in the light of the Gospel as taught by the Second Vatican Council and Catholic Social Teaching. Over the past fifty years the insistence of official Church documents in Latin America on the centrality of an *inductive*, pastoral stance, rather than a *deductive* doctrinal one has contributed enormously to a church which reads the *signs of the times* and listens, a church which takes a proactive, listening and learning posture rather than a reactive, teaching and admonishing one.

Pastoral conversion, then, means something analogous to what St. Paul called “taking on the mind of Christ” who “even though he was God, did not hold divinity as something to be

¹⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers (BICM)*, Washington, DC: USCCB Publications, 2012.

grasped, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant...” (Phil 2:6). *Shepherds and servant leaders*—these are the images that best capture what we priests are called to be! Insofar as we priests jealously hold on to our status and prerogatives and do not model the humble service of Christ, we falsify our calling and scatter the flock more than unite it. Pope Francis’s calls us to pastoral conversion in his landmark Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* which is a clarion call to reconsider our image of priesthood in terms that go way beyond gatekeeping, niches, and the *cursus honoris*, to really embrace the radical call to “going out,” to missionary outreach and engagement with the world first as it is and only second as it should be. “Reality is more important than ideas” Pope Francis keeps thundering in his five years of extraordinary Petrine Ministry.

Priests as Missionary Disciples

At the 2007 gathering of the Latin American Bishops at Aparecida in Brazil, the world’s largest regional episcopate proclaimed that the term “missionary disciple” is the one that best describes the identity of all the baptized faithful including priests. The teaching of Aparecida¹¹ and subsequently of Pope Francis insists that care must be taken not to distract from the radical equality of all the baptized and from the principle that “all is given in baptism.” Pope Francis pointedly puts it this way:

Looking at the People of God is remembering that we all enter the Church as lay people. The first sacrament, which seals our identity forever, and of which we always should be proud, is Baptism...no one has been baptized a priest or a Bishop. They baptize us as lay people and it is the indelible sign that no one can ever erase. It does us good to remember that the Church is not an elite of priests, of consecrated men, of bishops, but that everyone forms the faithful Holy People of God...To forget this carries many risks and distortions in our own experience...of the ministry that the Church has entrusted to us.¹²

One of the obvious implications of a priesthood imbued with the Church’s missionary purpose is the need to cultivate the *pastoral imagination* of all ministers, especially priests. Can we re-imagine ministry in ways that encourage a new openness among priests to the potential of cooperation and collaboration? This means collaboration and cooperation among priests themselves first of all as well as with all other pastoral agents. The move to invite all the baptized to take responsibility for taking the Good News to every nook and cranny of the world necessitates a change in mentality that gives pride of place to community and to teamwork as well as to skills like listening and delegating. The dominance of what sociologists call “expressive individualism” is a real threat to building community in the presbyterate itself and

¹¹ Council of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM), *Concluding Document of Aparecida*, Washington, DC: USCCB Publications, 2008.

¹² Pope Francis, Letter to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, March 19, 2016.

between priests and the faithful. We U.S. priests have imbibed a lot of individualism ourselves. Nevertheless, the climate of the parish and every other ministerial context must become more horizontal rather than vertical, less hierarchical and more participative. Of course, it is not a question of denying the Church's hierarchical constitution but finding the appropriate *balance* between the need for order and the Spirit's constant working in human contexts. One practical consequence of this emphasis on cooperation and collaboration is greater openness to apostolic movements led by the laity. These movements are unquestionably the source of great vitality in the Church today, yet it is common enough for them to experience benign neglect or suspicion, and even opposition from pastors and bishops rather than the oversight and cooperation they need.

The priest in the U.S. today finds himself in the grips of a crisis in vocations that has led to more and more of the faithful being packed into bigger and bigger, denser and denser parishes or clustered among more parishes. The end result is that, despite many outstanding efforts, adequate numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse personnel are not identified, trained and enabled to form and facilitate viable communities of faith. At best there are good liturgies and sacramental programs, but access to viable experiences of community declines. Adequate numbers of laity have simply not been formed or authorized to facilitate the creation of small communities. Yet we are told that it takes a community to form an adult Christian as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults proposes. We know that real community just like the Eucharist is a fundamental feature of our ecclesiology. Consequently, it is hard to escape the conclusion that a more intense kind of cooperation between the priests and the lay leaders is required to create the conditions for parishes as real communities of faith to flourish.

Conclusion

In closing I simply want to mention the appropriateness of our traditional way of speaking about the priesthood as involved with uniting God and humanity. The priest in many religions, not only Christianity, is a bridge-builder, a mediator. If this is so, then our lives experience a constant tension that derives from having our presbyteral feet, as it were, firmly planted in two worlds, the invisible world of the Spirit and grace and the nitty-gritty world of nature and the material. Our priestly vocation today demands of us a growing ability and willingness to reach out in order to link and reconcile people among themselves and with God. To do this we are called to develop knowledge, attitudes, abilities and skills that make us effective in connecting people with each other and with God. This will only happen with hard work and generosity.

If we really desire to follow Christ in this priestly role there is no choice but to listen and learn from the people and the circumstances we find in our parishes, dioceses, as well as in the whole world, and find ways to effectively engage them. The signs of the times demand that we recruit growing numbers of our laity and encourage them in the process of truly becoming missionary disciples. The success of our priestly mission to reconcile all things in Christ depends precisely on how successful we are in enabling the laity to be the hands and feet of Christ. For, as Pope John Paul II suggested in *Ecclesia in America*, the evangelization of the world actually

depends more on the lay faithful than on us priests.¹³ The success of our priestly mission depends on our ability to recruit, form and enable growing numbers of the faithful to reach out to others whom we would never be able to reach out to ourselves. Consequently, we must increasingly think of our priesthood in terms of the one baptismal vocation in *correlation with* the common priesthood of all the faithful. To affirm the Church's identity as missionary through and through and ourselves as missionary disciples of the Lord means to assiduously guard against every form of clericalism, elitism and entitlement that can insinuate itself as toxin into our priestly brotherhood. Rather, we must rejoice and exult in the Risen Lord who, as *Lumen Gentium* teaches, has graciously called us all to be one, holy, priestly People of God.

¹³ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, No. 44.