Many areas of American life have witnessed epochal changes in the last fifty years. Two examples are the fields of health care and information technology. However, during the last half-century, the Roman Catholic Church has experienced perhaps more change than in any other comparable period in the history of Christianity. From the reforms of Vatican II to the decline in the number of men in the priesthood and today’s crises over sexual abuse by priests, the Roman Catholic Church has been buffeted by winds blowing both from within the church and from the world in which it ministers. In addition, the effects are felt not only in the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. but globally as well.

One of the greatest changes for American Catholics has been in the area of leadership. A Church once dominated by a hierarchy, staffed by priests assisted by nuns, has become a Church with more democratic, parish based programs and initiatives increasingly led by lay people. As Chris Anderson of the National Association for Lay Ministry puts it, “The Church of Bing Crosby in Going My Way and The Bells of St. Mary’s is gone. This is a different church.”

So when Lilly Endowment launched its program, “Sustaining Pastoral Excellence,” its application to the Roman Catholic Church involved not only the question of the nature of excellence but the question of leadership itself. One can argue that the same dynamics of change affect both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, moving them from clerical models of leadership to lay models, but at least Protestants have a tradition of affirming “the priesthood of all believers.” In the Roman Catholic tradition, the shift to lay leadership is simply more pronounced and more poignant.

Forty projects were funded as part of Lilly’s “Sustaining Pastoral Excellence” program. Some samples of Protestant programs are described in an article, In Pursuit of Excellence: Nurturing Protestant Pastoral Leadership. This essay describes three Roman Catholic projects that involve different organizations and various strategies of nurturing pastoral excellence but have some strikingly similar conclusions—both for American Catholics and their Protestant counterparts.

1. The Archdiocese of Chicago and Loyola University

At first glance, this project, known as INSPIRE, is notable for linking unlikely partners—a major church-related university and one of the largest and most influential judicatories of the Roman Catholic Church.
Daniel Gast, Director of INSPIRE, says that it was made possible in part because of the strategic plan of Loyola University (Chicago). Gast says, “The University basically posed the question: How do we use research to benefit our communities?” At the same time, the Archdiocese of Chicago was searching for ways to support and nurture the new mosaic of pastoral leadership that includes not only priests and a diminishing number of nuns but also lay ministers in church administration, youth ministry, pastoral care, and other areas of parish life.

According to Gast, the goal of INSPIRE is to go out of existence by the end of the grants in January 2013. By then, he says, “the project’s work of developing vital parishes and growing parish-based Pastoral Leadership Teams needs to be owned and sustained by the two Chicago partnership institutions.” By early 2011, that goal seems attainable as both Loyola and the Archdiocese of Chicago have demonstrated their commitment to continuing and undergirding INSPIRE.

Two principal findings of the INSPIRE project are simple but profound. Excellent pastoral leadership is collaborative. It is not so much the work of individual, visionary priests but the product of shared insights from priests, lay ministers, and members of the parish itself. It is the transformation of leadership from “I” to “we.” Further, spirituality is absolute crucial to forming these teams and their ministries. In other words, pastoral ministers’ relationship with God is the foundation for excellence in ministry.

Gast says, “When I see pastorally excellent priests and lay ministers, I realize they have taken seriously the reflection, ‘What am I
in this ministry doing for the sake of the Kingdom?’ That in itself is an important stage of pastoral development, but ‘pastorally excellent’ ministers have moved beyond that reflection to ask themselves, ‘Because of what we are doing for the sake of the Kingdom, what are others doing?’ Especially, ‘. . . what are our parishioners doing?’ I think that is part of the phenomenon we are tracking: when pastoral staffs become pastoral leadership teams, we see a rise in the intentional recruitment, development, and support of parishioners as leaders.”

INSPIRE’s program involves three areas of activity:

- Education. Here the project aims at “developing pastoral leadership teams as dynamic learning communities,” says Gast. This education involves guidance and consultation, conferences, training, and formational programs. The emphasis falls on pastoral leadership as a team endeavor, and that is crucial for parishes where so often ministers function in what Gast describes as “silos”—discrete and separated areas of parish life. Gast acknowledges that “this creates a productive critical tension for persons and teams between programmatic and self-directed agendas.” Rather than a predetermined educational agenda offered by consultants, the pastoral leadership teams develop their own agenda and discover what they can learn from one another. At the same time, INSPIRE participants—and their consultants—“have discerned patterns in collaborative growth, best practices, and growth-limiting practices.” What they learn is shared with other pastoral leadership teams in the INSPIRE program, as well as with non-participants within the Archdiocese of Chicago. These findings are also available to other dioceses, and in one notable international example, the Roman Catholic Church in Germany.

