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PREVIEW

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

A THEOLOGY OF COLLABORATIVE  
MINISTRY FOCUSING ON CATHOLIC FAMILIES  
NEGATIVELY AFFECTED BY TV TECHNOLOGY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY  
OF THE HUMANITIES DEPARTMENT IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

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A Theology of Collaborative Ministry

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## Collaborative Ministry to Families Affected by TV

### Abstract

Two contemporary issues are addressed in this dissertation. One is the relentless decline in the number of Catholic priests available for ministry in the United States. The other is the problematic impact of modern technology on family life symbolized by the negative influences of television in the home.

A twofold response is proposed. First, an investigation of the Christian tradition demonstrates that lay ministry, like priestly ministry, is grounded in baptism. Thus, the first objective is to engage pastor and laity in a collaborative model of ministry as an alternative to the exclusively clerical model.

Second, an examination of the literature on TV technology indicates that prolonged viewing generates dissociation, estrangement, and alienation in family and faith community. Thus, a second objective is to implement collaborative ministry by commissioning trained lay collaborators for the ministry of preparing families for infant baptism. The desired outcome is (a) a reorientation of these families to the faith community and, (b) a decrease in their dependence on television.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The primary purpose in researching this dissertation was to address the problem of the shortage of priests available for service in the Catholic church in the United States and beyond. A collaborative approach to ministry is proposed as the modern successor to the exclusively clerical model operative in the church since the Middle Ages. The collaborative model engages pastors and trained parishioners in a mutually supportive ministry.

The secondary purpose of this dissertation is to address the problems modern families are experiencing as a result of the negative impact of television on the quality of family life. Thus, the effectiveness of the collaborative approach to ministry is tested by preparing families for the baptism of their children. The goal of the baptismal preparation process is to reorient these families to their traditional faith community and, at the same time, to decrease their dependence on television.

The completion of this dissertation marks the fulfillment of these objectives. St. Patrick's parish, Harrisville, Rhode Island, now enjoys the benefit of

collaborative ministry to expectant parents. Its effectiveness here suggests that this method of ministry may be developed and implemented elsewhere.

Thus, the completion of this study marks, first, the conclusion of a profitable process of study, research, writing, and learning about the possibilities of collaborative ministry in our technological age. Saint Patrick's parish community also begins a period characterized by a broader and deeper understanding of the Christian ministry.

These accomplishments are due in no small measure to the contributions of many individuals who deserve my thanks. These include the President, administrators, faculty, and staff of Salve Regina University for the opportunity to engage in the doctoral program in humanities. This rigorous course of study has been distinguished by the superior quality of professors, student participants, and competent administrators.

Second, my thanks go to the dissertation committee, especially to the chairman, Dr. Eugene Hillman, who critiqued my work as it developed and offered sound advice. Drs. Karen Murphy and Michael Malone, readers on the committee, also provided insightful textual criticism and encouragement.

Similarly, the pastoral council of St. Patrick's parish played an important role in implementing the pastoral plan for parents presenting their children for baptism.

A final word of gratitude is due to my parents, Myles and Bridget O'Reilly, who provided a family environment where the rudiments of collaborative ministry were practiced. It is to their memory that I dedicate this dissertation. Their unselfish love and support for the members of our family are gifts for which we are eternally grateful. Indeed, the completion of this project is largely due to the motivation that comes from such loving memories.

The project's effectiveness at St. Patrick's already validates the conclusions of this study. Expanding the ministry to include the laity at this parish alleviates the clergy shortage, and the baptismal preparation program adequately addresses the needs of families negatively affected by television. But the long-term effects will ultimately depend on the ongoing collaboration of ministers and parents in maintaining the quality and integrity of life in the family and in the faith community.

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CHAPTER ONE  
THE RESEARCH QUESTION, METHOD, AND DESIGN

Introduction

The topic of this dissertation emerged from this writer's personal experience as a priest in the diocese of Providence for the past twenty-five years, particularly the last four as pastor of St. Patrick's Parish in Harrisville, Rhode Island. It was a period during which the needs of a growing, diversified Catholic population intensified while the number of priests available for service declined at an alarming rate. Overwhelmed and burned-out by ministerial pressures, many men left the priesthood seeking fulfillment elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Those who remained exercised their ministry as they understood it: Some continued to serve in traditional fashion, while others struggled to meet the emerging challenges presented by the late 20th-century society.

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<sup>1</sup>An NBC televised report on the priesthood in the United States (1993, March 12) estimated that in the past twenty years 20,000 priests resigned from the active ministry in pursuit of other professions. Death, retirement, and burnout also reduced the clerical population.

