

**Called by Love, Called to the Service of Stewardship:
Theological Foundations of Lay Ecclesial Leadership
in Ministerial Public Juridic Persons**

*What God does first and best and most is to trust us with our moment in history.
God trusts us to do what must be done for the sake of God's whole community.*

—Walter Brueggemann (1933–2025)

This paper has been prepared by Associate Professor Jamie Calder, SJ, MAPS, of Australian Catholic University, in response to the request, in early 2024, of the Formation Committee of the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons (of which he is a Formator Member) to develop a theological rationale for lay ecclesial leadership in Ministerial Public Juridic Persons (MPJPs) within the Australian Catholic Church. The paper presents Calder's reflections following extensive consultations with lay ecclesial leaders among MPJPs in Australia and should be considered to be a working paper—that is, a work in progress that is open to future development or revision.

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Executive Summary

This working paper examines the theological significance of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons (MPJPs) in the Catholic Church, a governance model where lay women and men lead major church ministries in health, education, and social services. Since 1994, twenty-two MPJPs have emerged across Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore, representing a significant shift from traditional consecrated religious-led governance to lay leadership.

Central Thesis. MPJPs represent a “sign of the times” in Catholic Church governance. In them lay canonical stewards exercise legitimate church authority through God’s calling to the mission of canonical stewardship, as an exercise of their baptismal dignity, and through the provision of canon law. These communities of canonical stewards, understood here as MPJPs, are best understood theologically as “small intentional Christian communities.”

Foundation of Authority. All church authority stems from God’s mission, understood as the Holy Trinity’s loving, relational outreach to creation. This divine calling manifests through community needs, particularly those of the poor and suffering, evoking responses to God’s call, which authorises lay leadership.

Authenticity and Legitimacy. Lay ecclesial leadership may be authentic not merely through juridical appointment as a function of canon law but through genuine vocational witness to God’s humanising mission both within an MPJP and to the boards and ministries entrusted to their care. This is connected to Jesus’ example of authentic leadership, emphasising that legitimate authority requires both power and trust.

Theological Identity. MPJPs are small intentional Christian communities that bridge between the institutional Church and their ministries. This enables them to exercise spiritual leadership while maintaining communion with the broader Church and their organisational service. In the theological identity of small Christian communities, communities of canonical stewards called to the vocation of stewardship exercise that stewardship by providing a nexus of communion that unites the different communities of their boards and ministries. In this

they mirror the Church itself in their stewardship mission to be a communion of communions.

Further, MPJPs act collegially in overseeing civil boards that govern their ministries. Differing from traditional single-person governance (such as by bishops, parish priests, congregational leaders), the lay leaders of MPJPs function collectively as unified and unifying communities, exercising stewardship through principles of subsidiarity and communal discernment.

Significance for the Church. MPJPs represent a reclaiming of Christian community models, similar to synodality, dating back to ancient Christian communities. This “revival” has the capacity to reshape Catholic Church experience and provides a critical expression of gospel care for the vulnerable and marginalised. The emergence of lay-led MPJPs demonstrates the Holy Spirit’s continued provision for church needs while empowering lay Catholics to assume their baptismal dignity in church leadership. This represents both continuity with tradition and adaptation to contemporary circumstances.

Conclusion. The theological foundation for lay ecclesial leadership in MPJPs rests on understanding these communities as small intentional Christian communities called to stewardship of God's mission, a stewardship that must ultimately be understood as one of kinship. This identity provides legitimacy for their unique position as church authorities while enabling them to serve as bridge-builders between the Church and their diverse ministries, ultimately witnessing to the gospel’s preferential care for society’s most vulnerable members. As small intentional Christian communities, MPJPs’ witness to the union of hearts of minds so as to foster communion among the communities of boards and ministries entrusted to their care cannot be overstated.

Introduction

Since 1994, various organisations within the Australian Catholic Church have been establishing canonical entities entrusted with the care and stewardship of many of the largest and most diverse ministries of the Church in Australia.¹ These ministries have arisen from the heart of the Church and its people's response to God's call of loving service. Traditionally, many of these ministries, in health and aged care, education and social services, have been founded and administered in the name of the Church by mostly consecrated religious women and men. These ministries or works can be understood as part of the Holy Spirit's continued inspired provision for the wellbeing and sustaining of all peoples. In this way, established under specific canons (cann. 115, 116, or 313) of the Code of Canon Law, the Church's internal legal framework, these newer entities are often referred to as "ministerial public juridic persons" (MPJPs).

Public juridic persons (PJPs) are not a new phenomenon in the Catholic Church. This governance form has a long and venerable history. For example, Catholic religious orders, as well as dioceses, are themselves public juridic persons in canon law. What is new about the more contemporary *ministerial* public juridic persons is that they are composed of groups of lay women and/or men acting collegially as a church authority of governance over the church ministries given into their care. Often, but not always, these more contemporary MPJPs have arisen initially under the auspices of Catholic religious institutes of women or men. Some MPJPs are diocesan, reporting to local church authorities, such as bishops, while others are pontifical, reporting their activities to the responsible Vatican dicastery. Important here, however, is that MPJPs represent church authority in their ministries.

Thus, these contemporary MPJPs are composed of groups of lay women and/or men who have been empowered by the Code of Canon Law to exercise a significant ministry of

¹ In this paper, the word "Church," with the initial C in upper case, refers to the Catholic Church, whether or not the word "Church" is preceded by the qualifier "Catholic"; and, in general, lower case "church" refers to the adjectival sense of the term, e.g., a church authority—an authority within the Catholic Church.

leadership in the Catholic Church, as they steward in trust the diverse ministries given into their care, in the name of the Church.

The various MPJPs in Australia have varied origins and exercise varied forms of governance, with various procedures for the selection of their respective memberships—all of this stemming from a variety of constitutions with different reserve powers. At the time of writing, there are twenty-two MPJPs across Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore, many of whom belong to the Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons (AMPJP) in Australia.

The various expressions of this relatively new form of lay leadership in the Catholic Church, diverse in their origins, ministries and governance structures, represent an important “sign of the times” for the Church, not only in Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore, but across the world. Indeed, this governance form is now present in many countries, albeit with diverse histories and structures.

Importantly, through their stewardship of diverse Catholic ministerial institutions of various sizes, MPJPs contact the lives of millions of people in the world, within the Church and beyond, and their stewardship invites theological reflection.

The Nature of This Document

This document is a working paper that explores the emergence of increasing lay² governance and leadership in the Catholic Church, which has occurred over the last thirty years through the rise of MPJPs. This phenomenon is a sign of the times, and we are invited to consider MPJPs’ significance, especially in theological terms.

Throughout many of the more recent centuries of the Church, governance and leadership of its ministries had been overwhelmingly in the hands of groups of celibate religious women and men, some being ordained priests, but many not so. The rise, therefore, of groups or communities of overwhelmingly *lay* women and men as canonical trustees/stewards in MPJPs entrusted with the governance and leadership of significant church ministries represents something of a seismic shift in leadership and governance within the Catholic Church.

Understanding this recent phenomenon of laity-led MPJPs as representative of a significant development in church governance and leadership requires us to reflect

² The terms “laity” or “lay people” and cognates to describe members of the Catholic Church who are not ordained ministers or consecrated members of religious institutes is problematic, because religious brothers and sisters, for instance, are, canonically speaking, members of the laity.

theologically on them in order to discern their meaning for the Church as whole. Essentially, as with all discernment, theological reflection is reflection on what the Holy Spirit might be bringing about or calling forth in the Church “for just such a time as this” (Esther 4:14). And indeed, it is theology that is important here, for a central part of its role in the Church is to reflect upon God’s ongoing call so as to help discern the movements of God’s Spirit. Such reflection always takes place in the light of God’s call in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in light of the centuries of Catholic tradition of reflecting on God’s call.

The purpose and orientation of this working paper, then, is to engage in theological reflection—that is, to reflect on the theological meaning and significance for the Catholic Church of these contemporary MPJPs.

This paper must not be understood as being a finished or definitive piece of theological reflection. Rather, the Association (AMPJP) offers it as a starting point from which to further explore the theological significance and foundations of the Holy Spirit’s call to God’s people in lay ecclesial leadership through MPJPs. This paper is thus a starting point to provoke further reflection, discussion, and growth in understanding and discernment of God’s call to the Church. It has been prepared in conjunction with Wisdom Circle gatherings of canonical stewards (in two sets of gatherings, in 2024 and 2025) and extensive discussions with the Formation Committee of the Association. So, although this paper has a primary author, it is also an integrated collection of many people’s wisdom, input, responses and reflections. As such, the paper will use first-person plural to indicate that this is a communally sourced paper being read by a community of persons.

Two Focus Themes

There are specific, central theological questions we seek to reflectively address in an integrated fashion throughout this working paper, which essentially comprises four main chapters and a concluding summary chapter. These theological questions may be grouped according to two themes, each theme responding to different theological questions.

The first theme is the broader theological one of the call of the Holy Spirit in the Church as the central authority for ministry. This theme will be particularly taken up in chapters 1 and 2. It contextualises or situates a second theological theme, focused on the authority, meaning and significance of an MPJP in the Catholic Church, which will be taken up more directly in chapters 3 and 4. Both themes are a way of responding theologically to the broader question of the sources of authority for ministry in the Church. That is, we seek here to explore theologically the broader backdrop of MPJP legitimacy, authority and

authenticity in and for the Catholic Church, through firstly exploring the foundations of authority for ministry governance in the Catholic Church as a whole.³

Flowing on from this broader theological context of authority for mission and ministry in chapters 1 and 2, a set of theological propositions in chapters 3 and 4 will respond to questions concerning the specific nature of the authority and authenticity of communities of canonical stewards (i.e., MPJPs) for their relatively new governance of church ministries. This second theological theme is particularly important, because it starts to reflect on the specific “sign of the times” represented by lay ecclesial leadership of MPJPs.

Traditionally, the laity have not, overall, been involved in decision-making or decision-taking in the Church. There are of course exceptions to this norm throughout history, particularly in relation to monarchs. Significantly, the situation has now shifted, with lay people in MPJPs becoming decision-makers, albeit collegially or in unison as “an aggregate of persons or things”; and reflecting on the meaning of this development in church governance should help in promoting an understanding of the unique, theologically-sourced identity of lay canonical stewards. Thus, in responding to identity questions such as “What manner of ‘thing’ is a community of canonical trustees?” we will be able theologically to tease out their unique identity among other governing bodies in the Church. We will propose throughout this paper that the theological description that best captures the identity of an MPJP of canonical stewards is the very ancient one that has undergone relatively recent renewal in the Catholic Church in Africa, South America and Asia: that of the small base Christian community or small intentional Christian community.

