

May 17, 2009

During Mass on this past Thursday evening at Holy Angels Cathedral, I presented certificates to 25 lay men and women who have completed our sixth Lay Ecclesial Ministry Formation Program. It was an occasion of great joy. These very dedicated and faith-filled men and women completed four years of serious graduate-level classes in Theology along with spiritual and pastoral formation as well as supervised ministry. They will bring faithful, energetic, and creative leadership to our parishes.

These graduates, along with the graduates of our five previous Lay Ecclesial Ministry Formation Programs, will serve as leaders in our parishes in such capacities as pastoral associates, directors of religious education, youth ministers, music ministers, and liturgists.

The emergence of Lay Ecclesial Ministry in our parishes over the past 40 years is a response to the movement of the Holy Spirit and significantly contributes to the vitality of parish life.

Pope Paul VI, 30 years ago, anticipated what the Catechism of the Catholic Church now repeats: “The laity can also feel called, or in fact be called, to cooperate with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community for the sake of its growth and life” (“Evangelization in the Modern World,” no. 73).

Currently, there are over 31,000 Lay Ecclesial Ministers serving in U.S. Catholic parishes. They outnumber our priests by about 7,000, but do not replace our priests.

Ordained priests have a unique ministry within the Church. They are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ, the Head and Shepherd of the Church. Priests are ordained to authoritatively proclaim His Word and repeat His

acts of forgiveness and His offer of salvation, particularly in Baptism, Penance, and the Eucharist. Ordained priests gather the people of God into unity and lead them to the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Ordained priests exercise their ministry in communion with and cooperation with the bishop's ministry. They share the bishop's concern for the Universal Church as well as for their own particular parishes.

The Second Vatican Council affirmed that every baptized person has a unique dignity as a member of the Body of Christ as well as a responsibility to build the Body of Christ and transform the world in the light of Christ. It is the challenge of the ordained priest to inspire and empower the baptized to share in parish ministries in accordance with their own particular vocation and their own special gifts.

A parish is vibrant when its members generously extend themselves in varieties of ministries, whether assisting in the liturgy as a choir member, usher, greeter, proclaimer of the Word, or extraordinary distributor of the Holy Eucharist; or assisting in the formation of adults, youth, or young people in religious education or R.C.I.A.; or reaching out to the homebound, those in health care centers, or the poor; or participating in the parish's peace and social justice advocacy efforts to address systemic injustices.

Deacons and well-formed Lay Ecclesial Ministers collaborate with the priest and one another in motivating and coordinating the involvement of all the parishioners in the multiple ministries within the parish.

Our parishes are more vibrant than ever before. I am particularly grateful to our many generous lay faithful who respond to God's call to leadership in collaboration with our priests and deacons. Our diocese and parishes are richly blessed because of their faith and love for the Lord and His Church!