Modern pastoral concerns, if they are to be addressed creatively, require that changes be made in the approach to pastoral ministry. A declining priesthood and expanding modern needs necessitate the inclusion of laity more directly in the ministerial enterprise. Such an expansion presupposes that the laity will bring fresh insights--gained from their own family experiences--to the ministry, and a willingness to commit time and energy to serving families of the parish in collaboration with others. Thus, the proposed collaborative approach to family ministry foresees clergy and trained laity working together, making unique yet complementary contributions to pastoral theology and ministry. It is proposed in this dissertation that such a pastoral response will alleviate the shortage of clergy and meet the needs of the families of St. Patrick's parish.

Families were chosen for study in this dissertation because, as the evidence will show, they are extremely vulnerable to the allurements of television's graphic entertainment. Creating a sense of personal space whether in family or faith community is a maturing experience that has been neutralized to some degree by the dominance of television. Families

seem to suffer from the immediate gratification, instant communication, and information explosion this medium offers. The quality and integrity of family life have suffered to the degree that decision making, once the domain of individuals, family heads, and community leaders, has been extensively influenced by television now occupying a central place in practically every home in America.

It may not be assumed, however, that television is the only problematic factor in the technological transformation of modern culture. Television was selected for study in this dissertation because it is the chief exemplar of the various media that are subversive of Christian attitudes and values today. In recent years, according to Medved (1992), TV has incorporated into its programming many objectionable features of modern secular culture. Rock music, trashy films, and tabloid scandals featured on the TV screen are all intrusive, addictive, and counter to Christian values.

The latest advances in electronic technology with more TV channels, larger screens, and interactive programs with virtual-reality techniques--all portend that the home will be continuously invaded by these

mesmerizing attractions in coming decades. The psychological need for personal involvement with family and community is not met in this artificial environment. Opportunities for self-expression and self-actualization are not encouraged in an atmosphere that fosters poverty of spirit. Due warnings are frequently repeated by social critics (Winn, 1986; Staudenmaier, 1988; McKibbin, 1992) who complain that we are turning into a nation of couch potatoes or a captive audience of zombies.

The meaning and practice of infant baptism is a central theological component of this dissertation. Preparing parents for the baptism of their children presents the parish community with an opportunity to address the problems of modern family life. A primary concern is the way television programming affects child rearing in modern America and how it contributes to the breakdown of family relationships. Baptismal preparation also provides the occasion for the faith community to reflect on its own life and how its pastoral practices have been influenced by the TV mentality. The insights gained from studying infant baptism in conjunction with the other sacraments of initiation--confirmation and eucharist--will provide

the necessary material for training collaborators and educating expectant parents in community identity.

In short, the proposed baptismal preparation program at St. Patrick's parish is a practical way of demonstrating how collaborative ministry is essential, necessary, and effective in addressing modern issues.

### Analysis of the Problem

Three important issues necessitate the undertaking of this study--a shortage of priests available for pastoral ministry, increasing family needs occasioned by unsuitable TV programs, and the need for a fresh approach to ministry. These problems will be described in the following pages.

The state of the priesthood in the United States declined sharply since Vatican II first convened. Castillo (1992) summarizes the situation in 1962:

In that year [1962] there were 48,992 seminarians in the United States, and the future of the Catholic priesthood in this country seemed quite secure.... In 1967 there would be 59,892 priests serving in the Catholic community. No one knew it at the time, but 1967 was the peak year and the

number of priests in the United States declined ever after. (p. 302)

Castillo (1992) completes the statistical profile of church personnel in the United States today:

Between 1962 and 1992, while the number of priests declined six percent, the Catholic community in the United States grew thirty-six percent. A good portion of this growth took place in the suburbs, thus necessitating new parishes and further stretching the clergy. This situation does not appear likely to improve--witness the decreasing number of seminarians. A 1990 study prepared for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops predicted that by 2005 there will be 74 million Catholics and fewer than 34,000 priests, or one priest for every 2200 parishioners. Besides declining numbers, there is also concern about how many priests will be active in their pastoral ministry. The average age of priests [in the United States in 1993] is over 51 and climbing. (p. 302)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Wilks (1992) did a study of the Official Catholic Directory

These trends are reflected in the diocese of Providence. A recent study predicted that by the year 2015 the number of priests available for active ministry in the diocese will be cut in half by early retirement, resignations, and death (O'Hara, 1985). Likewise, the number of ordinations will be reduced by half, representing less than ten percent replacement of those leaving active ministry. Simultaneously, the *Status Animarum Reports* (Annual Diocesan Census Reports) for the period 1977 to 1993 show steady increases in the Catholic population. These findings are substantiated by a recent study entitled the *Diocese of Providence: Demographics and Attitudes* (1991) which suggests that the trend in the ratio of priests to parishioners is expected to continue, given the heavy influx of Catholics from Latin American countries into the area.