Through unfolding this unique identity, the second theological focus theme in this working paper will be better able to address the significance represented by the shift in ecclesial leadership to MPJPs, given that most communities of canonical stewards are composed of members of the laity of the Church. In many instances, such Catholic laity reflect the various walks of life found in the communities from which they come and which they serve, in governance and leadership of church ministries.

³ Please note, however, that the theological explorations and reflections offered in this working paper are limited to providing a stimulus for further engagement and development after this paper is distributed. Accordingly any fuller treatment of the theological understanding of, for instance, “sacred power” as jurisdiction and/or delegation beyond that which is offered below is beyond this paper’s scope.

What Is an MPJP?

Prior to commencing our theological reflection, it is necessary first to make some orienting comments to better situate our discussion.

A PJP (in contradistinction to an MPJP) is an entity instituted through canon law to perform a specific function. As previously noted, the newer PJPs at the heart of this paper have exclusive responsibility for church ministries; hence the letter “M,” denoting this ministerial emphasis. The Association of Ministerial Public Juridic Persons (AMPJP) in Australia notes several key features of contemporary MPJPs:⁴

- They are largely autonomous in canon law (*similar to religious institutes*);
- They have an exclusive focus on church ministries (*unlike bishops and leaders of religious institutes, who have broader mandates*);
- They are governed by a college of canonical stewards (*whereas a diocese or a parish is governed by a single person*);
- Their canonical stewards can be, and almost always are, lay people (*other PJPs require their canonical stewards to be a vowed religious or an ordained cleric*); and
- They have a clear and set demarcation of roles within the boards they appoint to govern their ministries.

While there are differences in structures, reserve powers, and constitutions between MPJPs, for our purposes it is necessary to point to a clear understanding as to the nature of an MPJP. To that end, an MPJP is comprised of canonical stewards as trustees, who witness to and serve the Church’s mission collegially through their service of stewardship in their oversight of the civil boards that they entrust to govern their ministries. Thus, with a few exceptions, a community of canonical stewards (an MPJP) expresses their mission through their stewardship of boards, who, in turn, govern their ministries.

Importantly, whether an aggregate of “things” or “persons,” as the text of canon 115 states, canonical stewards act as a singular “person” or “voice” in unison with one another in the oversight of their boards and in this way they govern their ministries. Important here is the Catholic social teaching principle of subsidiarity.

So, for the purpose of our theological reflection, the term “MPJP” refers to a community of canonical stewards who witness—in their oversight of their ministries through their stewardship of their boards—to the mission of Jesus Christ in the Catholic Church. This

⁴ See <https://ampjp.org.au/about-mpjps/>.

understanding enables our discussion to further reflect on the dimensions of God's call to the Church (that is, on ecclesial dimensions) by exploring the authority and legitimacy of lay leadership in the Church.

Authority and Power

Turning then to models of church or theologies of church (ecclesiologies), it becomes necessary to briefly, and in an introductory way, touch on the theological nature of authority and governance of groups of canonical stewards in the Church. Implicitly, this points to the theological understanding of notions such as power, authority and, ultimately, identity.

Theologian Richard Gaillardetz argues that we cannot escape notions of power and authority, for the exercise of healthy authority is necessary to basic human flourishing.⁵ Such a notion of authority, though, must not be seen as a property possessed solely by any person or thing (on which, more in a moment). Rather, the power of authority resides in the relationship between the person or thing, on one hand, and the recipient or focus of that authority, on the other. Examples might be the “authority of the Bible” in the case of a “thing”—or the authority of an MPJP (community of canonical stewards). Note here that the exercise of legitimate authority in the Church necessarily encompasses the notion of power.

The term “power” has multiple valencies of meaning, including negative and positive ones. In the contemporary Australian Catholic Church (at least) it would be safe to say the notion of power has come to have overwhelmingly negative connotations. Yet, as noted, for basic human flourishing, power cannot be renounced; and indeed power is a ubiquitous and necessary part of human life. Equally, the gospels attest to Jesus' constant use of his own power and authority (*dynamis* and *exousia*) for healing and teaching. Importantly though, his exercise of power and authority were intimately related to an authenticity hitherto unseen by his audience (cf. Matthew 7:29). In this, we can begin to see the interrelated nature of authority, power, and authenticity. Of particular note, perhaps, is the close relationship between the notions of authenticity and authority, which relate to each other in conjunction with the notion of authorship.

So, while coercive power or power *over* others (rather than power *for* or *with* others) lies at the heart of much abuse, and so makes the notions of power and authority in the

⁵ Richard Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? Foundations for Understanding Authority in the Church* (Liturgical, 2018), Kindle.

contemporary Church controversial topics, it remains that both power and authority are necessary for flourishing—whether in human communities in general or, more specifically, in the Church.⁶ Moreover, we cannot really grasp the nature of the exercise of authority in an MPJP in the Church, whether within its ministries or within the larger Church itself, until we have a theological understanding of power. Gaillardetz helpfully clarifies the matter:

For our purposes, we may think of “power” simply as *the capacity for effective action* and ecclesial power, when it is exercised authentically, as *the capacity to engage in effective action in the service of the church’s life and mission*.

“Authority,” in turn, can be understood as *the legitimate, trustworthy, and accountable exercise of power*. Note also that you can have power without authority, but you can’t have authority without power.⁷

One of the key reasons for orienting this discussion about the theological meaning, identity, and purpose of MPJPs is the increasing attention given to the value of trust. Recently, the *Final Document* of the Synod on Synodality pointed to the importance of trust in ecclesial life, reflecting on the variety of ministries within the Church through the notion of “entrustment.”⁸ The question of authority, then, and its connection to authenticity, turns out also to be a question about trust and “entrustment.” As such, it also lies at the heart of any theological discussion around the sources of the identity and authority of MPJPs.

Finally, then, in an institutional Church that has been governed predominantly by a celibate and ordained clergy of presbyters and bishops, the rise of non-ordained lay women and men to governance and official leadership of that Church cannot but be responded to theologically—and particularly so in relation to questions of power, authority, authenticity, trust, and “entrustment.” So, at the outset of these theological reflections we have noted in an introductory way some brief definitions of and reflections on power and authority.⁹ We turn

⁶ Gaillardetz, chap. 1, Kindle.

⁷ Gaillardetz, chap. 1.

⁸ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document*, 76, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/final-document-of-the-xvi-assembly.html>.

⁹ For instance: “Until recently, theories of ecclesiastical governance centred on the notions of ‘sacred power’ in the life of the Church as it relates to the exercise of jurisdiction. While the question is not a new one, it has re-emerged with greater urgency considering the priority of developing more effective structures of synodal governance at every level of the Church urged by Pope Francis, including his commitment to appointing laypersons to roles of leadership within the Roman Curia and to serve as voting members of the International Synod (a consultative, not a deliberative, body). While there are undoubtedly historical precedents to support

now to the first theme to begin to situate theologically the meaning of contemporary MPJPs for their own self-understanding and for the wider Church.

such participation, it has yet to find a fully satisfying and coherent foundation in contemporary ecclesiology.” See Catherine Clifford, “Power and the Exercise of Authority in the Service of the People of God,” *Studia Canonica*, 58 (2024): 202.

Chapter 1

The Source of All Power and Authority in Ministry: God's Call Manifest in the Needs of the World

Chapter Summary

- God may be understood as pure relational mission: The Trinity lovingly embraces all creation. God's nature is one of endless loving movement and connection, reaching out as self-diffusive love. God is mission.
- All authority in Christian ministry flows from God's call, which people experience as vocation: a personal response in the context and circumstances of one's life, in light of one's gifts or talents, to the divine invitation to join in God's mission of love to the world.
- This call becomes perceptible through observing the needs of the world around us, especially of those persons who are poor, suffering, marginalised, dispossessed, or excluded. Responding faithfully to such needs may create webs of interconnected relationships that mirror God's own loving nature.
- The authority to lead in mission comes not from human appointment, although it is expressed through such, but from authentic discernment of God's call, both individually and within the particular Christian community that a person feels called to serve in.
- Communities of canonical stewards find their deepest authority in responding to the needs of the community through their vocation to stewardship, empowered by the Holy Spirit to govern ministries through their boards.

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In this chapter, we move from exploring the specific theological foundations of MPJP lay-leadership in the Church to exploring the source of all power and authority in the Church. Using the lens of a theology of mission, we will tease out the way in which, through revelation, Christians have come to understand that God in God's very "self" is pure relational mission: God, the Holy Trinity of Three-Persons-in-One, reaches out in loving embrace to all creation, sustaining and vivifying it.

Such an understanding will anchor our discussion of authentic and authoritative leadership in a theology of mission, in which God's call is the centre of authority for all ministry in the Church, as well as the *raison d'être* of any Christian church. We will then unfold the ways in which God-who-is-mission calls humanity through the needs of the world, especially those of the local community. This will lead us to highlight the web of relationships in which all living beings exist. Referring to *Laudato Si'*, we will be further able to see that the essential interdependence of all beings and being itself mirror God's own self-giving relationality.

We will then further develop this theology of God as mission, exploring the ways in which God's call, seen in the needs of the community, especially of those who are poor or suffering, introduces the notion of vocation as faithful response to God's call. In this way we will see that it is vocation that describes a key source of authority for leadership of a community of canonical stewards and that empowers them to respond in mission to those needs.

Everything Starts with God:

The Authority of Communal Mission and Primary Calling

From Christians alone it is ultimately impossible to understand God. That does not mean, however, that there are no indications or "reveals" as to God's nature and desires. Reflecting on such is the study known as theology. Again, the long history of God's revealing God's loving self in and for creation is a vast and cosmic love story that is finally beyond all telling (cf. John 21:25).

Those parts of the divine love story that have been revealed are attested to in the faith-history captured in the biblical texts. This divine love story is also reflected on in centuries of writings in the Church as faith and reason have been brought to bear upon God's revealing. These reflections on God through the movements of God's Holy Spirit throughout two Christian millennia make up for Catholic Christians the Catholic Tradition, and provide the perspective in which Christians understand God's revelation in earlier millennia, in the

Old Testament. Summarily, the pinnacle in this story of God's love for us and creation, at least for Christians, remains God's self-revealing or self-communication in the unique event of the person of Jesus Christ: his life, death, resurrection—and ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

From this particular revelation of Jesus Christ, Christians are invited to understand that, from the very remotest beginning, a dynamic communion “prevails” in God, such that nothing in or of God is static. In the Christian understanding, God's deepest identity in Godself is pure relationality of endless loving communion.¹⁰ Throughout the Christian centuries different metaphors have been used to try to understand the human experience of God's intimate relationality, out of which God calls creation to intimate relationship or union with God, who is the source of all mission.

