

PRIESTLY MINISTRY
AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Hopes and Horizons

RICHARD R. GAILLARDETZ

THOMAS H. GROOME

RICHARD LENNAN

Editors

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

INTRODUCTION

Thomas H. Groome

With this collection, we bring to completion—though not conclusion—conversation about the future of Catholic priesthood that began at Boston College (BC) some years ago. In September 2016, the Church in the 21st Century (C21) Center at Boston College established a faculty seminar to study and imagine “the future of priesthood.” The sentiment was that, while the state of priesthood shows ample signs of crisis, this might also be a moment of grace to forge a new horizon so urgently needed.

The seminar group was made up of twelve working members and a student scribe. Of those, six were distinguished theologians with particular competence on the theme, three were priests, two were university personnel who work in spiritual formation, two were Boston College PhD students in theology, and two were priest leaders from the Archdiocese of Boston; there were eight men and five women in all. Richard Lennan, Richard Gaillardetz, and I served as cochairs.

The ninety-minute breakfast seminar met four times each semester for two years, adding a final gathering, making a total of seventeen meetings. The first three semesters were spent in intense study and conversation, with the fourth dedicated to writing a consensus statement that went through many drafts. While concerned for the state of Catholic ministry, in general, we realized early on that it would be wise to limit our focus to diocesan priesthood, in particular. Further, while we hoped our research might bear fruit for the whole church, we limited our focus to our context here in the United States.

The seminar members were far from uniform in their views regarding priesthood. This diversity became a blessing in that it prompted us to step back from the controversial issues and to ask the deeper questions: What does it mean to be ordained? What are the nature, purposes, and needed charisms

for priesthood? How should the church craft the selection, preparation, and ongoing education of its priests?

We discerned that a *practical* theological approach to our theme was advisable. This meant beginning with contemporary research on the present practice of diocesan priesthood in the United States by looking at statistics, trends, and projections—the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) research was invaluable. We studied what is happening with collaborative parishes and with the recruiting of international priests to fill a perceived shortage. We considered the faculties and formation practices of our seminaries, the integrating of diocesan priesthood with the explosion of full-time lay ecclesial ministers, now numbering more than forty thousand in the United States.

Then, faithful to such a practical theological approach, we added theoretical research by reviewing the grounding in scripture and tradition of ordained ministry in the early church and across the centuries, at Vatican II, and into the present day. We read all of the relevant church documents, including *Pastores Dabo Vobis* of Pope John Paul II (1992), *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* of the Congregation for Clergy (2016), and others. We brought in scholars from other universities to share their research on ministry.

After such practical and then theoretical research, we moved in our fourth semester to writing a foundational and consensus statement—about eight thousand words—suitable for any interested person to read. The result was the document, “To Serve the People of God: Renewing the Conversation on Priesthood and Ministry” (TSPG) issued jointly by the Boston College Department of Theology and its School of Theology and Ministry. It was first published in *Origins*¹ and is reproduced in its entirety in the opening of the first part of this volume.

We shared our document with all the bishops of the English-speaking world, as well as the presidents of all the Episcopal Conferences worldwide, in both English and Spanish. It was communicated to Pope Francis through Cardinal Parolin, Vatican Secretary of State. Cardinal Parolin wrote appre-

¹ “To Serve the People of God: Renewing the Conversation on Priesthood and Ministry,” *Origins* 48, no. 31 (2018). The document was well received, with very appreciative reviews in a number of publications. For example, in *America* magazine, Professors Steve Bevens and Robin Ryan of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago commented that it is “one of the best reflections on priesthood we have ever read.”

ciatively, “I am grateful for your efforts aimed at renewing the theology of priesthood and ministry and I express my hope that your work will bear fruit in the life of the Church.” The document was also shared with and appreciated by scholars preparing the Pan Amazon Synod (October 2019). All of this encouraged us to continue the conversation.

On January 2 and 3, 2020, we gathered a group of forty people at the Boston College retreat center in Dover, Massachusetts, for an intense conversation on the document. We were particularly honored by the presence and participation of Cardinal Blasé J. Cupich of Chicago, Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin of Newark, and Cardinal Reinhard Marx, archbishop of Munich and Freising and then-president of the German Bishops’ Conference. Cardinal Sean O’Malley of Boston presided and preached at the opening liturgy. In addition, present were six bishops; seven priests, who were either rectors of a seminary or deans of a theologate; seven theologians from other universities; some lay leaders; and the members of the original seminar.

The agenda was a thorough conversation of TSPG. This was aided by three presentations by Professors Lennan, Gaillardetz, and Bergin, who elucidated the text. Throughout the conference, Cardinals Marx, Tobin, and Cupich also made brief presentations. Most of the time, however, we engaged in small- and whole-group conversations. To say that the discourse was “lively” would be an understatement. At the end, the conference issued a “communiqué” that summarized some of its insights and recommendations.²

Soon thereafter, the COVID-19 epidemic struck and delayed any further in-person conversation. Perhaps the hiatus will prove in time to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, this difficult period has been particularly challenging for the worship life of the church, reducing us to virtual liturgies and sorely missing reception of the Eucharist. On the other hand, many families, with parish programs and Catholic schools being closed, began to read and reflect together on the Sunday scriptures and be more intentional in the catechesis of their children. Then, in the larger church, there has been heightened emphasis on synodality to guide the life and practices of regional churches, and the reappointment of a committee by Pope Francis to study

² See Conference Co-Chairs, “Communiqué of Conference on ‘To Serve the People of God: Renewing the Conversation on Priesthood and Ministry’”; Richard Lennan, “Ministry in the Life of the Church”; Richard Gaillardetz, “A Profile of a Well-Formed Priest”; Liam Bergin, “Shaping the Future”—all in *Origins* 49, no. 33 (2016).

the possibility of women in the diaconate. All of this and more encourages fresh conversations.

This present volume renews the good work. The first part includes the full text of TSPG and the three elaborating essays by Professors Lennan, Gaillardetz, and Bergin, followed by a reflection from Cardinal Marx that he delivered at the conference. The second part has sixteen essays from participants at that conference, including an archbishop, a bishop, seminary rectors, pastoral ministers, and academic theologians. Our invitation to all was to write a readable essay of some three thousand words, expressing their best hopes for the future of priesthood. We encouraged the authors to write from their own context and experience, and particularly from their hearts and deepest desires.

Our best hope is that this volume is a catalyst of fresh conversations across the ideological spectrum regarding priesthood. We hope it is read by bishops and vocation directors, by theological faculties and seminaries, and by the whole people of God. Thinking especially of adult faith education programs in parishes, we asked the authors to add reflective questions to their essays.

What sounded loudly at the January 2020 gathering is that the priesthood is cherished and lies at the heart of our Catholic faith and people. Also palpable was that effective *preaching, pastoring, and presiding* are essential to the nurturing of our faith, as was the deep desire to have such priestly ministry flourish going forward. While this volume brings some completion to the work of the original Boston College faculty seminar on priesthood, we hope the conversation and the fruits of our good work will long endure.