

## The Importance of Lay Ministers

To many Catholics the idea of a "lay minister" smacks of protestantism. Yet in the semi-annual meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines our Bishops took steps for a fuller recognition of lay leaders as true ministers of the Church. They listened to a report of Fr. John Rich, a Maryknoll missionary in the prelature of Tagum (Davao del Norte), praising the wonderful work of lay leaders in building Christian Communities by leading their people in community discussions, bible services, common prayers and communion without Mass. The Bishops also approved the holding of an Asian Colloquium on "New Forms of Ministry". Topics of the discussion will be: new forms of ministry that are already developing; what forms of ministry are needed; and by what means those forms could be attained. Clearly, the renewal of lay ministries in the Church is considered by the Bishops as an important development in contemporary Christian life.

But isn't the idea of giving church ministries to lay people borrowed from Protestantism? No, it is not. In the words of Pope Paul VI: "It is certain that, side-by-side with the ordained ministries, whereby certain people are appointed pastors and consecrate themselves in a special way to the service of the community, *the Church recognizes the place of non-ordained ministries which are able to offer a particular service to the Church.*" (Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi" no. 73).

He recognized that the existence of lay ministries in the early Church "enabled the Church to consolidate herself and to grow and spread." He also expressed the hope that a study of the Church's past experience in lay ministries coupled with attention to the present needs of mankind and the Church "will make it possible to seek wisely and to discover the

ministries which the Church needs and which many of her members will gladly embrace for the sake of ensuring greater vitality in the ecclesial community." He reminds us, however, that "These ministries will have real pastoral value to the extent that they are established with absolute respect for unity and adhering to the directives of the pastors, who are the ones who are responsible for the Church's unity and the builders thereof."

Very clearly the Pope says that lay ministries are only "apparently new but closely tied up with the Church's living experience down the centuries." He mentioned some of the ministries that have existed in the person of "catechists, directors of prayer and chant, Christians devoted to the service of God's Word or to assisting their brethren in need, the heads of small communities, or other persons charged with the responsibility of apostolic movements."

With a certain insistence the Pope says: "These ministries are valuable for the establishment, life, and growth of the Church, and for her capacity to influence her surroundings and to reach those who are remote from her."

Bishops and priests in the Philippines have found it indispensable to rely on lay leaders to make the existence of basic Christian Communities a reality. It is from a rich pastoral experience that they raise questions like, why not set up a lay ministry of community organizers? why not give to the lay leader of a Christian Community the dignity of a Church minister?

All of us should have an open mind regarding the development of lay ministries in the Church. Let us heartily applaud our Bishops' move for a fuller recognition of lay ministers and for their proper training.

## **In This Issue**

The development of lay ministries in the Church should not diminish the dedication of the laity to the field of the apostolate which is most properly theirs, the upliftment of the tem-