It is this life of communion in God's “restless Godhead” flowing out effortlessly and without ceasing, spilling out into creation, healing and sanctifying, that calls all beings according to their capacities into a communion of loving embrace. This is what intimacy with God looks like: a Relationality that is “making holy” (sanctifying), that is healing, for it brings human persons home (communion) to their very selves, to others and to God, the necessarily tripartite definition of union with God. Paradoxically, this call is at one and the same time a sending forth into creation on mission to gather still more into communion and so into healing and sanctification.

It is this omni-directional, self-diffusive, gathering and sending nature of God that hints at what the nature of reality is: “What is real is not what is concerned with itself or turned in on itself (this latter is Luther's definition of sin). What is real is going beyond oneself, being in relation, calling others to relation.”¹¹

Another way to say this is that God, who is utter self-giving, diffusive, communal love, *is* mission. In similarly reaching out to respond to the needs of the world in love, each human person is understood to be both inspired by and, in some mysterious way, joining with God in our giving ourselves to that love in mission. So, it is not that God *has* a mission, but that God *is* mission and Christians name this mission as love (see 1 John 4:7-12).

¹⁰ Leonardo Boff, “Trinity,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Orbis Books, 1993), 389. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, part I, question 3, article 1.

¹¹ Stephen Bevans, “The Mission Has a Church: An Invitation to the Dance,” *Australian eJournal of Theology* 14, no. 1 (2009): 3.

God, Who Is Mission:

Humanity's Vocation for the Needs of the World

Since God in God's selfhood is mission, in an endless loving movement reaching out, endlessly creating, we can see that God's nature is not only the source of our natural becoming throughout life, but also the very source of human dignity. In this way, Christians affirm that in their experience of love each human person participates in the Holy Spirit, as the Third Person of the Divine Trinity loves the creation and all human persons unconditionally, yet utterly personally, into life and freedom. Thus, each and every living being, as much as the creation as a whole, provides the blueprint for the meaning and pattern of all life: interconnected, entwined relationality of love. This describes the sense in which mission, in all its different forms, is the natural human response (vocation) to "God-who-is-love-in-mission," as divine infinite Love calls each person according to their time, circumstances, gifts and vulnerabilities. So, the universal vocation of all creation, and of all human beings therein, is to enter into relationships of closeness (intimacy) with the self, with all other beings, and with God. In joining God in mission, each person steps into their own ongoing vocation to continually become a most loving self. God's call in the Holy Spirit is the stimulus awakening vocation (or the "how" of our response to the Spirit's call) in all people.

Christians, like all people of good will, affirm in their deepest heart of hearts this calling to love that presents itself in the needs around them, to which they seek to vocationally respond in ministry. The needs of the world are spiritual and material. At the heart of this attraction is the desire to "make better" our world; our response to need remains ultimately a responsive desire for communion. For Christians, the fulfilment of such a desire for communion is ultimately found only in complete union with God, who is Love, through and beyond this present world.

This manifold pattern of love that is both our human calling and a sharing and joining in God's mission as a part of God's self-diffusive love is self-evident across the whole creation. Pope Francis describes this pattern and call in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*:

240. The divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships.

This leads us not only to marvel at the manifold connections existing among creatures, but also to discover a key to our own fulfilment. The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. *Everything is interconnected*, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity. (My emphasis)

“Interconnection” here is simply another way of describing the interdependent relationships of all things, which arise from the mystery of God’s loving embrace. Imaging God (see Genesis 2:7), humans, being as precisely that, human being, exist in endless webs of relationship. Growing in maturity, each human person comes to know more deeply the desire for closeness or intimacy with self, others, and God through communion. In communion, each one according to their gifts and capacities realises the deepest longings of the Holy Spirit as much as that of their own hearts.

The Source of Authority in a Community of Canonical Stewards

It is in the midst of these deepest and most powerful human desires for love and belonging, for union, that we find some of the first, and, teleologically speaking, final, aspects of God’s call. This call is, as noted above, natural to God’s self, which is intrinsically constituted in loving mission between the three Persons of the Trinity, and indeed, is at one and the same time, therefore, the call to all human persons to join in the Holy Spirit’s mission of love in the world, through entering into communion.

Christians believe that this call of the Holy Spirit is placed in the hearts of all, whatever their degree of sanctity or sinfulness. It is a call in which we experience our sense of vocation. Vocation, then, becomes a way of describing the creaturely response to the experience of God’s love, whether that love be explicitly known by the creature or not. In human terms, God’s call is imprinted within the spirit in all of us, regardless of our status, abilities, sinfulness, or righteousness. The hallmark of responding lovingly to God’s call is an ever deepening inner freedom.

Saint or sinner, we are all called and experience a vocation. The profligate love shown by God’s call is addressed to all. Indeed, the varieties of responses to Jesus’ own call to his community (Israel; see Matthew 15:24) and his first disciples provide an excellent

example of the frailty and failures as much as of the joy and possibilities of God's call and human vocational response. God's call does not summon into being the community of the perfect or completely free, nor does the Holy Spirit call us in ways that avoid the hard work of spiritual self-discovery and surrender to love. Nor, for that matter, are we called because we are part of some kind of elite group, either socially or spiritually. Rather, God's call summons into being a communion of a many and varied people who journey on mission to respond to the needs of the world. Again, we see that there is nothing static here. It is the continuous dance of becoming love that mirrors God in God's self.

Visibly, then, Christians understand that it is God's call and our human vocational response that are instantiated in the various ministries of the Church. This call may be known explicitly or not, yet through the eyes of faith Christians are enabled to see it and join intentionally with the Holy Spirit in nurturing God's call. Discernment, or the seeking of God's will (of love), thus automatically becomes the backdrop against which God's call may prayerfully become understood and recognised. This search amounts simply to asking: What is the Holy Spirit calling us to become and do in God's name and in that of God's Church, the People of God?

In the Christian context, it is God's call, authentically discerned in communion between individual hearts (and minds) and the heart (and mind) of a Christian community, that should form the basis of all authority empowerment in the Church and in the Holy Spirit's ministries in the Church. This is simply another way of saying "the mission has a church and ministries."¹² Thus, similarly for MPJPs, the Holy Spirit's authoritative call to the ministry of stewardship of God's mission is also the foundational or source authority in the Church for that of lay ecclesial leadership and governance of communities of canonical stewards. Practically, this authority flows as a response to the pastoral needs that the Church aims to meet, in canon law, which creates the ecclesial legal framework for the existence of MPJPs. In this way, the Spirit provides for the emergence of lay ecclesial leadership and so empowers the vocation to canonical stewardship. In responding to the personal and communal discernment of the Holy Spirit's invitation to exercise authority as a member of an aggregate of persons in communion, each canonical steward takes up their vocational response to God's initiating call to that communion, in whatever way that invitation might arise. In this way, each community of canonical stewards then takes up its "group" vocation to express its mission in the stewardship of that mission.

¹² Bevens, 3.

This is all simply to acknowledge that, for the Christian peoples known as the Catholic Church, all “things” begin and are understood as a response to the divine call of love. This call is always discerned in individual human hearts and recognised through a communal discernment by some form of Christian community.

A Vocation Responds to Needs

For many, this call is often most clearly known and felt in the needs of the people and communities we see directly before us. Sometimes these needs become apparent only over a longer period. It is in response to those same needs that the Holy Spirit has authorised all the ministries of the Church. Recognition of these needs comes the same way as all such knowing: through the grace of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit speaks to us, whether or not we are saints. There have been many examples of saints who have responded favourably to the Spirit speaking to them through the long history of the Church. St Mary of the Cross MacKillop illustrates this with her famous dictum, “Never see a need without doing something about it.” There are spiritual needs but also needs for care, comfort and succour, for advocacy and justice.

So, from the beginning of creation itself through to individual hearts and minds in these times, God creates in freedom every day, calling every “thing” and each one into being, each in its own particularity. It is God in the Holy Spirit who then sustains all that is in the endless movement of love-begetting-love that is God in God’s trinity of selfhood as God provides for the needs of the human family and invites us to share in this dynamic. In recognising this invitational call to mission in and through the ministries of the Church, one can recognise the seeds of Christianity’s response to the needs of the world such that we as Church can truly resonate with the Second Vatican Council:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of [women and] men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man [and woman].

That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind [*sic*] and its history by the deepest of bonds.¹³

¹³ *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), preface, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

Chapter 2

The Human Shape of All Authentic Christian Vocation: The Missional Shape of Canonical Stewardship

Chapter Summary

- The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ reveal the authentic pattern for all Christian mission, which continues Jesus' liberating loving acts of healing, restoring, and accompanying persons. In such acts God's reign breaks into the world: God communicates God's very self and God's own desire for the human family.
- This particular shape of Christian mission (healing, restoring, and accompanying) humanises both those who serve and those being served through the fostering of relationships of kinship that create communities of mutual and reciprocal belonging. In such communities people can realise more deeply God's dream for them: to be fully human.
- This mission is attractive to not only Christians but to all people of good will who feel called to create the conditions for healing, restoration, and accompaniment in the world.
- Authentic Christian identity emerges when communities live out the same mission they are called to steward. They become internally what they seek to express externally through their ministries.
- The call to canonical stewardship follows this same pattern of witness to God's love, through the creation of communities of trust that embody kinship and inclusion while serving others through their governance roles.

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In the previous chapter, we explored the matter of authority for ministry in the Catholic Church, which prefigures that of MPJP ministerial authority. This authority arises from God's call manifest in our vocational response. The authority of this call requires both individual and communal discernment for affirmation. It is, therefore, timely to explore in greater depth the notion and value of authenticity. This exploration is into the terrain of what might constitute authenticity for the ministry of MPJPs. As noted previously, authenticity in ministry is closely associated with notions of power and authority in ministry leadership and governance. It is also, therefore, closely tied to the understanding of efficaciousness in ministry, for it is hard to imagine any non-coercive ministry effectiveness outside of authenticity.

In this chapter we will examine the way in which, in response to God's call, the individual heart's response of vocation to become a member of group of canonical stewards is brought about by a call to a mission that has a particular pattern or shape. This pattern is also then expressed both through and in the Church as much as in and through MPJP communities of canonical stewards. Importantly, here, we note the natural connection of authenticity to identity, for identity is not an abstract phenomenon, but one that is expressed in real time and space. Our discussion, then, turns towards exploring the pattern of an authentic Christian identity that might be the hallmark of the ministry of an MPJP. That is, the contours of the expression of mission by MPJP canonical steward communities are both an internal realisation of that mission amongst groups of canonical stewards themselves and, at the same time, an external expression of their stewardship to the boards and ministries entrusted to them. Another way of stating this might be to say that groups of canonical stewards are invited to become amongst themselves the mission they are seeking to care for and sustain (i.e., they are to grow into their identity) amongst their boards and ministries (organisational identity). Our starting point then must be to unpack the nature, patterns, contours of Christian mission itself.

