

# The Theology of Ministry Leadership

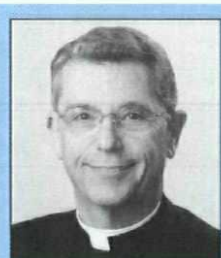
BY FR. MICHAEL D. PLACE, STD

As everyone knows, one of the critical challenges facing the Catholic health care ministry is ensuring that it will have—as Sr. Doris Gottemoeller said so well in her remarks to a Consolidated Catholic Health Care meeting in February 1999—the critical mass of leaders possessing the “fire in the belly” (and, I would add, the “vision in the mind”) needed to thrive in the first decades of the new millennium.

In previous columns, I have reflected on that challenge from the perspective of leadership competencies and culture transmission.<sup>1</sup> I also have considered sponsorship as an aspect of ministerial leadership.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, through the efforts of Kate Grant and Ed Giganti and from experience gained on my own travels, I have learned of the many significant efforts and achievements in leadership development in the ministry at both the system and institutional levels.\* Also, over the years, *Health Progress* has published many significant articles on various dimensions of leadership development. This issue of the journal continues that tradition.

In thinking about those many contributions to our knowledge and experience, I have noted a lack in recent years of systematic theological reflection on the nature or meaning of leadership in the Catholic health care ministry. My hunch is that this is not because we have not had a theology, but rather because that theology had become so second nature to us that we lived it without thinking about it. This is not unusual in the life of the church. For example, when we go to Mass on Sunday, we usually do not have the Council of Trent teaching on transubstantiation in the forefront of our minds. However, if something strange or unusual were to occur—if potato chips were brought to the altar instead of bread, say—

\*Mary Kathryn Grant, PhD, is CHA's former executive director, leadership development; Ed Giganti is the department's senior director.



*Fr. Place is president and chief executive officer, Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.*

we might, seeking to rationalize our resulting sense of unease, explain that this was somehow not “Catholic.” In a sense, we would be searching for a theological reason. In other words, it is not unusual for us, in periods of crisis or significant transition, to take the time to search for a greater understanding or appreciation of the theological underpinnings of a particular dimension of church life.

In this column I hope to contribute to that process of theological analysis. I will mention several theological categories that, I suggest, ought to illumine our understanding of leadership in the ministry. Some I will mention only in passing and leave till later for further exploration. Others I will engage in more detail, albeit briefly. Finally, I will initiate what I hope will be a ministry dialogue on the significance of these theological themes for the selection and development of future leaders.

## LEADERSHIP AND LEADERS

Let me begin by defining what I mean by “leaders.” In a sense, the case could be made that anyone who has managerial responsibilities in the ministry is a leader. One also could argue that for the necessary critical mass noted above to exist, the leadership of which we speak will be found almost exclusively in the office of the chief executive. To my mind, the former point of view is too expansive and the latter, too narrow. For this article, “leader” will refer to those people whose positions give them either the power or the influence needed to direct or leverage the life of an institution or organization so that it can faithfully incarnate and perpetuate the healing ministry of Jesus Christ.

Which leads me to a second clarification. The leadership of which this article speaks exists within, and for the explicit purpose of carrying forward, the healing ministry of Jesus Christ in the community of faith that is the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, we are not talking about health care leadership in general that just happens to occur in a

Catholic setting. We are speaking of leadership in an ecclesial ministry or, to say it another way, ministerial leadership. Here again we might well find a great diversity of opinion concerning which positions in our organizations should be included in the category of ministerial leadership. We might also debate whether a person who is not an active Roman Catholic or, for that matter, a Christian, can be a "ministry leader." Although I leave it to others to discuss this neuralgic issue, I will suggest that any leadership position that has the capacity, by virtue of its power or influence, to significantly deflect or impede, on one hand, or significantly focus or advance, on the other hand, the *collective* ministerial mission of an organization exercises *ministerial leadership*, as distinguished from leadership in the ministry.