“What we heard from participants,” Gast says, “is how busy the place was, yet how alone they feel. They feel that no one really values what they do or understands how they use their time.” Getting pastoral ministers to be involved in INSPIRE is often difficult. Gast says the first question is “‘How much time will this cost me?’ We have to assure them that if they work with us, it won’t be an add-on.”
Research. Here the project’s aims at assessing and documenting “the pathways to collaborative leadership in pastoral settings.” Gast says that in the early years of the program, “many of INSPIRE’s practices were drawn from leadership or organizational development literature that remained outside most pastoral settings, especially Roman Catholic parishes. We questioned whether processes that build collaboration in corporations and enhance their missions would work the same way in Catholic parishes. INSPIRE leaders and parish consultants took pains to respect and learn from the new pastoral settings.” The result was again a breakthrough. “We discovered that spirituality is absolutely critical for pastoral leadership,” Gast declares. “The easiest and best way to start is prayer and study of Scripture. It opens people up. When they pray together, they find different ways of developing trust and the willingness to explore possibilities, including the hard stuff like budgets.”

In many ways, the process became symbiotic. In order to build excellence in teams, the consultants had to jettison part of their own agenda participants to form forged in the crucible and corporate. They learned that themselves in the gave them the and wisdom of caring another and the

Some joined gyms. Some went on retreats. They found a variety of ways of rediscovering the spiritual meaning of their often relentless pace of work. “We are the bread for the world,” Gast maintains. “This all starts with the Sunday altar. There we give thanks for what God has done for us, and then we start moving to the world.”
One result of discovering the importance of spirituality, Gast says, is that the project’s research and evaluation agenda was postponed. There was “scarce room for the quality of research needed to establish theory and practice about collaborative models of pastoral excellence,” he declares. But, he adds, “we believe that such research is now mandatory if sustained development, in Chicago and the wider Church, is to become a reality. In effect, INSPIRE can become a laboratory for building the foundation of a critical pastoral discipline.”

- Consultation. This, Gast maintains, “is a routine resource in modern organizational life, but is at best present in meager proportions in Catholic pastoral settings. Diocesan personnel do find limited opportunities to consult with pastors and staffs, but usually within a particular ministry or administrative practice, and seldom across ministry disciplines.” What is absolutely essential is “safe” consultants, individuals who maintain strict confidentiality and will not be reporting to Archdiocesan authorities. That, Gast says, is “virtually nonexistent,” and so consultants had to be individuals who won trust from the participants and created safe space for them to relate to one another and build shared dreams, expectations, and accountability. In the last years of the grant, INSPIRE intends “to document this role and its practice, develop its parameters and ethics for pastoral settings, and then find ways to express and sustain its praxis through university and church agencies.” Gast concludes, “This is a critical vein of learning that could be one of INSPIRE’s most important contributions.”

Finding such consultants was difficult, Gast acknowledges. “During the first six months,” he recalls, “they were
found by God.” Gast found that religious orders were often a fruitful place to look. “They were the first to deal with issues of scarcity in the church,” he says. The first two consultants were nuns, one of whom worked only in Fortune 500 companies. Gradually they found more people who were familiar with the Roman Catholic Church and were eager to take on the assignments. “They have to be people who understand how organizations work but also have experience in the church and ministry settings. If they don’t have that, they will miss the dynamics entirely,” Gast maintains. In exploring spirituality and mission with pastoral leadership teams, the consultants were changed as well. “This has been a conversion story for many of us,” Gast says.

Gast says that INSPIRE’s success is rooted in the realization that “we can do this.” The project involves “gathering people to inspire trust and pastoral imagination and parish excellence. It builds a common sense of mission.” He cited one example of a parish with many problems created long ago. At one point, the pastoral leadership team reached a stalemate, but the pastor urged INSPIRE to continue its work. Gradually, Gast says, “they began to unwind this tangled ball of knots. Then came a happy breakthrough: they could tell the truth, and everyone could breathe again. They learned what it meant to say ‘we.’”

