

# PREPARING FOR CANONICAL GOVERNANCE

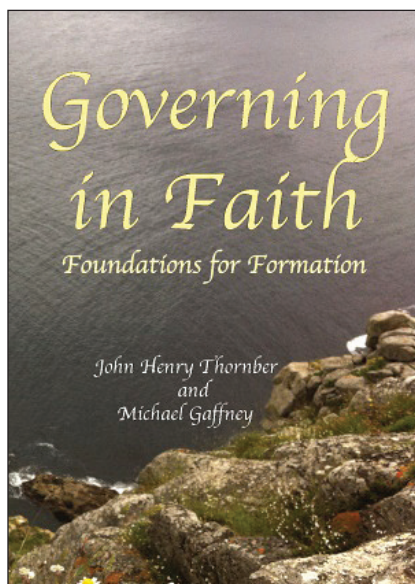
REVIEWED BY ZENI FOX, MA, PhD

**G**overning in Faith asks the question, “What is needed to support canonical governors in their roles, or, in other words, what formation do they need?”

In a time when lay professionals lead increasing numbers of Catholic institutional ministries in health care, education and social welfare, many founding religious orders have sought ways to ensure the institutions’ ongoing catholicity. One way is by developing new structures for governance to assist with this task. Often described as “sponsorship,” these structures take varied forms, but all are ways of exercising canonical governance. Some of the governors are vowed religious, some are clergy, many are laypeople. As Thornber and Gaffney write, they are charged with “leading ministries in ways faithful to their mission in light of Church law.”

For his doctoral dissertation, Thornber sought to identify what theological and ecclesial preparation such governors needed, especially laypeople, in order that they “sponsor” well. *Governing in Faith* describes the process he undertook to answer that question, and, in concert with Gaffney, he places the findings in the context of the changing landscape of ministry today. Then, drawing on Thornber’s research, the authors develop a comprehensive framework for formation which is both visionary and practical.

It can be argued that the role of a sponsor is simply to safeguard the Catholic identity of an institution, being sure that its works are a faithful continuation of the ministry of Jesus. It also can be argued that a sponsor should seek to ensure that the teachings of the



**GOVERNING IN FAITH: FOUNDATIONS FOR FORMATION**

BY JOHN HENRY THORNBER AND MICHAEL GAFFNEY

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church be followed properly — both wide-angle teachings such as the dignity of each person, and more focused teachings such as those expressed in the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*.

However, the relational tasks of the sponsor within the structures of the ecclesial community can be an added role. Those tasks once had clear paths for maintaining both interpersonal and structural relationships, linking religious communities and their works to diocesan and Roman Catholic Church leadership. Furthermore, the individuals particularly charged with main-

taining such ecclesial communion were formed in such a way that they had a (reasonably) common language and (mostly) similar understanding of goals and processes as those in the larger church to whom they were responsible. Such formation made effective relationships more possible.

Since a sponsor’s lay members generally have not had such formation, how can they be better prepared for both the specific task of governance and the more complex one of fostering ecclesial relationships?

**SURVEY REVEALS TRAITS**

Thornber searched for an answer by constructing a survey drawing on documents from both the Vatican (especially *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II’s instruction on priestly formation) and the United States bishops (*Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, a guide for the development of lay ecclesial ministry). The survey gave him an effective way of identifying the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral understandings and characteristics needed for ministry, yielding “traits for canonical governors.”

For example, “traits relating to the human dimension focused on the personality and character of people ... such as integrity, balanced judgment and behavior and sense of justice.” Traits relating to the spiritual dimension included “understanding and appreciation of one’s baptismal call and vocation, and one’s ministry as working for the mission.”

Furthermore, the actual listing of each trait is concise and specific. For example, one human dimension trait is “possess a deep sense of justice,” while

the spiritual dimension is “view their role as a ministry of governance.” Each trait has specific citations, particularly from *Pastores Dabo* and *Co-Workers*.

Although Thornber identified the traits for his research, the result is a tool with two parts: the list of traits and ways to explore each in greater depth from the church’s teaching. Those responsible for formation for sponsorship can use the tool both in assessing potential candidates and in developing formation programs. In addition, the identified categories would themselves help candidates gain greater familiarity with the language, goals and processes of ministry.

However, this was only the first step. Thornber’s research design “involved a range of participants and a variety of data collection and analysis strategies,” and it used both quantitative and qualitative methods. The survey asked participants to indicate their level of agreement regarding the desired traits and the extent to which they perceived the traits to be evident. In addition to the online survey, Thornber conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with participants from a variety of backgrounds, including theology, spirituality, executive management, governance, canon law, civil law and human resources.

The participants offer much advice about the content and desirability of the traits. Most significantly, they indicated that there was discrepancy between the levels of desirability of various traits and the perceived enactment of those traits. Interviewees were especially concerned about “the perceived lack of understanding ... about how the church operates ... the purpose and mission of the ministry ... and who has author-

ity in the Church and how this authority is exercised in governance processes.”

#### CENTRAL THEMES

In a second level of analysis, the authors identify central themes and use quotes from interviewees to illustrate them. They give a kind of operationalized description of canonical governance that is very meaningful, yet practical. Two final chapters entitled “Developing a Framework for Formation” and “Forming Foundations for the Future” outline the key tasks that lie ahead. The vision here is rooted both in the survey’s and interviews’ rich material and perspectives from varied disciplines. A reader who used only these chapters would be enriched in understanding the breadth of holistic formation and given practical implementation strategies.

Who would profit from this volume? In short, all those responsible for ministry in the church: ministry within institutional settings and beyond; the ministry of governance, including that of bishops; the ministry of formation, of canonical governors and other ministers, lay and ordained. In addition, leaders of Catholic institutional ministries whose specific competencies do not usually include in-depth ministerial and theological understanding could gain a deeper understanding of this aspect of the life of institutions they lead.

*Governing in Faith* is a treasure trove of information and visionary possibilities for more effectively carrying forward the ministry and mission of Jesus.

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