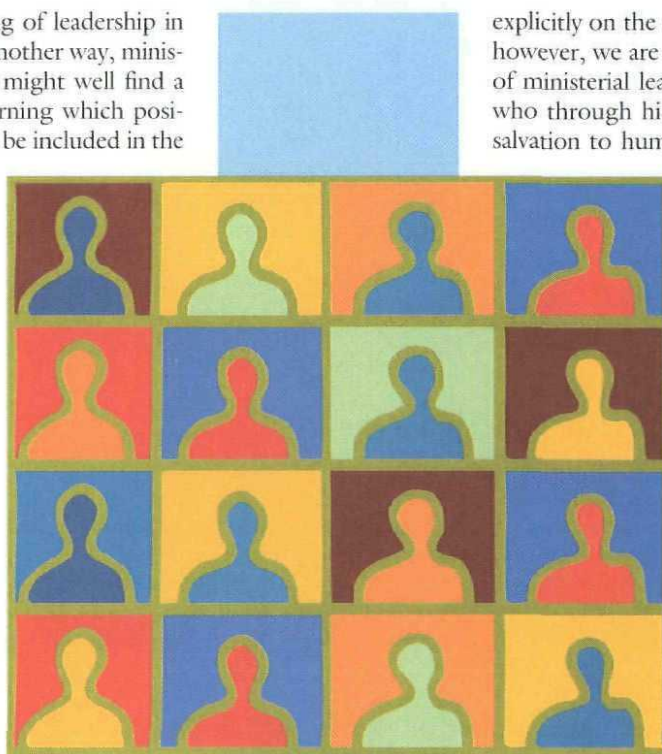
In other words, while there are significant personal competencies associated with successful ministry leadership, these reflections are beginning from a more sociological or organizational perspective. In discussing them, I assume that all positions possessing the power or influence to significantly deflect or impede or significantly focus or advance an organization's collective mission share certain dynamics and criteria. This column probes the significance for the role, and for the one who holds it, when the position is one of *ministerial leadership*.

### THEOLOGICAL CATEGORIES

Which theological categories merit reflection here? They are all implied by our premise that the subject of this reflection is *ministerial leadership in the healing ministry of Jesus Christ within the community of faith that is the Roman Catholic Church*. (Clearly one could begin this reflection at various points of our premise. And, within the premise, words can be clustered in various ways in order to elicit analysis and reflection. In fact, how and why one would cluster and prioritize categories could itself be an occasion for theological reflection. We will not pursue that opportunity here.) The four theological categories are:

- Ministry of *Jesus Christ*\*
- *Healing* ministry
- Ministry of the *Roman Catholic Church*
- *Ministry leadership* within the Roman Catholic Church.

**Ministry of Jesus Christ** Later we will reflect more



explicitly on the concept of ministry. At this point, however, we are reminded that the origin and goal of ministerial leadership is the Lord Jesus Christ, who through his death and resurrection brought salvation to humanity. His ministry had a specific *purpose* that he outlined when he made the words of Isaiah his own: "The spirit of Lord Yahweh is on me for Yahweh has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the news to the afflicted, to soothe the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, release to those in prison, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord" (Is 61:1).

This is a ministry whose *spirituality* is timeless:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek: for they shall possess the land. Blessed are they who

mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice: for they shall have their fill. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the clean of heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice's sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:3-10).

This is a ministry grounded in an *ethical imperative* that is remarkably simple: "Love the Lord your God with all your mind, all your heart, all your soul, and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:25-28).

This is a ministry that was defined by a love so expansive that its *modality* of *service* knows no boundaries: "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (Jn 10:14-15).

This is a ministry that, in the end, was to be carried on by others who are *disciples* of the same Lord: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Mt 28:19-20).

I would suggest that if we are to truly grasp the significance of ministerial leadership, it is imperative that we begin with the ministry of Jesus

Christ—grasp it not as an abstraction but as a living reality whose shape and form, whose purpose, spirituality, ethic, modality of service and discipleship we receive and may not alter.

**Healing Ministry** Although much could be written about the *healing* ministry (within your CHA staff, we often speak of it having the two dimensions of service and transformation), I will highlight only two aspects here. First, although the Gospels are replete with healing miracles, Jesus never healed just to heal. Jesus always healed for a purpose: to invite a response of faith. For Jesus, healing was a window that, when opened, revealed the face of a loving God to whom the healed could surrender themselves. Healing did not require one to believe (for example, the lepers who did not return), but its unmerited graciousness invited the one healed to reconsider the very nature of existence. Healing was the first plank of a bridge, the rest of which was to be constructed by an act of faith so intense it would transform the entirety of a person's very being: "Here I am, Lord." "Be it done unto me as you will." "Lord, I am not worthy."

What this means is that the healing ministry of Jesus is never an end in itself. It has a purpose that ultimately is salvific.

A second aspect of Jesus' healing is that it is multifaceted. Jesus' healing addressed the human person in his or her totality of body, mind, and spirit. In a future column I will probe this in more detail. For now, it is sufficient to say that the healing ministry of Jesus is about much more than healing the body.