2. The National Association for Lay Ministry

As has become obvious to those inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church, the Church has a shortage of priests, an increasing and much more diverse membership, and an almost static number of parishes. Less obvious to outsiders is how this is transforming parish life and creating entirely new patterns of parish life (often consolidating parishes into megachurches), and the powerful growth of lay leaders, many of whom are ordained deacons but many more of whom are lay people. Consider the magnitude of change over more than four decades:
The unnuanced and dramatic conclusion is this: the Roman Catholic Church in the United States of the twenty-first century is a hierarchical church structure led largely by clergy and thousands of parishes and millions of members led increasingly by laity.

Lilly Endowment has made grants to the National Association for Lay Ministry to study these changes and to help develop a program to sustain pastoral excellence—the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project. In the words of one of the National Association’s proposals, the Project “has created an environment in which research, pastoral conversation, and theological reflection are taking place.” Specifically, the Project “is studying the evolution of pastoral leadership roles; growing reliance on parishioners; leadership of merged, clustered, or mega parishes; personnel issues, and the impact of the largest wave of immigration known in the United States.”
The Project is fascinating in part because it aims to sustain pastoral excellence when the question of the nature pastoral leadership is being questioned and transformed. Some bishops have supported the Project, while others have been tepid or opposed to its primary finding—the rise of lay leadership. Chris Anderson, the Executive Director of the National Association, recalls one bishop who described these epochal changes as “temporary.” When asked to explain what “temporary” meant, he replied, “100 years.”

The Project is significant for the Roman Catholic Church in part because the National Association for Lay Ministry is building collaboration between a number of organizations that previously have operated independently of one another: the Conference for Pastoral Planning and Council Development, the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators, the National Catholic Young Adults Ministry Association, and the National Federation of Priests’ Councils. In addition, the Project has also developed liaisons with similar projects, such as the one at the Archdiocese of Chicago and Loyola University (described above) and other Lilly-funded projects in the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program.

The National Association has produced a number of articles in Church periodicals and a five-book series on various aspects of pastoral leadership, published by Loyola Press and designed for parish and pastoral leaders. It has also sponsored a series of regional meetings and consultations and a national summit to which all the partner institutions and other parts of the Church sent representatives.

Lay leadership of parishes is defined and made possible under Canon Law 517.2. Indicative of the problem of definition of lay leadership is the fact that the terminology about lay ministry is hotly debated. So, the Project adopted the shorthand common throughout the Church. People refer to the work of lay ministers as simply “517.2.”

But despite this legal stipulation, a host of other issues emerges. For example, when leadership shifts from clergy (who are minimally paid) to lay people, what should be the levels of compensation and fringe benefits? What should be the levels of education of lay leaders? Who will pay for this education and how much of it should be paid? What are the qualifications for youth ministers and other specialized ministries? What is the scope of authority for lay pastoral ministers and parish councils, particularly when priests frequently serve more than one parish? How should parishes handle mergers and consolidations? What should parishes do when their schools are inadequately attended and poorly staffed? How should parishes handle sometimes extraordinarily large and diverse memberships?
To illustrate the issues of size and diversity, the Project discovered that there are parishes of three to six thousand families. Spanish-speaking immigrants comprise a huge part of the increase in Roman Catholic membership, but the project also found that "with larger dioceses celebrating weekly Eucharistic liturgies in 50, 60, 70 or more languages—and all dioceses celebrating at least in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese—the challenge to provide pastoral ministry is daunting."

Anderson declares, "We are very careful not to recommend a model, but we can see right ways and wrong ways of responding to these changes. We aren't shouting 'Fire!' in a crowded movie theater. Everyone sees the fire. Lay ministers now outnumber priests. What are the implications?"

Initially, the Project identified five areas of excellent pastoral leadership:

- Pastoral
- Collaborative
- Ethical
- Prophetic
- Inclusive/welcoming

“Successful leaders,” Anderson reports, “taught us there were two more: adaptive—the ability to work together to find new responses to unforeseen circumstances, and creative—the ability to discover new ways to provide traditional practices. As we are being asked to reconfigure parish structures, take on new and evolving pastoral roles, and plan for an increasingly diverse community, we must discern how to move forward.”

Anderson says they quickly realized the importance of stories in educating people and building trust. Participants described themselves as “a narrative people” and “a wisdom community.” “This belief,” he writes, “led to the decision to host research gatherings that asked participants to share their experience and knowledge, rather than bring in experts to teach them. Plumbing the talents, gifts, and resources of pastoral leaders was probably one of the most significant contributions of the Project.” In other words, the Project was built from the bottom up, rather than the top down.