God, Who Is Mission:

Jesus Christ as God Enacting God's Mission

Christians understand that it is God's call to human hearts that draws people together for a common purpose. This is simply another way of saying that it is mission that calls people together into a community that forms around common purposes that seek to respond to the needs of the world. There is a certain sense, then, that mission is a way of expressing a narrative of common purpose that, in our case, is anchored to the good news of Jesus'

teaching and healing ministry. Broadly, then, we can say that it is through mission that the Holy Spirit forms individuals into a community of common purpose that can be known as church. In the same way, a group of canonical stewards is formed or comes together for a common mission. It is thus mission that summons them to vocational response, since it has summoned the Church, the ministries themselves, their boards, and all in them, into being.

The call of the Holy Spirit, then, comes through mission, mirroring the mission relationality that God is in God's self. In Christian terms, mission is then a way of describing a response of love arising in human hearts, mirroring that arising from the heart of God, through a call prompted by the needs of the world. In this way mission becomes not just the exclusive identity marker or prerogative of Christians but of all people of good will who seek to join us in common purpose in tending and caring for the human and physical environment of the world. God's love, then, is indiscriminate, pouring through the hearts of all. Christians, through their faith, however, have the particular gift of being able to see and affirm this love that is God.

To reflect on the community-creating call of love manifest in mission, then, picks up on several other closely interrelated notions. Firstly, as noted, there is a sense in which mission furnishes a group with a common purpose. In the case of many communities of canonical stewards, that mission is expressed in their stewardship of the governance of their ministries through their boards. For other communities of canonical stewards who are both trustees and directors, it is expressed in their more direct governance of their ministries. To say that such common purpose is at the heart of mission is another way of expressing what is most meaningful or important to bring about in the world; it is another way of describing value. So, it is in being drawn into seeking to bring about in the world a common set of values that a community of mission coalesces into being. When a group engages values such as those anticipated with the healing or teaching ministry of Jesus Christ, mission becomes a form of identity expression. That is, mission is an expression of a group's identity as its members seek to bring about or engage with what they commonly understand to be most important, what is most valuable, in the world.

In Christian terms, ultimate value lies in the person of Jesus Christ and his mission. It is Jesus' enactment of his mission that is normative for the shape or pattern of all Christian mission or mission done in his name. After his resurrection, his disciple-followers came to realise that Jesus' life, death and resurrection—and ascension and the sending of the Spirit—were the very event of God revealing God's self as mission. In this way, Jesus in his earthly life went from the proclaimer of God's mission to being proclaimed as the experience of that

very mission. Thus, it is belief in Jesus Christ as the single God-event of Jesus' life, death and resurrection—and ascension and the sending of the Spirit—as the particular revealing or communication of God's loving interest and desire for all humanity that brings believers into the identity of "Christian disciple." This identity is the one expressed in taking up that same gospel message of liberating love through mission.

The gospels attest that during his ministry on earth, Jesus referred to his own understanding of his mission with the term "Reign of God" or "Kingdom of God"/"Kingdom of Heaven" (see Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17). But since there is nothing separate from God, such as a kingdom or reign, "God's reign" is simply another way of describing the in-breaking of infinite, transcendent love that heals, restores, and accompanies us in the here and now of our human experience. For Christians, Jesus Christ is the in-breaking of that love as God communicates God's loving self. Thus, we can understand that when Jesus goes about healing, restoring, and accompanying, God is making God's self present in a unique way. So, when such moments of healing, restoring, and accompanying occur in all the diverse Catholic sectors of education, health, social services, aged care, and parishes, God's reign or God in the Holy Spirit is revealing God's loving self in our time and space. In other words, when healing, restoring, and accompanying are occurring, God's presence is occurring. The shape of Christian mission then becomes that of imitating God in Jesus and creating the conditions for God's liberating love to be experienced. In responding to the call to come together to join, continue, and deepen God's mission in Jesus Christ (*missio Dei* or *missio Christi*), groups of canonical stewards become constituted by missional call (God) as a community, a Christian community.

God's Mission Calls All People of Good Will

Importantly, creating the conditions for healing and restoring people to themselves (freedom) and accompanying them is a mission to which many and diverse peoples feel attracted and called. In Christian terms, God's vocation of love is an attractive project and this attraction is never limited to the disciples of Jesus Christ; it is the gift and provenance of all people of good will. So, in the same way, many and diverse peoples of other faiths and none are welcomed in Catholic ministries such as those of MPJPs, as these peoples come to work alongside and in Christian communities, sharing in our common purpose of creating the conditions for liberating love to come to be experienced through healing, restoration, and accompaniment. Within the ministries of the various MPJPs addressed in this paper, then, a key component of their authority or empowerment is to support a communal culture that

welcomes and supports the many people of good will who feel called to join Jesus Christ's mission of love, but who do not necessarily believe in Jesus Christ as God's definitive and particular communication of divine, infinite, transcendent love. Ultimately, Christians understand this dynamic as being about God's call in Jesus Christ to the common vocation of all peoples to become more deeply human—and indeed to become fully human, as Christ is.

The Pattern of Authority and Authenticity:

The Humanising Shape of Jesus' Ministry

God, whom Christians understand as infinite, transcendent love, has been bringing to birth God's self (the Reign of God), which is to say bringing to birth love, in and through creation. The Australian poet Michael Leunig expresses this sentiment acutely in his Christmas poem, "Love Is Always Being Born":

Love is born
With a dark and troubled face.
When hope is dead
And in the most unlikely place
Love is born,
Love is always born.¹⁴

Through God's love and the human experience of this love known as grace, the Divine Trinity of Persons, who is a dance of love, has been responding to human needs, hopes, longings, and dreams for liberation from fear and suffering in the vast-beyond-imagination, ongoing act of giving birth to creation (Romans 8:22). Throughout history, God has responded particularly through inviting and supporting, again and again, the establishment of communities of caring and belonging. Communities of canonical stewards stand in just such a long history of communities of witness.

In God's pattern of loving care and grace the human family finds the origin of its own deepest desires for belonging, safety, peace, freedom—indeed for communion. These desires are felt in our contemporary world, as they have been felt by countless peoples throughout the centuries. For Christians, this belonging has been and continues to be fulfilled in joining with God in Jesus Christ on mission. For it is through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that God has been continuously inviting the human family away from practices of hate, exploitation, and fear, all of which eventually destroy community. In this

¹⁴ From his *Prayers*, <https://www.leunig.com.au/works/prayers>.

way, we can attest that belonging in communion lies at the heart of human spiritual and psychological wellbeing, for such belonging is constituted by love.

Thus, while hatred, resentments and fear, and their effects of exploitation, commodification, and objectification of the human person and of the natural world, are at times part of human experience, even though they are so detrimental to human flourishing, so too in the human person is to be found a profound place within the heart for connection, understanding, mattering, trust, and acceptance—another way of understanding communion. These longings are at least partially fulfilled in union with love and communion with others. Indeed, Pope Francis invited the Catholic community of faithful belonging, the Church, to consider herself as a field hospital responding to an alienated world with the medicine of communion, both literally and metaphorically.¹⁵ So, while it might be true in many ways that nothing creates a community of negative belonging faster than hate, so it is also true that ultimately it is only love, which lies at the heart of true communion, that can promote the flourishing of community by inclusion, restoration, and accompaniment, the hallmarks of Jesus' gospel mission.¹⁶

It is with such longings for communion and flourishing that the human family has continued to resonate and find in mission with Jesus Christ. It is natural then that such communion should also lie at the heart of God's call and so at the heart of the Christian church. For God is pure loving communion (mission) and when the human family works together in love for a common purpose to bring that love into the world through ministry, we participate in communion with God and with one another, in love.

Crucially, for Christians, as well as for many others, this movement into a community of common purpose for human flourishing is a pathway that enables many to enter more deeply into the mystery of their own humanity. In the same way, Christians believe and experience that, in loving relationship with God in Jesus Christ, each one becomes more richly that which they are created to be: human. Being human can then be understood as the primary vocation of all human persons, with Christian faith furnishing a particular pathway embraced by responding to the divine call of loving relationships of trusting interdependence (a way of describing intimacy) with God, self, and others, including

¹⁵ Francis, with Antonio Spadaro, *My Door Is Always Open: A Conversation on Faith, Hope and the Church in a Time of Change* (Continuum, 2014), 54.

¹⁶ For more on "negative belonging," see James Alison, *Discipleship and the Shape of Belonging*, 2006, <https://jamesalison.com/discipleship-and-the-shape-of-belonging/>.

the rest of the natural world. Simply put in Christian terms, entering ever further into the mystery of being human is part and parcel of relationship with divine, infinite, transcendent love (God). The north American Franciscan spiritual writer Richard Rohr is reputed to have summed this point up succinctly: “If you wish to practice your Christianity, practice your humanity.” A key hallmark of entering into such a relationship with Love is entering into the mystery of God’s mission of love in and to the world. This is vocational self-offering to the mystery of becoming human and loving at one and the same time, for, paradoxically, joining God’s mission of love enables joiners to become more deeply themselves (vocation)—another way of describing their becoming their truly human selves.

For Christians, it is Jesus Christ who reveals the fullness of what it means to be a human being, and so all that is possible for us in holiness (what it means to be like God). In God’s incarnation (God’s becoming human flesh) in Jesus Christ, Christians see and find the fullness of humanity and the fullness of divinity mutually inhering in one human person. The humanity and divinity in the mystery of Jesus are never in competition, neither are they ever confused. Jesus, in revealing what it means to be fully human, in the full dilation of freedom to love, thus reveals to the human family that what is most deeply human is also what is most deeply holy.

Further, what is being explored here is the source of Jesus’ own authenticity, which the gospels so powerfully announce to his followers. Jesus lives and loves in a complete and free way out of his relationship of love with his Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. In doing so, he reveals to all his followers how to be their most authentic selves in and through loving mission. This way of loving is at the same time the Christian pathway to become a loving self. Demonstrating this, Jesus draws on the authority of his response to the call (the vocation) to divine kinship, to support all his followers through the centuries to then know how to become their most authentic loving self. Relationships of trust and intimacy (communion) then become the marker of Christian belonging in kinship with one another and the world.

