



# A Sponsor's Identity Is Priestly, Prophetic, Royal

SR. DORIS GOTTEMOELLER, RSM, PhD

**O**fficial church documents such as the Second Vatican Council decrees tend to be couched in “churchspeak” — phrases like “the priesthood of all the baptized,” and the Christian vocation to be “a priest, prophet, and king.”<sup>1</sup> Really? How can a baptized lay Catholic be a priest, let alone a king or a queen? And I seldom feel very prophetic. At times, such phraseology may actually obscure its powerful message.

For the record, the reference to the threefold vocation comes from the passage in 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises’ of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Another reference to the priesthood of all the faithful occurs in Revelation 1:6, “(He) has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father...”

The key to a deeper understanding of some of this biblical and theological phraseology may be better found in Christian experience than in a theological thesaurus. And one venue for such a discovery is the role of sponsorship of Catholic ministries. How do sponsors live the priestly, prophetic and royal vocation of the lay Catholic?<sup>2</sup>

## THE BACKGROUND

First of all, a little background on the evolving understanding of the lay vocation. For those old enough to remember the days prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), they will recall that the church was more hierarchically organized. Priests were in charge, and laypersons were the vast and largely undifferentiated community. Vowed religious were in a special category, said to be living in a “state of perfection,” focused on pursuing holiness through their prayer and good works. The council disrupted this comfortable picture by asserting that “*all the faithful, whatever their*

*condition or state* — though each in his own way — are called by the Lord to that perfection of sanctity by which the Father himself is perfect.”<sup>3</sup> The whole people of God, whatever their vocation, are called to a life of holiness. In many places in church documents, this Christian life is described in terms of a priestly, prophetic and royal identity.

The council was careful to point out that the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood differ essentially and not only in degree. Each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ.<sup>4</sup> Another council document, the *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (Apostolicam Actuositatem)*, spells out in some detail how the laity participate in Christ’s mission.

In 1987, the Synod on the Laity returned to the threefold mission to give further clarification and urgency to the special role of the laity. In what follows, we can draw on Pope John Paul II’s 1988 exhortation, *The Lay Members of Christ’s Faithful People (Christifideles Laici)*. The pope states, “In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, at the beginning of my pastoral ministry, my aim was to emphasize forcefully the priestly, prophetic and kingly dignity of the entire People of God.”<sup>5</sup>

## THE PRIESTLY IDENTITY

The responsibilities of sponsorship certainly provide a venue for recognizing this dignity and for



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carrying out the triple office. In particular, they give the laypersons and consecrated religious who exercise sponsorship roles the opportunity to share in Christ's priestly, prophetic and kingly mission in specific ways:

A *priestly* act is fundamentally one of offering sacrifice to God on behalf of a community. Christians no longer offer goats or calves; instead, the baptized are united to Jesus Christ and his sacrifice in the offering they make of themselves and their daily activities. In Chapter 12 of his letter to the Romans, St. Paul wrote, "I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect."

Discerning what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect, goes to the heart of the sponsorship role. Although all trustees and administrators have the obligation to seek and to do what is good and pleasing to God, the final responsibility lies with the sponsors. Particularly in difficult cases, when the path forward is not clear, the sponsors must invest the necessary time and effort to discern what is to be done.

How do sponsors avoid conformity to some of the shallow values of this age? It requires the ongoing renewal of their minds and hearts through study and prayer in order to be prepared for future decisions on behalf of the community. St. Paul probably would be the first to say that investment of time and energy constitutes a "priestly sacrifice."

No doubt the boards of most ministerial juridic persons have encountered issues that deserve such discernment. New alliances, particularly with other-than-Catholic partners, often require careful investigation and reflection that go beyond the potential for increasing market share. Selection of new leaders and of new board members requires more than a review of professional credentials. What is the candidate's potential for enacting the mission? Sponsor boards need not don clerical stoles to process such issues, but their work certainly deserves to be dubbed "priestly."

## THE PROPHETIC IDENTITY

The *prophetic* dimension of the people of God — proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed — is perhaps easier to describe. In paragraph 14 of his post-synodal document on the laity, Pope John Paul II wrote, "Through their participation in the *prophetic mission* of Christ . . . the lay faithful are given the ability and responsibility to accept the gospel in faith and to proclaim it in word and deed, without hesitating to courageously identify and denounce evil. United to Christ, the 'great prophet' (Luke 7:16), and in the Spirit made 'witnesses' of the Risen Christ, the lay faithful are made sharers in the appreciation of the Church's supernatural faith, that 'cannot err in matters of belief' and sharers as well in the grace of the word. (cf. Acts 2:17-18; Rev 19-10)."