These projections have already been validated in a number of parishes throughout the diocese. At Saint Patrick's in Harrisville, where previously an average of 2.5 priests served, there is now only one with no possibility of an assistant being assigned in the near

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from 1952 to 1992 that supports Castillo's (1992) conclusions.

or even distant future. A telephone census conducted by the pastoral council on behalf of St. Patrick's parish in November 1992 reflects diocesan and national trends.<sup>3</sup>

Damaging media publicity over the past decade has compromised the image of priesthood in modern society and is feeding discontent among clergy and laity (T. C. Fox 1992). A consequence of this, according to a survey conducted by the Princeton Religious Research Center (1992), is that the image of the priesthood, once among the most respected professions in the world, is at an all-time low and continues to slip in public opinion.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is unlikely that the priesthood will recover in the immediate or even distant future from the depletion it has suffered over the past twenty-five years.

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<sup>3</sup>In October 1993, the office of Planning and Development in the diocese of Providence developed *Environmental Scan: Major Trends and Findings*, in which key issues and trends were identified as a context for strategic planning in the diocese for the next ten years. These trends reflect a significant increase in the Catholic population. A primary issue to be addressed in the plan is the reorganization of the parishes in relation to the number of clergy available for service.

<sup>4</sup>The results of this survey, conducted between June 26 to June 29, 1992 were published in *Emerging Trends* and were reported in the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* on November 28, 1992, p. A 11.

It may be further pointed out that the media may have contributed significantly to the decline of symbolic priesthood today.<sup>5</sup> John R. Quinn (1993), Archbishop of San Francisco, places the blame for the negative image of the celibate priesthood on the media:

[Priesthood] is assailed on all sides by the media, [especially] the entertainment industry.... The wide and remorseless publicity given to the one percent of US priests who have engaged in practices of pedophilia has cast a shadow on all priests and has a very negative effect on their morale. (p. 16)

A study entitled *Portrayal of Christian Leaders on Network Television*, conducted by Skill and Robinson (1993a) at the University of Dayton, lends credence to the thesis that the media trivialize priesthood symbolism. The study concluded:

Christian leaders are little more than a convenient mechanism for moving a story around other more interesting, attractive,

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<sup>5</sup>The terms "symbolic priesthood" and "priesthood symbolism" are synonymous. For a more detailed discussion on priesthood as a symbol see pp. 53-59.

and nonreligious characters.... Christian leaders on television rarely behave as Christian or exhibit a capacity for leadership. (p. 11)

The way priests see themselves, indeed the presentation of the symbolic image of priesthood to the public at large, is a function of what social psychologists Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin (1977) call the "projection of the outsider's symbolic representation" (pp. 276-277). In other words television technology, as P. Berger, B. Berger, and Kellner (1973) see it, "may be viewed as a basic structuring force of modernity" (pp. 61, 141). The assumption that continuous negative television coverage has contributed to the declining image of the Catholic priesthood in modern society finds support in these studies.

Family life has likewise been negatively affected by television. Studies indicate that prolonged viewing of television has a negative effect on the quality of family life. A distinctive feature is a lack of involvement or sustained interaction between parents and children (Dunn, Josepsson, & Wells, 1976; Winn, 1986; Rowe & Herstand, 1986; J. L. Singer & D. G.

Singer, 1986a, 1986b; Henggeler, Cohen, & Edwards 1991).

Fox and Pierce (1992), in a study entitled *Recent Trends in Violent Crime*, described the typical profile of children overexposed to television. In an interview with Carton (1992, November 12) of the *Boston Globe*, these researchers commented on what they consider to be the root cause of social problems among children:

Basically we're seeing more and more kids that are under socialized and under supervised at home.... Too many parents are going off to work, or otherwise ignoring their children before they've bonded, a condition that virtually guarantees emotional problems. (p. 63)

Fox and Pierce further indicated that some programs presented on TV are capable of influencing the development of a diverse array of negative social behaviors including violence in young children. In the same Carton interview professor Fox offered these additional comments:

The most susceptible children seem to be those who don't get strong anti-violent messages from somewhere else--their family or school. But it's hard to separate cause and

effect, since children who commit the most violence tend to be those who watch it the most. At a minimum, film violence seems to reinforce a child's own personal sense of violence. And the most dangerous movies and TV programs are those that fuse sex and violence since pleasure comes to be associated in the teenager's mind with the concept of inflicting harm. Unfortunately, screen violence is predominantly sexual, consisting of men committing crimes against women. And thanks to cable and videocassettes, it's readily available. (p. 63)

A growing number of criminologists across the country support Professor Fox's findings. An article in the *New York Times* (Butterfield, 1992, October 19) discusses the opinions of the experts:

[They claim that] the drug epidemic among urban poor, the growing number and firepower of guns, the eroding quality of public schools and the glorification of violence on television and in movies [contribute to violent behavior in children]. But, most