

Ministry

Paul Turner

All catechumens will be invited into ministry in the parish community. In this presentation I'll speak about why this is so important and how it can be done. First, though, let us recall that you would not be inviting anyone else into ministry if you were not personally involved in ministry already. So, I'd like to ask you to reflect for a moment upon your own call to serve. Think back about how you first got involved with the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. How did you hear about it? Why did this appeal to you? If you were to thank someone for your participation in this ministry - or blame someone! - who would it be? What would you like to say to that person?

Why do you stay involved in this ministry? How has it rewarded you? When you look back over the past year of RCIA ministry, how does it make you feel? Satisfied? Grateful? Frustrated? Hopeful? Why?

Have you ever told someone about your work with RCIA? What did you say? Have you ever invited someone to share this ministry with you? If so, why? If not, why not?

After baptizing an infant, the priest or deacon makes this declaration: "[God] now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that, united with his people, you may remain for ever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King." He then anoints the crown of the infant's head with chrism. In baptism, we are all given a share not only in the membership, but also in the mission of Jesus Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, "Based on this common priesthood and ordered to its service, there exists another participation in the mission of Christ: the ministry conferred by the sacrament of Holy Orders, where the task is to serve in the name and in the person of Christ the Head in the midst of the community" (1591). However, the catechism also says that "The whole church is a priestly people" (Ibid.) - the whole Church. Even you. You have priestly responsibility. Your responsibility is also prophetic and royal.

Priests serve. Priests offer sacrifice. Priests render thanks to God. Priests give God praise. Prophets receive the word of God. Prophets speak difficult things to people who need to hear them. Kings and queens have the responsibility of leadership. They also enjoy the service of others. We receive all three of these roles when we are baptized. We all suffer the temptation to settle into the third role, to act like royalty. We like it when other people render service, especially service to us. When I first became a pastor, we offered a Lenten mass at noon as an option for the working community. Attendance was pretty good, drawing people from several parishes who did not know one another, and who had no other ties to our parish. None of them stepped up to help as a cantor, a reader or a communion minister. No one was willing to sign up, to promise to be there tomorrow so that others could be served. They all wanted the option of attending that mass, but not the responsibility of leadership. That was the only year we offered a Lenten mass at noon.

Serving others is part of our Christian responsibility. This should not be a drudgery; it should be our joy. Pope Francis wrote in his apostolic exhortation, “The Joy of the Gospel,” “In union with Jesus, we seek what he seeks and we love what he loves” (267). And “If we are to share our lives with others and generously give of ourselves, we also have to realize that every person is worthy of our giving” (274). When you are in love, you will serve the person you love not out of obligation or responsibility, but out of desire. Think of the way that parents love children; yes, they have an obligation to serve their kids, but their desire to serve them is even stronger. Think of the way that people in the armed forces serve their country. They are willing to lay down their lives in service to national ideals. They do it out of love.

Jesus asked us to love one another, to love the Church. From that love comes the necessity of ministry. It is a desirable imperative.

When you have that love in your heart, you cannot understand why anyone else doesn't have it. We get frustrated when others don't share the same enthusiasm for ministry that we have, or when they don't even come to church as often as we do. Sometimes we have a point; but sometimes our vision is not clear. When our commitment to serve is strong, we stride along spiritual highways that are both rewarding and lonely. Other people may be committed at some level - perhaps not as much as we are, but they may be committed. From our perspective they may look like slackers. In reality, they may not be. Just because they are doing less than we are at church doesn't mean they're not serving at all. They may have active interests with their families and organizations that we never see. At some level, everyone feels the need to serve. The reason we have ministry is because we are baptized.

Ministering is different from volunteering. When you hear someone say, “I need a volunteer,” that person is probably not looking for a particular person with a specific skill. Any person will do - any volunteer. Ministry is different. It is a part of who we are. We get involved not just because of someone else's need but because of the specific gifts we received from God. Catechumens will learn this, and they will hunger for ministry as completely as they thirst for the waters of baptism. How do they get involved?

The New Testament gives an example of putting some members of the community into a specialized ministry. From Acts of the Apostles, chapter 6, we learn about the establishment of deacons. You remember the story - The Hellenists complained that the Hebrews were neglecting their widows in the daily distribution of food. The Twelve, not wanting to get bogged down in internal disputes, appealed to their job description: “It would not be right for us to neglect the word of God so as to give out food.” They wanted seven men filled with the Holy Spirit to perform this task. Even to distribute food, they wanted people filled with the Holy Spirit. These guys did much more, of course. They joined in the proclamation of the word and catechesis, and Stephen their model suffered martyrdom.

The story makes several points about ministry in the Church:

* More ministers are better than fewer. If you find yourself burdened with too many responsibilities, share them with others.

* Community discernment is better than individual discernment. If you know something is wrong, consult other leaders to see what should be done.

* Know your vocation. Stay focused on why God made you. What gifts did God give you? Why did God do that? Stay with your gifts, and let those with other gifts use them.