This is, in fact, the dominant pattern of lay leadership in the Church—grass roots initiatives launched by the parishes themselves, without necessarily waiting for diocesan approval or church policies.

Marti Jewel, who directed the Project until recently, observes, “Lay and ordained leaders have a growing understanding—sometimes more accurately described as the barest of glimmers—that the answers will not come from outside of themselves. The most significant 'emerging model' of pastoral leadership that was experienced throughout the Project was in the person of the pastoral leader, who not only exhibits
and practices the marks of excellence, but is also creative and adaptive, finding ways to bring the community of the faithful to discipleship. These excellent leaders are primarily concerned with animating the faith community, being a catalyst for them—a form of leadership they call collaborative."

Jewel calls the changes sweeping across the Roman Catholic Church “a paradigm shift.” Her words are echoed by a diocesan director of parish life after attending the national summit on lay leadership. In a letter sent to all pastoral leaders, he captures the central findings of the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project:

“Parish life as we have known it has changed. What a potentially daunting task we face: pastoral planning, formation and just compensation of competent lay ecclesial ministers, prudent stewardship of parish resources, collaboration within and among parishes. Daunting maybe; exciting definitely. It all depends on how you respond! I am convinced that we need not wait for national organizations to act upon these proposals. Perhaps visionaries among us will be inspired to bring about meaningful change that causes the Church to better fulfill Christ’s mission in manners that are respectful of everyone’s vocations and that includes stewardship, [spiritual] formation, collaboration, and intentional planning.”

3. School of Theology•Seminary, St. John’s University

Located in Collegeville, Minnesota, on one of the most beautiful campuses in America, St. John’s School of Theology•Seminary was selected as one of the participants in Lilly’s Sustaining Pastoral Excellence grant program. This institution is part of the Benedictine tradition, and the leaders of the St. John’s project mined the tradition to create what it calls “Conversatio.”
Its goal is ambitious: “Changing the culture of continuing professional development and vocational renewal for ministers in the Catholic Church.” Two immediate obstacles are the lack of a supporting ethos for continuing education and the lack of time for such reflection and education. “The spirit of vocational call is not lost to ministers,” says Victor Klimoski, the director of the project. “It simply is often overwhelmed.” He continues, “Conversatio addresses these twin challenges of a lack of cultural support and busyness by drawing upon Saint Benedict’s rule of life, in particular the commitment to a life-long conversion (conversatio morum) as we invite ministers into practices that deepen their sense of vocational call as they equip themselves for pastoral excellence.” Conversatio is both a transformation or conversation and a continuing conversation on what constitutes excellence in ministry.

At the beginning, there were four programmatic components to Conversatio: retreats, ministry colloquia, ministry learning communities, and certification for lay ministers. Ministry learning communities, a program of mini-grants to various groups of clergy and laity, has been dropped as Lilly funding was used up. The most successful is the ministry colloquia, which brings together a cohort of parish teams three times a year for peer consultation on issues identified by the teams. “In many ways,” Klimoski says, “this has proved to be our best idea and greatest success.” St. John’s is now working to incorporate Conversatio into the ongoing work of the School of Theology•Seminary on a permanent basis.

Like any educational institution, St. John’s began the program with some confidence that it could identify the qualities of excellence in pastoral ministry and then transfer them to individuals and groups of ordained and lay ministers. “I’ve got a lot of opinions about what works and doesn’t work in churches,” Klimoski says. “I have a disposition toward this. We sort of assumed that we would produce results. We would open the celestial heaven, and they would change.”

One immediate obstacle was resistance from potential participants. They simply did not have time. Another was resistance to the implicit idea that these ministers did not know what excellence is or did not possess the qualities of excellence. One priest bluntly told Klimoski, “I can’t come to one more event to learn that I’m a failure.”

The result is a program that has been turned on its head. Rather than trying to inculcate excellence, Klimoski and his colleagues depend on the participants
themselves to identify the marks of excellence in pastoral ministry and find ways to apply and implement them in parish settings. "That really was a discovery," Klimoski declares. “It’s been a revelation.” Leaders of the St. John’s program changed from faculty to facilitators of a conversation. Klimoski wryly observes, “Now I tell them that all I’m doing is holding their jackets.”