**Ministry of the Roman Catholic Church** In my November/December 2001 column, I began reflecting on the transition that has occurred with the realization that what we are about is, as Pope John Paul II declared, "an essential ministry of the church."<sup>3</sup> The context of our service is no longer *only* understood as being an expression of the charismatic or (religious life) dimension of church life. Rather, it is also an expression of the institutional (hierarchical) dimension of church life. As such, its ultimate point of reference is an appreciation of being part of the *communio* or community that is the church as well as sharing in the *missio* or mission of the church. The church is "ordered" not for the sake of order, but so that the mystery of *communio* and the dynamism of *missio* might be preserved. In the end, as our Orthodox and Eastern Catholic sisters and brothers know so well, church is not an "it" but a mystery, a sacred icon of God's presence and, in particular, of the dynamic activity of the Holy Spirit. All ministries of the church are Spirit-filled and Spirit-driven.

**Ministry Leadership within the Roman Catholic Church** The word "ministry," as we use it, is relatively new to

the Roman Catholic lexicon. It reflects a deepening appreciation of the significance of baptism/confirmation for the life of the church vis-à-vis the role of the laity. The revised *Code of Canon Law* summarized decades of theological reflection and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council when it said in Canon 204, No. 1:

"The Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through baptism, have been constituted as the people of God; for this reason, since they have become sharers in Christ's priestly, prophetic and royal office in their own manner, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world."

Since the Second Vatican Council, the laity have increasingly exercised their baptismal responsibility, especially as it relates to the public or organizational dimensions of the church's ministerial life. In many ways, this is a "work in progress." For centuries, leadership in the church has been directly identified with the clergy and indirectly with religious. Obviously, both of these required some form of a "permanent commitment" associated with ordination or vows. Consequently, the church has no clear analogue for the role of ministerial leadership that is not identified with being a cleric or a religious.

Recently, some preliminary descriptions of essential dimensions of ministerial leadership exercised by the baptized/confirmed, based as much on reflection on lived experience as on theological reflection, have emerged. In such cases:

- The community has affirmed its need for the leadership position.
- The person selected to fill the position has experienced a personal affinity for, or "call" to service in, that role.
- The person selected has undergone the training/formation necessary for the role.
- A church authority has formally "deputized" or "commissioned" the role.
- The suitability of the person selected is subject to an ongoing review/affirmation process.

Across the United States, large numbers of lay women and men are serving in positions of ministerial leadership that incarnate these realities. For example, at the parish level they are "pastoral coordinators" of priest-less parishes; they are principals and directors of religious education; they are pastoral associates doing the ministry previously done by priest associate pastors. At the diocesan level, they are "chancellors" (which, in many cases, means being chief operating officers of large dioceses, as well as small ones) and hold other significant leadership positions that only priests or religious would have held a few years ago.

*Continued on page 62*

**F**or Jesus,  
healing was  
a window  
that, when  
opened,  
revealed a  
loving God.

## REFLECTIONS

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### REFLECTIONS

Most would agree that three of these categories (Ministry of Jesus Christ, Ministry of the Roman Catholic Church, and Ministry Leadership) relate to ministerial leadership in general, whereas only one (Healing Ministry) describes the *purpose* of a specific ministry. What is not clear are the practical consequences of exercising ministerial leadership in the Catholic health ministry in the United States. It would be helpful, I suggest, for us to begin such a discussion.

For example, although we have had a fair amount of reflection concerning the concrete implications of the spiritual, ethical, and service dimensions of the Ministry of Jesus Christ, we have had little on the consequences of discipleship. Similarly, many have taken quite seriously being a Ministry of the Roman Catholic Church. The significance of exercising leadership that ultimately is to be "Spirit-filled" and "Spirit-driven" is not as clear, however. In recent times, we have seen an increasing emphasis on the commissioning of ministry leadership. What has not been as clear is the role of the local church in confirming this call. As challenging as such discussions might be, the most difficult, I suggest, will occur when we consider the salvific dimension of the healing ministry. What does it mean to say that the ultimate purpose of ministerial leadership is salvific? Does it not mean that all those who encounter or experience the ministry in its many and diverse aspects are invited, each in his or her own way, to experience the healing touch of ultimate mystery? □

### NOTES

1. Michael D. Place, "CHA Moves Forward on Leadership Development, BBA," *Health Progress*, November-December 1999, pp. 10-11, 16, and "The Parable of the Dance," *Health Progress* May-June 2001, pp. 6-7.
2. Michael D. Place, "Elements of Theological Foundations of Sponsorship," *Health Progress*, November-December 2000, pp. 6-10.
3. Michael D. Place, "The Graying of America," *Health Progress*, November-December 2001, pp. 6-8, 72.

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