God’s call to loving kinship collapses any idolatrous attempts to understand that there is somehow an “us” and “them,” any ideas that some lives might matter more than others. Such pernicious constructions are the basis of centuries of pain and suffering in our world, including contemporary situations of fear and exploitation. God’s call in Jesus Christ to humanisation through the intimacy of kinship responds directly to this pain and suffering caused by “othering” or separating out. Jesus sums up this kinship medicine in John’s gospel: “that they may all be one” (17:21), to which St Paul echoes, “There is no longer Jew or

Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Jesus thus reveals the very foundation and purpose of all Christian mission as that which calls all to belong to the community of missional purpose, for each of us to become more human through loving our selves, each other, and God as kin in communities of mission: “I suspect that were kinship our goal, we would no longer be promoting justice—we would be celebrating it.”¹⁷

While we are all indeed human, we are also, paradoxically, on the journey to becoming human—that is, fully human. As in God, so in ourselves, nothing is static or unmoving. The human person is a multidimensional, dynamic being on a continuous journey through life. It is love in relationships of justice and peace that enables us to become more fully human. Such is the Christian spiritual pathway; union with God, each other, and creation humanises us, as we pursue God’s mission that forms us into the community of the beloved Son.

The Heritage of Witnesses to Mission Love in the Holy Spirit

Such is the inspiration and call that lies behind the centuries of missional women and men witnessing to God’s call to the communion of kinship in the Church. For throughout human history there have always been men and women who have felt inspired by God in the Holy Spirit’s pattern of service that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ communicates—a surrender of life energy in loving care for the community. The sharp and revealing particularity of this inspiration has been, and continues to be, towards those members of the community who are poor, marginalised, voiceless, vulnerable, and suffering. Through a pattern of surrender to love that ultimately flows from and seeks union with that One who is Love, people of every walk of life and in every time have given themselves and their lives for the wellbeing of others and their communities. Often, Christians have used the term “sacrifice” to highlight the holiness-making dimension of such self-giving. It bears the stamp of authenticity for it is engagement in the humanising mission of Jesus Christ.

So, in the history of Catholic Christianity, persons and groups in their different modes of life have given their lives to work in the world for a vision of something different from what they initially found. Sometimes they have responded to specific needs, such as the

¹⁷ Richard Rohr, *Being One with the Other*, Centre for Action and Contemplation, June 4, 2020, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/being-one-with-the-other-2020-06-04/>.

plight of Irish immigrants in late-nineteenth-century Australia. At other times it has been, and continues to be, in monastic settings, a call to respond to universal needs through constant prayer for creation. In common, though, each call shares with Jesus and his ministry a pathway of belief and life that humanises both those who respond and others.

The call to canonical stewardship is no less than such a call. It too arises “for just a time as this” in our contemporary Church. Insofar as it humanises a community of canonical stewards through loving communion in common mission, it bears the stamp of both authority and authenticity:

Our culture is hostile only to the inauthentic living of the gospel. It sniffs out hypocrisy everywhere and knows when Christians aren’t taking seriously what Jesus took seriously ... It actually longs to embrace the gospel of inclusion and nonviolence, of compassionate love and acceptance. Even atheists cherish such a prospect.¹⁸

Insofar as these ministries led by their stewards through their boards are conscious of this witness to kinship and hold as central that they are engaging in God’s love and calling, like all other parts of the Church they are able to identify themselves as gathered into a community of leadership by the Holy Spirit, and so constituted as a Christian community.

The need to acknowledge this witness reveals the truth that church organisations such as MPJPs embody participation in a collective love that is characterised by God’s desire to bring about an ever deeper humanity and freedom in all participating in God’s mission. In their witness to God’s mission and their developing understanding of their charism as a community gathered by God’s love, communities of canonical stewards in their ministry of stewardship witness to a self-giving love and humanisation that is always linked together. In this way, divinisation (holiness-making) of the human person is understood in a service of love that includes oneself and God. As a Christian community of the Church, communities of canonical stewards witness to this love and, through their stewardship, they join with the Holy Spirit in enabling others to encounter this love in all its possible forms of liberation in the healing and teaching ministry of Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (Simon and Schuster, 2017), chap. 1, Kindle.

Chapter 3

The Grace of Baptism and the Role of MPJP Leadership of Mission in the Church

Chapter Summary

- Baptism is understood as the foundational empowerment for mission in the Catholic Church, and furnishes Christians an equal dignity and authority to participate in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly ministry.
- The Catholic Church is an "ordered communion" of communions (communities) rather than a rigid hierarchy. Power and authority are distributed throughout different levels of church life according to the principle of subsidiarity.
- Communities of canonical stewards draw authority from their baptismal dignity, which empowers them to welcome and lead diverse communities of people. Members of communities of canonical stewards may be called through their own desires, circumstances, hopes, and dreams to serve in Catholic ministries.
- Members of communities of canonical stewards are called to welcome all who feel called to join in Catholic mission, however such calls might be understood. Members of communities of canonical stewards may offer an authentic witness to reciprocal and mutual relationships in which they are changed by those they serve with and serve, making Christian mission a mutually transformative experience.
- Communities of canonical stewards may be regarded as intentional Christian communities whose members exercise their baptismal calling through hospitable leadership that welcomes all people of good will to participate in God's mission.

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In this chapter, we describe the ways in which baptism is an essential element in the authority of a call to the leadership of canonical stewards in the Catholic Church. In this, we will recognise the ways in which the grace of baptism for the Christian community of the Church is a pathway for understanding God's call that empowers mission.

This chapter thus introduces a discussion on the different theologies or theological models of the Church. Here we will explore the ways in which the Catholic Church is a communion of communions or an "ordered communion." It is from the basis of this model of the Church as an "ordered communion" that we will then further describe the nature of intentional Christian communities as a way to understand the identity and authenticity of communities of canonical stewards. We will do this by pointing out that a key theological purpose of ecclesial leadership for MPJPs is their empowerment to exercise stewardship through holding the various communities of their ministries and boards in communion with one another and the larger Church.

Christian Baptism

For Catholic Christians, the key empowerment marker for mission in the Church is traditionally understood as baptism. While we have noted the Christian understanding that mission in its most nascent or emerging form is a desire for a kinder, more just, world, it is baptism that all the baptised in the Catholic Church have as our shared empowerment to mission, whether we be in the laity or the clergy.

It is therefore important to consider the meaning and foundation of baptismal authority in the Catholic Church for communities of canonical stewards empowered to steward Catholic Church ministries. Such reflection is important for it should explore how that authority of God's call flows through, and is informed by, the ordered communion that is the Catholic Church.¹⁹ Necessarily, this takes our theological reflections towards considering the theological nature of the Catholic Church itself.

The technical term for the study of the theology of the church is "ecclesiology." There are many different ecclesiologies, or theologies of church, on offer. Equally, these varieties are not simply found embodied in one form in Christian traditions as a whole, such as the Anglican Communion or the Catholic Church. Different versions may also coexist within denominations themselves. For instance, some Catholics might imagine the Church as one vast, monolithic institution with a vertical chain of command moving from laity up

¹⁹ Gaillardetz, 124, Kindle.

through priests and bishops to the pope, who stands at the apex of some sort of pyramid.²⁰ Yet this is not theologically sustainable, for each local church (or diocese) within the Catholic Church maintains its own integrity, and it stands in spiritual communion with other local churches, including the Church of Rome, and their bishops—bearing in mind, though, that the pope (the Bishop of Rome) stands as the first among equals. So, it is as an ordered communion of various communions of believers that might best describe the Catholic Church. Thus, the exercise of power and authority throughout the Church is more diffuse than might otherwise have been considered.

While for many centuries the Catholic Church has practised infant baptism, with members of the Christian community gathering around the font of life, pledging their young to the Light, baptism is more: it is a key part of being joined into the communion of the Church and of being empowered to share in the mission of Jesus Christ in God's Church. So, in being plunged (literally through immersion in holy water) into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians believe and understand that baptism confers an empowerment into the priestly, prophetic, and kingly ministry and mission of that same Jesus.

Through baptism, then, Christians experience a way of sharing in the communion that all the communions of the different Christian churches share: an empowerment for mission arising from a common belief in God's communication of God's very selfhood in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. For this common belief is simply another way of describing the common call of God-who-is-love manifested in Jesus Christ through the power of encounter with God in the Holy Spirit. It is through this call that Christians believe they encounter a common purpose or mission, such that a constituent part of this communion is a belief in, and calling by, God-who-is-mission. We have already explored some key aspects of this mission in chapters 1 and 2.

We have also noted previously that, in Christian spirituality, the human response to God's call is addressed by the notion of vocation. Vocation is always both an individual and a communal call in that it arises in the context of a community for the service of the community. Vocation recognises that God's call is always at the same time an invitation for each of us to become the most loving version of ourselves, or, as we have seen, to become fully human.

In the Christian tradition, to follow a sense of call or a vocation is thus understood as the pathway by which each of us becomes more authentically ourselves. Thus, we can see

²⁰ Gaillardetz, 124.

again that vocation and authenticity are closely linked. Traditionally in the Christian context, this formative pathway of vocation is an essentially relational proposition of service, beginning in baptism as a first “commissioning” or empowerment for mission. In an important sense, responding to our vocation is to respond to God’s summons or invitation to join God as the mission that has a church. Again, vocation is a summoning to authenticity understood as taking up one’s authority for and in mission.

Thus, when a person discerns a response to take up a call to the stewardship of Catholic ministries in an MPJP, they also respond to a continuation of their ongoing and unique version of becoming human, through expressing this gift of love in this particular vocational instance. For most Christians, God’s call or naming of this pathway was affirmed originally in baptism. In this way, for the Christian disciple, baptism becomes a way of knowing and affirming God’s call to mission and this call’s subsequent empowerment to mission as a welcomer of all others, regardless of creed or background, who also feel called to mission in MPJP ministries. Part of stewardship then becomes something of the hospitality of mission that then creates a larger missional community of all those who feel called. In so leading mission, a baptised canonical steward expresses their baptismal dignity in the context of a hospitable leadership of the ministries of the Catholic Church, welcoming the diversity of peoples who feel a call to serve in these ministries.

It makes sense, then, to situate the vocation of the canonical steward, no matter the length of appointment to such stewardship, within the larger Christian story of vocation, a pathway we have just affirmed as begun in baptism. For Christians believe that God calls each of us into life, gifting each one with the capacity to respond to this call in their own unique and unrepeatable ways, through their personal vocation to the service of communion, however that communion might be understood.