Klimoski explains that during the early grant period, they based their approach on Philippians 4:8: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

What they gradually discovered is the voices of pastoral leaders themselves. “This is counter-intuitive to a lot of thinking about excellence,” Klimoski says. “We had to learn how to listen.” Klimoski now believes that a much more fruitful biblical base for excellence in ministry is I Corinthians 12-13—the chapters on the diversity of ministries framed by the hymn of love (“And I will show you a more excellent way . . . . Love bears all things, believes all things, endures all things”).

“We’ve come to the conclusion,” says Klimoski, “that the demarcation of excellence is better relationships.” He continues, “We’re not offering a set of foolproof steps leading to excellence. We’re not about making better priests, liturgists, or catechists. Conversatio is not bringing leaders to campus for salvation or pastoral excellence. The wisdom resides in them, and we bring them here to claim their excellence.”

“People work from the inside out,” he reports, “and the inside can make a difference. If they’re discouraged, giving them the best principles will fall like lead. If the heart is not there and if the mind isn’t there, it won’t work.”

One of the recurring themes from the St. John’s gatherings is the aloneness that pastoral leaders experience. “A lot of our participants feel that doing ministry is something you do alone. Power and authority are granted to them as individuals. They lose their sense of collaboration. There’s a deep sense of darkness that comes with aloneness. It’s exacerbated by busyness.”

Klimoski says the sense of busyness is often exacerbated by church leaders, who “continue to escalate that pace of life.” “I’m unimpressed by busyness,” he declares, “because the well is running dry. Then people declare, ‘I’m not experiencing any joy in what I do.’ Our interest is in helping ministers when ministry becomes dull. We’re very aware of the extraordinary women and men who enter ministry. The question for us is, ‘How can we help them burnish themselves to keep their vocation alive. We can’t revitalize them. They need to do that themselves and with each other.”
As *Conversatio* is blended into the future work of St. John’s, it will include the function of convening pastoral ministers, retreats both for individual groups and more structured retreats for groups focused around strategic planning, seminars built around the stunningly beautiful St. John’s Bible with its illuminated passages, and a redesigned sabbatical program. A director will be hired to supervise the on-going work of being a facilitator and convener of pastoral leaders. Most of the St. John’s events are almost by definition small, but that doesn’t phase Klimoski and his colleagues. “We’ve given up trying to reach the masses,” he says. “We firmly believe that a few can make a difference.”

I asked Klimoski whether the inversion of the educational and formative process might lead simply to reinforcing and ratifying habits of mind and patterns of activity that are not marks of excellence. “That’s probably a fair critique,” he acknowledges, “but placing the initiative with pastoral ministers is a crucial first step to challenging what they are doing. We have to earn their trust.”

Klimoski maintains, “I’m very mindful that people are sitting here saying, ‘I shouldn’t be here.’ But we have to help them to begin to claim their competence. We want them to admit, ‘What I’ve come to learn is that I’m really competent.’ We want them to find hope in themselves, confidence in themselves. We’d like them to discover that excellence is not so much in what they do but in who they are.”

4. Conclusion

What will be the shape of Roman Catholic pastoral leadership in the future? What are the marks of excellence? The answers are unknown but becoming clear. There will be diverse answers, and they definitely will come from the parishes and pastoral leaders themselves, striving for adaptive and creative responses to utterly new realities in light of the Church’s core identity as a sacramental community. Educational institutions, national church organizations, and governing bodies of the church will play a role in the pursuit of excellence, but their chief contribution will be convening, facilitating, and enhancing the lively and creative impulses within congregations and pastoral leaders.

In one sense, there is a crowning irony in these programs to foster pastoral excellence. They are based, implicitly or explicitly, on the model of experts who can influence, mold, and shape excellence in ministry. Such excellence—admittedly understood in imperfect terms—would become patterns of behavior and habits of life that would sustain, reform,
and revitalize Catholic life in America. There would be positive results. They could be evaluated. They could be adopted by others.

What these three sample grants in the Roman Catholic Church suggest, however, is that excellence is more spiritual than behavioral, more rooted in who pastoral ministers are than what they do. They point to the wisdom of Teilhard de Chardin, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

Furthermore, these sample grants strongly reinforce the idea that excellence emerges from communities instead of individual entrepreneurs or visionaries. American culture reinforces the notion of excellence as the product of individual endeavor. The experience of aloneness that so many participants describe is itself a sign of the debilitating and destructive impact of individualism in churches. Klimoski is undoubtedly right that the beginning of discussion about excellence lies in “the still more excellent way” in I Corinthians 13 and in what Walter Brueggemann calls the fundamental testimony of Scripture: “You are not alone.”