He further enjoined the lay faithful to let the Gospel shine out every day in their family and social life and in their secular occupations. What

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better venue is there to let the Gospel shine forth than in the ministry of health care? We can say that every employee has the potential to proclaim the Gospel through his or her workplace actions. Extensive orientation and mission-education programs foster this behavior.

However, more than anyone else involved in the ministry, the sponsors have the opportunity and obligation to proclaim the Gospel. Their oversight is a key to the integrity of the mission. Areas such as community benefit, advocacy, care for the environment, employee policies and others offer opportunities to ensure that Gospel teachings undergird organizational behaviors.

In short, prophetic activity does not require standing in the public square with a loudspeaker announcing the good news. It happens whenever the sponsor group meets and endorses a policy directed toward enhancing the mission of the





organization. Furthermore, the personal commitment that sponsors are making to their own spiritual and intellectual development through sponsor formation programs is an indication of their sincerity.

### THE ROYAL IDENTITY

The *royal* dimension of the Christian vocation may seem the least familiar. Pope John Paul II explained that, “because the lay faithful belong to Christ, Lord and King of the Universe, they share in his kingly mission and are called by him to spread that Kingdom in history.”<sup>6</sup> Spreading that kingdom encompasses the evangelizing mission of the whole church, including through the prophetic activities described above.

“But in particular the lay faithful are called to restore to creation all its original value.”<sup>7</sup> We can read here an anticipation of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis’ passionate call to care for all of creation.

In that encyclical on the environment, after reviewing all that threatens its well-being, Pope Francis urges us to “come together to take charge of this home which has been entrusted to us.”<sup>8</sup> The health care ministry has a giant ecological footprint, building and maintaining countless service centers: hospitals, clinics, physician offices and long-term care facilities, among them. It also is a huge consumer of energy and of supplies that have to be disposed of after use. These realities require sensitivity to their impact on the environment. Fortunately ministry practices, especially new construction and the purchase, use, recycling and disposal of supplies, have become increasingly sensitive to their impact on our common home.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, a healthy environment is one of the social determinants of good health. Implementing this care for creation requires the efforts of every trustee and employee. But it is the responsibility of the sponsors to articulate the vision and to call for its enactment.

Although describing the sponsorship role as an exercise in the priestly, prophetic and royal vocation of the Christian faithful may seem unfamiliar or even artificial, the imagery does underscore the unique and challenging opportunities sponsors share. As stewards of significant church ministries, with an official commissioning and

accountability, they play a specific ecclesial role. In most dioceses, the number of ordained priests has decreased significantly in recent decades. It surely is the work of the Spirit that dedicated laypeople have stepped forward into positions of responsibility for the church's charitable ministries.

An awareness of how sponsors are called to live out the threefold office of the people of God also can be a lens for reviewing a candidate's potential for a sponsorship position: Will you make the necessary sacrifices to prepare yourself to discern the best choice in a difficult decision? Are you willing to promote organizational behaviors that proclaim and demonstrate Gospel values? Is care for creation a central value for you?

These questions can prompt the type of discussion that indicates whether the candidate is prepared to assume the priestly, prophetic and royal duties of sponsorship. Whether or not the position description is couched in these biblical terms, the phraseology does provide a unique way to describe the role. Furthermore, the usage reminds us of the triple mission entrusted to all of the people of God.

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## NOTES

1. *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, para. 31: "The faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the People of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world." *The Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People*, para. 2, uses the same phrase.
2. Doris Gottemoeller, "The Vision of Vatican II: Alive in Catholic Health Care," *Health Progress* 94, no. 4 (July-August 2013): 53-55. In 2013, I suggested that the health care ministry has been a "community of practice" for the vision of the Second Vatican Council, an insight I have further developed for *Health Progress* in this 2017 article.
3. *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, para 11. Italics added.
4. *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, para. 10.
5. *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, para. 14.
6. John Paul II, *The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People (Christifideles Laici)*, para. 14.
7. John Paul II, *The Lay Members*, para. 14.
8. Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si')*, para. 244.
9. See the May-June 2016 issue of *Health Progress*, which includes numerous articles on caring for creation.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Sr. Doris Gottemoeller, RSM, names the roles of "priest, prophet and king" as part of a sponsor's identity. Can you think of how those terms apply to sponsors of Catholic health care in your ministry?
- How does a sponsor's responsibility to discern the will of God affect the day-to-day operations and care of patients and residents within your ministry? How is that communicated throughout the organization?
- Sponsorship is a prophetic vocation within the church. How do sponsors ensure the prophetic role of the Catholic health ministry today?

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