In Christian disciples’ original vocational affirmation and commissioning in the sacrament of baptism, all Christians can acknowledge their share in God’s call to mission. This baptismal call then effectively amounts to a moment of equal dignity for all members of the Church no matter what place they might come to occupy in its various hierarchies. For the sacrament of baptism affirms that all Christians share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Jesus Christ. Such an affirmation of the equal dignity of all through baptism is particularly emphasised in *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican II), standing against any conceptions of the Catholic Church as an “unequal and stratified society” comprised of multiple hierarchical

layers.²¹ “Before there are ordained and unordained, clergy and lay, all church members are the Christian faithful, the baptised, sharing in and called to a common discipleship in Christ.”²² Theologian Richard Gaillardetz affirms this equal dignity thus:

Where the clergy and laity were seen as two “ranks” in which the sole responsibility of the laity was to obey the clergy, the council called for their cooperation and affirmed the shared identity of all believers as the *Christifideles*, “the Christian faithful.”²³

So, while bishops teach by virtue of their ordination and are charged with safeguarding the integrity of the apostolic faith, the baptised as a whole are also understood to teach the wisdom gained by their experience in Christian living and the exercise of the *sensus fidei* (the personal aptitude of each believer to discern by making sense of living their faith).²⁴ In doing so, the baptised person is empowered to participate in Christ’s mission of love in and through the Church in equal dignity as a member of the “Christian faithful.”

Baptised into the living water of God’s love and anointed by Jesus Christ with the affirmation of authority for this mission as priest, prophet, and king, the baptised person affirms simply that, through God’s call into the mission of Jesus Christ (God’s reign) and through their belief in such a calling, they are empowered in the Church to participate in God’s mission of love in the context of the whole community.

Thus, we can understand the service of canonical stewardship as a response to a call to love and be loved in a communion already manifested in many other previous and concurrent vocations in people’s lives. In taking up a discerned call to canonical stewardship, a baptised person may be understood as taking up their call to authority in the service of Christ’s mission in a community of stewards. A particular feature of this mission of stewardship is then the welcoming of all who seek to share in it.

Equally, this defines the reciprocity characteristic of all Christian mission service, for while each canonical steward is empowered to be responsible for the ministries in their care in union with one another through the stewardship of their boards, in that service they

²¹ Pius X, *Vehementor Nos*, in *The Papal Encyclicals*, ed. Claudia Carlen (McGrath, 1981), 3:47–48.

²² Richard Gaillardetz, *Ordering of Baptismal Priesthood* (Liturgical, 2003), 27.

²³ Richard Gaillardetz, “Preface to the First Edition,” in *By What Authority?*, Kindle.

²⁴ Richard Gaillardetz, “Power and Authority in the Church: Emerging Issues,” in *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, ed. R. R. Gaillardetz and E. P. Hahnenberg (Liturgical, 2015), 98.

find an invitation to communion, both to be it amongst each other as witness, and to be it for the boards and ministries that have their entrustment. This is an invitation to become more authentically relational through sharing in a community of mission with fellow Christians as well as with others who may share different faiths or no particular faith but who act with good will towards the mission. In doing so, communities of stewards find a pathway to become more deeply human within their community of leadership and within their larger community of boards and ministries. Christian mission is not and has never been a one-way relational activity. Put starkly, those we serve with, as much as those we seek to serve, offer the possibility and challenge of becoming more richly and deeply human. So, a clear mark of Christian mission ministry is that it is distinctly mutual in its engagement. We are changed by those with whom we serve and those we serve: For the measure of our compassion for the poor, the marginalised, the voiceless, the suffering and lost lies not in our service to them but in our ability to see ourselves as one of them, to paraphrase Gregory Boyle.²⁵ In this way, a community of canonical stewards is best understood in Christian terms as an intentional Christian community of service, its members engaged in the exercise of their baptismal dignity in that service through a spacious welcome to all who would share God's mission on their boards and in their ministries.

In this way, baptismal dignity is a way of recognising or describing God's call to leadership and authority for canonical stewards acting as a unity in a communion of persons, an accurate description of which is to understand this unity of communion as an intentional or small Christian community. Further, in the equal dignity of baptism in the Church, members of Christ's faithful are empowered to the mission of leadership marked by a relational engagement of hospitality to all women and men of good will who would participate in that mission. Finally, this mission participation is an invitation to become more richly and deeply human through a relational engagement with mission that is characterised as Christian through reciprocity and mutuality: no "us" and "them," simply an "us" together. So, at the table of God's mission, all are welcome (cf. Luke 9:49).

²⁵ See: <https://youtu.be/ipR0kWt1Fkc>.

Chapter 4

MPJP Power, Leadership, Authority and Identity

Chapter Summary

- Ministerial Public Juridic Persons (MPJPs), or communities of canonical stewards, may be understood as intentional Christian communities. They are “aggregates of persons or things” called by God through canon law to act with a unified voice in stewardship. They govern boards and ministries in the name of the Church.
- As intentional Christian communities, communities of canonical stewards can function as “bridge-builders” that maintain communion between the Catholic Church and their ministries, and between the different communities of boards and ministries within their care. This communion reflects the concept of “catholicity,” which involves holding diverse entities in unity through faithful interrelationships rather than through abstract universal inclusiveness.
- The authority and identity of a community of canonical stewards derive from their participation in God’s mission of love, rooted in a trinitarian theology of missional self-giving. Their stewardship thus is grounded in the mission of communion that lies at the heart of Jesus’ healing, teaching, and accompanying ministry, which promoted human flourishing and holiness.
- MPJPs are called to operate through prayerful processes of communal discernment and synodality. They are to “journey together” in deep listening and reflective prayer to discern God’s will for the life and growth of mission in their boards and ministries. This represents a reclaiming of early Christian practices and embodies Vatican II’s vision of lay participation.

- MPJPs represent an important realisation of Vatican II's emphasis on lay governance and synodal church structures. Through their synodal way of proceeding, these communities of canonical stewards offer the Church a pathway to its becoming more truly itself by listening to the Holy Spirit speaking through all.

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Thus far in our theological reflections we have been exploring the sources of the authority, authenticity, and so something of the identity, of the contemporary MPJP through the lens of a theology of mission. Through this lens, we have described the way in which God in God's deepest self is pure mission of loving outreach, as a Trinity of Persons continuously and eternally giving themselves to each other in love such that the giver of love cannot be separated from either the receiver or the gift itself. This missional love overflows into the same God-self-giving that is love pouring out, reaching into creation, creating, sustaining and endlessly renewing it. In chapter 2 we explored the pattern or contours of the love-mission of God-who-is-love as it overflows in outreach to humanity in the Second Person of the Trinity, becoming enfleshed within creation and in human history as Jesus Christ.

In Christ, Christians are invited to perceive and experience in a definitive way that God's mission of love is that which humanises and so sanctifies (makes holy) the human person. The theological mark of this as much as the psychological mark is the invitation to ever deeper humanity through relational intimacy, achieved through the building of relationships of trust that form communities of belonging. Through a union of hearts and minds with God, we come into a union of hearts and minds with one another—and vice versa.

In chapter 3, we explored how Christian baptism forms a further way of understanding the empowerment of the call to canonical stewardship through the emergence of the possibility of a conscious joining of God's mission, this time in an MPJP.

In all these theological explorations we have ultimately if implicitly been considering the theological foundations of the identity and purpose for groups of canonical stewards empowered by the Church to leadership and authority for their boards and ministries. We have been doing this by closely considering the role of God's call to mission in Jesus Christ and each human person's vocational response to that call as a source of Christian identity. Such explorations have pointed to the ways in which accepting God's call or invitation to join God in the mission of love in the vocation of canonical steward constitutes groups of canonical stewards as small Christian communities engaged in the mission of

stewardship. In considering this we are also implicitly considering the role of communities of canonical stewards as leadership bodies within the Catholic Church. Such discussions lead us to return again—more deeply—to the question of authority in the Church. For, as North American theologian Richard Gaillardetz notes, “Many of the divisions in Christianity have occurred because of disagreements about both the appropriate sources of Christian authority and its power exercise.”²⁶

A Brief Definitional Review

At the outset of this paper, we briefly described the contemporary MPJP, distinguishing it with the “M” for “ministerial” from previous PJPs such as religious institutes of consecrated life (among others). It is timely to briefly review some of these points. This is because aspects of our theological exploration have necessarily turned on a reflection of the identity of an MPJP as a Christian community, so constituted because it is created by canon law and comes together by virtue of mission. We have reflected on this mission as being a way of talking about God’s nature, expressed through the Holy Spirit in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this, we have been locating both MPJP canonical stewards and their boards and ministries in the power, authority, and authenticity founded in the theology of mission. This applies to most if not all church power for authority, governance, and identity as it is simply another way of saying “the mission (God) has a church.”

In this, we have described in a preliminary way the claim that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and for the ongoing care of God’s people, ensuring the continuance of the healing and teaching ministry of Jesus Christ, the Code of Canon Law of the Catholic Church has created the identity of a ministerial public juridic person as an aggregate of persons (or things) who are called to act in union with another as a single voice, in the ministry of the governance of boards who administer their ministries:

A juridic person is a legal entity under canon, or church, law that is set up for one or more specific purposes; within church law ... Each juridic person functions through designated physical persons who serve as its representative according to its approved statutes. Such ecclesial entities are designated as

²⁶ Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?*, 103, Kindle.

public juridic persons when their purposes have been formally sanctioned by a church authority and are carried out publicly under its auspices.²⁷

Anthony Tersigni, retired CEO and president of Ascension Health in the United States, writing in 2017, makes a similar point, this time employing the actual language of canon 116:

Canon 116 defines “public juridic persons” as “aggregates of persons (*universitates personarum*) or things (*universitates rerum*) which are constituted by competent ecclesiastical authority so that, within the purposes set out for them, they fulfil in the name of the church, according to the norm of the prescripts of the law, the proper function entrusted to them in view of the public good.”²⁸

Rightly, the emphasis in these understandings of authority in the canonical creation of MPJPs relates to the juridic nature of their calling or their coming to be. Even so, these definitions in and of themselves cannot escape the implication of the communal nature of these MPJP statutes—firstly, as “aggregates of persons or things,” secondly, as representations of church authority amongst their boards and ministries, and thirdly as coming together for a common purpose or mission.

Gabrielle McMullen and Martin Lavery further illuminate the communal nature of canonical stewardship when they describe its work or mission as follows:

At any given time, a group of trustees is “missioned” to take responsibility for an MPJP’s ministries. In their role, trustees exercise the ministry of stewardship. There is a “calling” to what is technically titled canonical stewardship, and the trustees (canonical stewards) generally have both canonical and civil responsibility for the ministries entrusted to them. In exercising their ministry of stewardship, trustees delegate to incorporated boards of directors, senior executives and other entities the governance and conduct of specific ministries.²⁹

²⁷ Gabrielle McMullen and Martin Lavery, “Learnings from the Development of New Lay-Led Church Entities in Australia,” *Australasian Catholic Record* 97, no. 2 (April 2020): 131.