* Come up with a job description. The Twelve needed more than table waiters. These helpers also had to negotiate disputes between Hellenists and Hebrews, disputes grounded in the feeding of widows, an emotional topic that was dividing a community. The Twelve decided that one trait they needed in the new recruits was people “of good reputation, filled with the Spirit and with wisdom.”

Parishes can follow a similar process. Before recruiting catechumens to serve as ministers, the community ought to know what ministers it needs. This requires discipline. Parish leaders should have a clear idea of what they are capable of providing, and stay fixed on that. Nearly every parish has some organizations that have endured for many years but are struggling to find new members. It could be that the organization has served its purpose and now needs to end. If so, parish leaders should know what other ministry they still need, and how to get people involved.

One way to establish a matrix for evaluating parish activities is to review the methods of formation that catechumens are to receive and to ask if these are vibrant in the community. For catechumenate geeks, paragraph 75 is the John 3:16 of the RCIA. It speaks about four different ways of providing formation. You are probably familiar with these:

- * a suitable catechesis is provided
- * catechumens become familiar with the Christian way of life
- * the Church helps by means of suitable liturgical rites
- * catechumens learn to spread the gospel

These four methods of formation even have fancy Greek equivalents: *κατηχήση, κοινωνία, λειτουργία* and *διακονία*. These methods can be used as templates not only for the formation of catechumens, but also to characterize parish ministry. The only way we can offer all four methods to catechumens is if we are practicing all four methods already. So, here are some questions for parish leaders:

* How does your parish provide suitable catechesis? Do you offer sacramental preparation? For which sacraments? How do you make it available? Is there year-round religious formation? For what age groups? Over the course of the year, how does adult faith formation take place?

* How does your community express the Christian way of life? What social events are important to the parish? Who is invited to them? Do visitors receive

a welcome? Does the parish leadership model Christian moral codes? Are members of your parish trusted as a morally upright community?

*** What liturgical rites does your parish offer? Are they sufficient or too many? How do people get involved with these? Is it difficult for new people to break into some ministries?**

*** How does the parish spread the gospel? What outreach does it do? Are Catholics in your community known as promoters of social justice? How? How do members of the broader community receive a specific invitation to come to events at your church? How personal is it? Is your evangelization passive? Or active?**

Do all four of these cylinders work in your parish? Or do one or two misfire? How does the budget set priorities in these four areas?

With that review in the background, parish leaders can begin to discern what ministries they still need, and who might help fulfill them. If you don't have enough people, you may not have the right ministries, or God may not yet have sent you the people you need. Or you could have the right people in the wrong places. Especially if some groups or ministries are faltering, it is important to know if that ministry still fits the overall vision of the parish. If so, then help it out. If not, then consider inviting some of the people involved there into a different kind of service.

For many years in our parish we had a group called the Men's Club, a charitable and fraternal organization. Over the years, attendance at meetings dropped to only two or three people. Eventually the members stopped meeting all together. They discovered that all the men in the club were also members of the Knights of Columbus. The Knights had a more active organization, so the guys decided on their own to stop the other group. They had one interesting problem - the dues they were collecting still sat in a separate parish checking account. I talked with the former leaders of the Men's Club, and we all agreed to put the money toward improvements to the church building that everyone could enjoy. The organization is gone; its assets have been liquidated; but the members are still active in the parish - every one of them. And they basically did it themselves.

If ministries are worth preserving, we need people to serve in them. We should also offer people the training they need, the support they require, and the affirmation they crave. When ministers feel cared for, they are more likely to serve.

Some people stay too long in a ministry. They lack the skills the parish needs, but they have earned respect for the years of service they have offered, and no one has told them it's time to step down. These are always difficult situations. But sometimes, for the good of the entire parish, some people with certain duties need to share them with others and consider taking up other activities. They may create space for catechumens to take a new role. A priest I know says that parishes often suffer from what he calls "the reverse Caiaphas principle." Do you remember this character from the trial of Jesus in John's gospel (18:14)? Caiaphas counseled that they may have to put Jesus to death

because it was better for one person to die rather than have all the people suffer. In our parishes, we often work on the reverse Caiphas principle: It's better for everyone else to suffer rather than just one person. Normally if we can move someone from a misfit ministry into one where he or she can flourish, everyone will benefit. Catechumens will be more likely to offer their services if they feel that in general the parish has worked hard at matching people's gifts with the ministries they have.

When you think about involving catechumens, often people think immediately of liturgical ministry. "Maybe you could become a reader," someone will suggest. "You could become a communion minister." In many parishes in the US, the hardest liturgical ministry to break into is the ushers. You almost have to wait for someone to die before the others will consider letting another person into the club. In some US parishes males have as firm a grasp on the ministry of ushers as they do on the priesthood. In my parish, whenever we have a second collection, I like to have a second set of ushers take it up a few seconds after the first collection has begun, the second set following the first set by about three or four pews. That way all the sacrifice can be brought to the altar before the eucharistic prayer begins. But to do it this way means that our ushers have to change what they have been doing for centuries. Sometimes they'll tell me, "We don't have enough ushers," and they use it as an excuse for the same ushers to take up both collections, the second one beginning only after the first one has been entirely completed, thus delaying the liturgy and punishing the priest. If the ushers tell me before mass they don't have enough ministers, I look around. There are plenty of people in the building. I recruit a few extra ushers myself. Even some women.

