

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Lay ecclesial ministries and the future of the Church

FORWARD IN HOPE. *Saying Amen to Lay Ecclesial Ministry*. By Bishop Matthew H. Clark (Ave Maria Press, 2009) . 114 pages, \$11.95.

In *Forward in Hope: Saying Amen to Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, Bishop Matthew Clark details the status in the Diocese of Rochester of lay ecclesial ministry (LEM), strongly advocated in his 1982 pastoral letter, *Fire in the Thornbush*. The inherent issues, problems and failures of the LEM model are apparent, and reveal the legacy Clark leaves to his successor in 2012. The vision is obscure; it does not address how LEMs, unable to confect the Eucharist and to forgive sins, can provide for the spiritual needs of the future flock. Clark's words (plus five LEM testimonies) reveal LEMs as either second-class clergy or elite-laity. Servanthood is almost completely missing from testimonies of LEMs, worried about their own prestige and pay rates.

Clark seems reluctant to call LEMs to obedience regarding women's ordination. Finally, on page 93 (of 114 pages), he writes: "I assent completely to the definitive teachings of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II that the Church, following the example of Jesus in choosing only male apostles, cannot alter this pattern." One can almost hear "but," as he continues: "...I must also point out that many of us in Church leadership have encountered both men and women who struggle with the Church's teaching regarding ordination." He calls this "a difficult cross," refers to the "painful question of ordination," and says LEM "has become a substitute ministry for the one to which they feel called." Clark adds: "The fact that ordination is not

open to them is experienced as a restriction, and sometimes as a very real source of grief and anger." The Bishop's commiseration is part of the problem, not the solution, stoking dissatisfaction rather than exhorting to servanthood.

He gives no criteria for discerning suitability to be an LEM, but one might expect at least obedience to Church teaching, lack of resentment toward the priest's role, and a servant mindset toward the People of God. Rather than expressing gratitude for the opportunity to serve, the testimonies (most of them from women) echo traditional feminist complaints about needing more power or feeling under-appreciated. A gender agenda is sadly divisive, belying claims of a vocational call (usually characterized by joy, not complaint).

Zenit reported on March 16, 2009: "The Holy Father urged the bishops to ensure that the 'new structures' or pastoral organizations are not planned for a time in which it will be possible to 'do without' ordained ministry, on the basis of an erroneous interpretation of the promotion of the laity, because this would lay the foundations for a further dilution in priestly ministry, and any supposed 'solutions' would, in fact, dramatically coincide with the real causes of the problems currently affecting the ministry." Clark describes LEMs as being "in nearly every facet of our mission" and says: "We simply could not do what we do without [LEM]s" and "with no significant sign that the gradual decline in the number of priests will abate soon, the presence of [LEM]s will allow us to sustain our parishes." This seems to contrast sharply with the papal warning about "a further dilution in priestly ministry." Analysis is lacking on the LEMs' impact on priestly vocations. Why is the startling rise in LEMs nationwide (to more than 30,000) not related to

the decline in priests from 59,000 (in 1975) to 40,580 (in 2008)? Which is the cause? Which is the effect?

Ignoring controversial LEM testimonies, Clark says LEMs "should be viewed as a complement to the ministry of the ordained and not as corrosive of their authority." But how is this accomplished, especially where lay parish administrators are in charge of a priest? Clark approvingly quotes one LEM: "My belief is that I have received a call by virtue of my own charisms and giftedness, rather than, 'I'm doing this for Father.'" Instead of expressing concern for priestly vocations and prerogatives, Clark indulges LEMs attending priests' convocations, and frets about LEMs not processing with the priest at Mass, or sitting in the sanctuary, or being more active and visible in administering the sacraments.

Even the bishop seems conflicted on the real relationship of LEMs to other laity. He writes: "many lay ecclesial ministers

naturally feel their ministry is distinctive, more clearly defined, and more professional than that of their peers in the pews." Three sentences later he writes: "But I do not sense among the vast majority of these ministers with whom I have conversed any overt sense of entitlement or privilege or feeling of being set apart." Such contradiction underlies and abets confusion about LEMs' roles.

If LEMs are supposed to serve the laity, why is no effort reported to solicit lay reactions, or identify the effect on parishioners' spiritual lives and parish participation? Do LEMs impede lay involvement? Do the laity hear, "Don't volunteer; just send money to pay the LEM?" Or is time and talent elicited to benefit souls and community? Further data and analysis are needed before using this book in lay ministry, and before saying "amen" to more LEMs.

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