²⁸ Anthony Tersigni, “An MPJP Contemplates Charism, Calling and the Future,” *Health Progress*, May–June 2017, <https://www.chausa.org/news-and-publications/publications/health-progress/archives/may-june-2017/an-mpjp-contemplates-charism-calling-and-the-future>.

²⁹ McMullen and Lavery, 131–32.

What we have been doing here thus far, then, has been theologically fleshing out the meaning of terms such as “call” and “missioned,” while steadily working towards suggesting that the best description of the distinctive ministry identity of canonical stewardship groups is that of some kind of intentional Christian community. In this chapter then, we have begun to ground the previous chapters’ theological exploration in terms of the actual canonical and juridic definitions that create this unique identity, “MPJP,” in the Catholic Church. Importantly, there is a sense in which an MPJP is a community of canonical stewards, for it is the canonical stewards collectively who “sponsor” the boards and ministries as their particular mission.

Indeed, note again in the quotation above from McMullen and Lavery the use of the term “calling.” Thus far, we have been extending this sense of calling into its larger theological frame in the theology of mission. Since it is the case that the above definitions, as much as the preceding ones in the introduction to this paper, indicate that an MPJP links the ministries entrusted to it through the stewardship of its boards, to the Church, so it must also be that an MPJP links the Church to its (the MPJP’s and the Church’s) ministries. Thus, a community of canonical stewards is, in a crucial sense, a particular expression of the community of the Church as the Body of Christ, the People of God, representing this Church particularly in and through their role. This role is surely to express the Church’s purpose or mission in a particular way unique to them as a community of ministry responsible for the expression of mission in the boards and the ministries entrusted to them.

A Community of Communities:

Canonical Stewardship, Communion, and Catholicity

Importantly, this provides a further staging ground that highlights something of the particular identity of a community of canonical stewards as an intentional community at the heart of the boards and ministries entrusted to them in the name of the Church. That is, precisely as an intentional Christian community, a community of canonical stewards is not to be understood as being simply another board of directors above the boards operating their respective ministries. An MPJP is, by its nature, required to be something different in church governance from a civil board. Rather, they are, by canon law, integral to the theology of mission we have been exploring; they are constituted as a community by and for the Church.

It is in the sense that MPJPs are intentional Christian communities that, regardless of the number of boards or ministries entrusted to them, a key purpose is revealed. For, in an MPJP understanding itself to be an intentional Christian community, by its nature it is called

to hold in communion the various communities made up by their boards and trustees. So, just as a community of canonical trustees or stewards is conceived in canon law as the bridge-builder or *pontifex* between the Catholic Church as a whole and the Church's ministries, so also they are the particular "bridge-builders" between the different boards and ministries entrusted to the MPJP. The unifying source of this communion is their "common purpose" or, simply, mission.

Here, we are suggesting that an important meaning of the canonical trustee "call" to "stewardship" of governance, quoted above from McMullen and Lavery's work, is that of the Christian community responsible for maintaining the communion of mission amongst its boards and ministries. An example is the Trustees of Mary Aikenhead Ministries. It is the community of the canonical trustees acting in unison that holds the various boards and ministries of Mary Aikenhead Ministries in communion with one another. They do this by virtue of being the community that each of the communities of their ministries have in common. Yet this example can be extended further into all the various communities of ministry of Mary Aikenhead Ministries, for they too, even if they have a common board of directors, are held in communion as Mary Aikenhead Ministries in their board's connection or bridge to its community of canonical trustees.

Catholicity and the Role of the MPJP

For the ministries of the Catholic Church as much as for their boards of directors, we are proposing that it is in their unique identity as intentional Christian communities that they are empowered as communities of canonical stewards to hold their boards and so ministries in communion with each other and within the Church. This mission is the very essence of the term "catholicity."

While it is often thought of in terms of universality, the meaning of catholicity is somewhat different. In its Greek origins, *katholikos* refers not to an abstract, universal, singular essence, as in the case of something universal, but rather to relationalities that compose a unity.³⁰ *Kata* or *kath* translates as "through" or "throughout," and *holos* as "whole"; taken together, *kath* and *holos* mean "through the whole," or "throughout the whole."³¹ Catholicity, then, focuses on that which constitutes wholeness (inclusivity), and so

³⁰ For an excellent description of catholicity, see Daniel Horan, *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood: A Contemporary Theological Anthropology* (Orbis Books, 2019).

³¹ Horan, 4.

it is concerned not with abstract essences but existing realities of intensity, richness, plenitude. It is concerned, therefore, with relationalities that compose unity or support a union of different things. Thus catholicity, unlike fullness, implies a unitive relationship among things that are diverse. It responds to the question: How are these different things or groups held together as one? As such, it is important to recognise that “catholicity” characterises how the different components of a union, with their unique identities, are not collapsed to make a whole, but rather the way in which the different components are respectfully held in union with one another as a whole or integral phenomenon. So, the Catholic Church is a union of churches held in communion with the Church of Rome and its bishop, who is the *pontifex* (pope) or “bridge-builder.”

We are proposing, then, that it is precisely in being an intentional Christian community that a group of canonical stewards distinguishes its particular identity as the specific community responsible for the communion of its various boards and ministries. This role of being the locus of communion applies not only to the group or groups of communities entrusted to the MPJP (boards and ministries), but also between those boards and ministries and the Church as a whole. Understood as an intentional or small Christian community, a community of canonical stewards exercises its call to the ministry of stewardship in being the point of communion for its boards and ministries, fulfilling its canonical obligations. Put another way, an MPJP intentional Christian community of canonical stewards lives out its call to mission stewardship, and, in doing so, the notion of stewardship is grounded in the mission of communion that lies at the heart of God’s mission in Jesus Christ’s healing and teaching ministry for deepening humanisation, and so holiness.

Small Intentional Christian Communities:

The Role of Synodality and Communal Discernment

In this working paper we have been proposing why it is that, at the heart of communities of canonical stewards, there is a call from the Holy Spirit to stewardship care of the ministries of the Church. We have proposed that this vocation might be seen in the Christian vocation to be human, which was initially pledged in baptism. In this, we have been teasing out how a community of stewards might realise the vocation of canonical stewardship through understanding themselves as an intentional Christian community of the Church whose stewardship is expressed in holding the communities of their boards and ministries in communion, both within one organisation and in relation to the Catholic Church as a whole.

At its heart, then, to enact such an identity, the ways of proceeding would involve some sort prayerful approach in being together in general and prayer concerning communal discernment in particular. Since in a Christian theology of prayer, prayer concerns promoting the conditions that enable us to become conscious of the Holy Spirit already praying and working within us and our community, it is some sort of prayerful process that will be a key marker of an intentional Christian community in a community of canonical stewards.

In particular here is the aforementioned prayer concerning communal discernment. Different spiritualities place different emphases on how this might be done. For instance, in Ignatian spirituality (a way of proceeding employed by the Ignatian families such as the Sisters of Charity, the Christian Life Communities, and the Society of Jesus, to name but a few), communal discernment is the active seeking of God's call in choosing the truly good in preference to the apparently good. The backdrop of communal discernment is not about weighing a particular choice but rather seeking the Holy Spirit's will and direction. The Ignatian "Rules of Communal Discernment" offer a way of proceeding in these terms. Equally, other spiritualities such as Franciscan spirituality offer ways of approaching communal discernment. What they all have in common is a desire to know the call of Love. Ultimately, this call is about identity, for it results in a person or group stepping into action in the name of Love.

Recently the universal Catholic Church has worked through a Synod on Synodality. The process of synodality has been called for in all the many dioceses of the Catholic Church. Interestingly, very similarly to communal discernment in Ignatian spirituality, synodality is also ultimately a process of communal discernment that seeks the will of Love in relation to communal decisions and dispositions through rounds of deep listening and reflective prayer. Some commentators have been quick to observe that synodality is not a new invention for the Catholic Church but actually a reclaiming of a way of prayer that had been pursued in the earliest Christian churches. Indeed, Pope Francis observed that synodality is "an expression of the Church's nature, form, style and mission ... and a place where ... all can feel at home and participate."³² It is a word that means, simply, "journeying together."

Just as synodality furnishes the whole Church with a method of praying together in community for the purpose of mission governance, so too it provides a method of being in

³² Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome, September 18, 2021, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html>.

prayer together for communities of canonical stewards. Indeed, during the recent 2025 “Inclusive Governance in a Synodal Church” symposium at the ACU Campus in Rome, Canadian theologian Catherine Clifford remarked that it is surely no coincidence that the reclaiming of synodality as a way of being a Christian community called church has occurred at the same time as the rise of MPJPs as forms of lay governance in the Church.

So, while in the Church there are hierarchical structures and ways of proceeding that are necessary to care for and maintain the institution, so also in the Church in its various MPJPs there are small Christian communities of gathered women and men who might think of themselves especially as the house of the communion prayer of synodality that holds their boards and ministries in communion.

Further, Australian theologian Ormond Rush has written that “synodality is Vatican II in a nutshell.”³³ In this way, as a small Christian community of mostly lay people that practises the prayer of communal and individual discernment at the heart of synodality, an MPJP becomes an unfolding enactment of the Church of the laity described at Vatican II and brings the Church closer to being synodal.³⁴ Thus, in its implicitly synodal way of proceeding, a small Christian community of canonical stewards forms an important embodiment of “what it means to be ‘a church which listens,’ dialogues and discerns among all the faithful.”³⁵

Such a way of proceeding in prayer might be the essence of what theologian Edward Schillebeeckx termed a “political love”—a self-giving to others in a world in which we are called to humanise.³⁶ This is a way of expressing the idea that, in their stewardship, communities of MPJP canonical stewards can become places in which the Spirit of God grants the Church the gifts that it requires to become truly itself: “Church.”³⁷

In this way, MPJPs share in something of the refreshing and liberating spirit of renewal, as has been suggested of this style of listening for the call of love of the Holy Spirit embodied in the term “synodality”:

³³ Ormond Rush, “*Dei Verbum* and the Roots of Synodality,” *Theological Studies* 84, no. 4 (2023): 570–91, at 572.

³⁴ Ormond Rush, “Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2017): 299–325.

³⁵ Rush, “*Dei Verbum* and Roots of Synodality,” 572.

³⁶ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (Seabury, 1979), 630.