Liturgical ministry appeals to some people for the same reason it disinterests others: It's public. My father occasionally served as a lector, but he never enjoyed it. He would proclaim the passage as quickly as he could just so he could sit back down in his pew. Some people like the spotlight. Others don't.

However, a parish offers other ways that people can serve. Through catechesis, hospitality, and evangelization, people can always get involved.

Also valuable is to review the ways that catechumens already give service in their daily lives. Are they married? Do they have children? Talk with them about the sacrifice they are making for their family. Do they take care of their neighbors? Ask them about why they do that. Is their job more than a job? Is it making the community a better place? Does it feel in some ways that they are working right where they belong? What does that tell them about the way God made them, the opportunities for service they have, and the satisfaction they receive? Are they involved in their children's schools and other activities? I have a friend who announces major league baseball games on television and radio. He's very active with his church because he doesn't want sports to rule his life. But I feel that even his job is providing a ministry to people like me who enjoy baseball as a break, so that we can return to our work with more vigor.

When you review these activities with your catechumens, what do you learn? Do they feel fulfilled? Or do they wish they weren't doing some service any more? Do they feel that they aren't doing enough? Do they feel drawn to other demands? Are they just too busy to add one more thing to their lives? Are the RCIA sessions eating up so much time that they cannot do anything else? Are they secretly counting the days when they'll have Tuesday nights free again? Is the same true of the RCIA team? What does this say?

Sometimes people don't need to do a whole lot more than what they presently do. They may just need the affirmation that they are serving the body of Christ in different ways, and we may have to admit that this is enough. They are serving. It may be less visible, but it's for real.

To return to the earlier point, ministry is a part of Christianity not just as a burdensome duty but as a welcome opportunity. When our hearts are filled with love for the community, we want to serve. We look for ways to help out. Your parish probably has lots of ministries going on. But if after reviewing what's happening there, you discern that there is a lack of ministry, then ask this hard question: If we lack ministry, do we also lack love? I'm not talking about commitment to a cause as some abstract ideal - but about real heartfelt love. Does the community love one another?

Jesus himself lifted this heavy concern at the end of his life. One of his most pointed commands shows up only in John's gospel. In the other gospels Jesus says things like, "Love your neighbor." OK, I can do that. "Love your enemy." Wow. Sounds hard. But I realize that my enemy is a person too. So I'll try. In John's gospel, though, Jesus looks around the room at the Last Supper, sizes up the group of disciples before him, thinks about how these friends of his have fought with each other and misunderstood his teachings, and he lays one final command onto that group. "Hey, you guys, love one another" (cf. 15:12). He addressed those words to his disciples for his disciples. Some future disciples would find it easier to love their enemy than to love someone else at the same church. Love one another. Would you please just get along? Would you please look out for each other. No one will listen to this gospel if the community preaching it doesn't have love in its heart.

Two final practical points about this theme, how to help catechumens see ministry as part of their Christian lives. One is to involve the sponsor. Be sure the sponsor gets tips on how to connect the catechumen with the rest of the parish. If the sponsor notices that the catechumen is absent from Sunday mass, from the parish festival, or from catechumenate sessions, the sponsor should speak up. The sponsor can introduce the catechumen to organizations and individuals - not just at the end of their formation, but from the beginning; and not just once, but throughout the period of preparation. Sometimes catechumens decline these invitations, and sponsors feel helpless. But their role is to invite.

Second, if there's one ministry I wish everyone would learn, whether they are catechumens or faithful, whether they have been members of the parish for 6 weeks or 60 years, it's this: Meet people. Learn names. Parishes solidify when

parishioners make friends of the people with whom they worship and serve. Once the community starts to form, they will feel more connected to the whole. I've heard many people say, "I'm just not good at names." Well, OK, but you have to improve this. At work you are probably very good at some parts of your job and not so good at others, but you still have to do the whole job. As priestly people, called to serve, called to be members of the body of Christ, it would help if we learned who the other members are. I know how hard this can be. Two years ago I moved from a parish where I served for 11 years to a new community with more than twice the number of members. It has been hard and remains hard for me to learn names. It takes time, but I'm still working at it, and I know it will get better. Once I learn names, I make sure that other people learn them too. If I see parishioners standing near each other but not talking to each other, I may say, "John, have you met Bill?" Sometimes, John says, "Well, I've seen him around, but I never knew his name." Whenever a group of parishioners is gathered for a meeting or social event, I make sure we all introduce ourselves at the beginning, so that everyone hears everyone's name. People know if you don't know who they are. They love it when you do. Visitors will come back if we've made an effort to offer them this very basic ministry within the body of Christ: the ministry of the name.

You got into catechumenate ministry because of some wonderful reason, something that connected your gifts with your faith and your desire to serve. You know how terrific it can be to make ministry a part of your life. Share that good news. Let others grow in Christ and as persons by encouraging their commitment to ministry. They will thank you for it because they know inside that because of their baptism, they are called to serve.