³⁷ David Ranson, “New Wine, New Wine Skins: New Models of Mission in the Australian Church,” paper presented at the Mary Aikenhead Ministries conference, Hobart, May 2018, 12.

And, the Church is listening to the Holy Spirit if and when it listens to and discerns the Spirit speaking within the hearts of all the baptised—lay and ordained—to whom the Spirit has given what *Lumen Gentium* 12 calls “the supernatural *sensus fidei*, of the whole people.”³⁸

Synodal listening, then, is not just a hallmark of a community of canonical stewards but also a way of proceeding for that community as it stewards its boards and so ministries through listening to hearts—and not just to the hearts of the baptised but to those of all who join them in mission. In this way, the community of communities that make up both MPJPs and the Church can come to discern God’s loving desire in the sense of the faithful (*sensus fidei*) so as to read the signs of the times for the service of all.

³⁸ Rush, “*Dei Verbum* and Roots of Synodality,” 570.

Chapter 5

Summary and Concluding Reflections

In the introduction to this paper we explored some of the issues generally associated with the legitimacy of leadership in the Catholic Church. We focused briefly on theological definitions for the notions of power, leadership, authority, and authenticity in the Church as an ordered communion of communions or of church communities. And we noted the significance for the Church of the rise of contemporary PJPs as MPJPs, led by lay leaders.

In chapter 1, we moved from exploring the specific theological foundations of MPJP lay-leadership in the Church to exploring the source of all power and authority in the Church. Using the lens of a theology of mission, we teased out the way in which, through revelation, Christians have come to understand that God in God's very "self" is pure relational mission: God, the Holy Trinity of Three-Persons-in-One, reaches out in loving embrace to all creation, sustaining and vivifying it.

In this way, we were able to anchor discussion of ecclesial leadership in a theology of mission, in which God's call is the centre of authority for all ministry in the Church, as well as the *raison d'être* of any Christian church. We then unfolded the ways in which God—who-is-mission calls humanity through the needs of the world, especially those of the local community. This led us to highlight the web of relationships in which all living beings exist. Referring then to *Laudato Si'*, we were able to see that the essential interdependence of all being mirrors God's own self-giving relationality.

We then developed this theology of God as mission, exploring the ways in which God's call, seen in the needs of the community, especially of those who are poor or suffering, introduces the notion of vocation—or of faithful response to God's call. And it is vocation that describes a key source of authority for leadership of a community of canonical stewards and that empowers them to respond in mission to those needs.

In chapter 2 we further explored the foundations of lay ecclesial leadership by examining the notion of authenticity in that leadership and how it might be known or experienced. There we saw that authenticity promotes legitimacy in leadership that is not

simply juridical but also spiritual. Moreover, we deepened our exploration of the notion of vocation to propose a Christian understanding of authentic vocational witness as cooperation with God's work of humanisation and sanctification. Indeed, Christ's authentic witness to this is unsurpassed. In a key sense, when Jesus asks his disciples, "But you, who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:13; Mark 8:27; Luke 9:18), Christian disciples respond with something approximating, "You are the one who shows us that fullness of divinity is to be found in a human being and the fullness of humanity is glimpsed only when we see the reality of God." This understanding of Jesus Christ as fully human and fully divine was the most significant outcome of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE).

Building on this, we came to understand that the mission of Jesus Christ (*missio Christi*) is in fact an invitation to all of humanity to become more deeply human in relationships of kinship and kindness—or to grow in familial intimacy or closeness of love—with God in Jesus Christ, ourselves, and others in the context of creation. All of this filled out the meaning of the basic vocation of all human beings: to become more loving and so more deeply human.

Mission and vocation were then explored as not being limited to Christian disciples but as being planted in the hearts of all women and men. Empowered by God's mission, Christian disciples, however, see themselves as having a particular vocation to welcome all with love to belong to God's mission of engendering human flourishing.

In this way, we could see that the primary Christian, and so human, category for wellbeing is relationship—but relationship that values closeness, belonging, trust, and kinship; in short, intimacy. From relational intimacy we explored the ways in which, as small intentional Christian communities, groups of canonical stewards could enact an identity that flows from God's call to communion.

In chapter 3, we recognised baptism as an essential element in authorising a call to lay leadership of lay canonical stewards in the Church and to empowering that leadership, but that, at the same time, it was but only one such element.

This chapter also introduced a discussion on theologies of the Church. Here we explored the ways in which the Catholic Church is a communion of communions or an "ordered communion." From there we revisited the model of intentional Christian communities as a way to describe the identity and authenticity of communities of canonical stewards, since it describes their theological sources of leadership as the specific community who stewardship is exercised as the holding of the various communities of their ministries and boards in communion.

Finally in chapter 4 we explored power, leadership, authority, and identity in MPJPs as communities of lay leaders in the Church. Here we saw that the juridic understanding of MPJPs converges with the understanding of groups of canonical stewards themselves as a communion manifest as small intentional Christian communities. Such an understanding also enables communities of stewards to take up their role of spiritual leadership.

In this discussion, we were able to fill out the meaning of the ministry call of canonical stewards to stewardship. We saw what stewardship of ministries means theologically as the “work” of witness to communion. This communion is one with divine, infinite, transcendent Love, with fellow canonical trustees in kinship, and with the ministries of an MPJP. This does not exhaust the possible meanings of being called to the ministry of stewardship, but such an understanding of stewardship as communion enables the model of small Christian communities to be the best theological description of the work of “stewardship.”

As a further way of unfolding this theological identity of small intentional Christian communities, we proposed that a further way to describe this “work” of stewardship is to understand it as the prayer of communal discernment. This enabled us to canvass the ways in which synodality might concretely enact the prayer life that should lie at the heart of small intentional Christian communities in order for them to be what they say they are: intentional Christian communities.

Further Comments on Theological Reflection

There is a certain sense in which the developing lay leadership of church ministries found in MPJPs in Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore has occurred ahead of concerted theological reflection. Like all “signs of the times,” the community of the Church comes to understand God’s will and purpose often through prayer in hindsight. Such is the nature of revelation: It often takes time to become known and understood in its fullest sense. Often when needs arise, we respond as we can from what resources we already have, and reflect later on God’s providence. In this working paper we have sought to outline the basis of such a theological reflection, anchoring lay canonical stewardship in a call to the whole Church from the Holy Spirit, in which Catholic laity are empowered to assume their baptismal dignity in the provision and care of God’s people through their service of stewardship, forming small Christian communities, practising synodality.

Australian theologian David Ranson has summed up such theological reflection by inviting members of MPJPs “to recognise their ecclesial identity in a deeper way, and to

assume their theological and spiritual responsibility in a particularly conscious manner.”³⁹

This paper aims to further such recognition. Ranson adds that the emergence of the new PJPs in the life of the Church is reshaping the experience of the Church in Australia.⁴⁰ Most importantly, however, the new MPJPs are surely a rising critical expression of the gospel call to care for the destitute, excluded, vulnerable, alienated, and voiceless in fostering communities of belonging and kinship for the wellbeing of the whole of society.

Concluding Reflections

We have been proposing here that the unique identity for the enactment of the call to stewardship in MPJPs is best described by understanding MPJPs as being small intentional Christian communities. This is an appropriate identity for a leadership group of the Catholic Church. Such an identity description also helps inform the ways in which both the Church and MPJPs themselves, acting as one in communion, might be clear about how they differ from civil boards. If MPJPs are to be true to their calling as church leaders taking up the stewardship of their boards and ministries that they hold in trust for the People of God as much as for their organisations, they have the duty to engage in individual and communal discernment to hear God’s ever new missional call that marks small intentional Christian communities and church leaders. This endows these small Christian communities of canonical stewards with a particular grace of stewardship of mission.

As small Christian communities, constituted as a communion by the Holy Spirit, engaged in prayerful processes of communal discernment, MPJPs take their rightful place of ecclesial leadership in equal dignity alongside the rest of the communities of the Catholic Church. Reflecting on the specific exigencies of their service of leadership while at the same time seeking to come to know the call of the Holy Spirit in the context of the signs of the times, small Christian communities of canonical stewards seek God’s will as a way forward in their decisions of stewardship. In doing so, they become that which they are: stewards of God’s mission for the provision of all God’s peoples.

In our discussions in this working paper, then, we have been exploring the theological foundations of lay ecclesial leadership in MPJPs through the lens of the theology of mission. During the course of the theological considerations of power, legitimacy of authority, and authenticity of MPJPs in relation to a theology of mission, it has become

³⁹ Ranson, “New Wine, New Wine Skins,” 9.

⁴⁰ Ranson, 9.

apparent that the best theological description for the grounding of lay ecclesial leadership is that of small intentional Christian community. As with synodality, the model of church based on small intentional Christian communities also possesses a long and venerable history in the Church. So, like synodality, the model of small intentional Christian community represents a reclaiming of an ancient way of being church, going back to the earliest Christian communities in the Roman empire and beyond it geographically.

Describing the theological grounding of MPJPs through the model of small intentional Christian communities captures several important theological themes arising from a theology of mission. Firstly, this model captures something of the unique church identity that groups of canonical stewards as MPJPs have in the organisations (boards and their ministries) entrusted to their stewardship as the local “church authority” in and for these organisations. This is to understand that in being intentional Christian communities, communities of canonical stewards can best fulfil their role as bridge-builders between the Church and their organisations’ boards and ministries. In doing so, they are also able to take up a form of spiritual leadership in their leadership of mission.

Related to this last point is that, secondly, in understanding themselves as small intentional Christian communities, individual canonical stewards might better comprehend and so enact their collective identity as a canonically created union of hearts and minds for mission, acting as one communion or community. In this, as small intentional Christian communities, communities of canonical stewards may be better able to understand their witness of communion to both the Church and the communities of their ministries.

A third strength of this model lies in the specific witness of mission in the healing and teaching ministries of Jesus Christ. A small intentional Christian community is one in the Church that is gathered as kin to each other and God, by a God who, in our experience of the calling of Holy Spirit, we understand as pure relational mission. So just as they witness to this communal mission, a community of canonical stewards is uniquely able to witness in their way of being together as a group to the gospel of Jesus Christ, with its deep preference for the care of the poor, marginalised, suffering, and excluded. For if the Catholic Church itself is brought into being by and for this mission of love as a communion of communities, it makes sense that a community of canonical stewards would then be understood appropriately as a church authority, holding in communion all the various communities that make up their boards and ministries, for that same mission.

To conclude this working paper, we can say that it is the theological identity of a small intentional Christian community that can offer leadership communities of canonical

trustees a unique and specific theological foundation by which to understand and claim their role of lay leadership within the Catholic Church.

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