

## Teleconference

### Intro:

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you about the Lobinger Model, and for the opportunity to respond to your concerns and questions.

I would like to tell you how improbable it was that I, a priest in Pittsburgh, Pa, USA, and Bishop Fritz Lobinger in Aliwal, South Africa met. I believe the God of Providence was at work. I had just finished reading his book, *Like His Brothers and Sisters: Ordaining Community Leaders*. (Claretian Publications, 1998). I was intrigued by his creative proposals for resolving the crisis of the shortage of priests. As a result, I had an earnest desire to discuss this topic with him and decided to call the Chancery in Aliwal, South Africa, in December 2007. I dialed the phone number, introduced myself and told the person on the other end of the phone the reason for my call. I asked if I could have the bishop's phone number so I could speak directly to him. To my surprise and amazement, the voice on the other end of the phone said, "This is Bishop Lobinger." After taking a few seconds to compose myself, I expressed my feelings of excitement and optimism about his proposals. I asked what I could do to promote his ideas. He was promoting an idea that was being considered by the world's bishops in the 1971 World Synod of Bishops: *Viri Probati*, an idea that has resurfaced this past week. The ideas he expressed in his first book evolved into his promotion of teams of elders.

God truly does work in mysterious ways.

Bishop Lobinger believes the Church is facing some big problems: The bad news is there is a scarcity of priests. The good news, however, is: many laity are not waiting to be served but are ready to serve. They are ready to use their charisms in service to the Church.

. Secondly, for decades parishioners became passive because they expected the priest to do everything, and in some quarters, the bad news is they still expect the priest to do everything. However, the good news is: dormant parishioners are becoming less passive and more active.

. And, arguably, there is a lack of spiritual formation of the faithful.

Bishop Lobinger believes these problems are actually opportunities for each mature community to have its own team of ordained elders. A mature community is a self-ministering parish community. (I will describe a mature community in detail in a few minutes.)

In each mature community a small team of three, five, or more could be ordained to preside over the life of the community and over its liturgies – Teams of Elders.

The Eucharist would be conducted not by one of them but always by two or three elders, while the rest of the elders would join worshippers in the pews. They take turns in order to provide variety, and in order to avoid overburdening anybody.

All ordained elders continue to live their daily lives with their families; and they continue to work at their secular jobs.

The role of a full-time priest is being reconceptualized. His main role is “animator and formator of elders and parish leaders.” (I will also address these two concepts in a few minutes.)

The Lobinger model is scripturally based:

Bishop Lobinger’s motto is: “Every community its own team of elders.” This is what St. Paul did when he founded new Christian communities. (Acts 14, 23: In each of these Churches they appointed elders.”) He believes the reason why the Early Church designed the life of Christian communities in this way was not because it was impossible to send a full time priest from somewhere else; the reason was rather that each community should use the charisms which the Spirit had given to their own members. Therefore, he says, we should do so today for the same reason.

The shortage of priests is a reality and a peril that cannot be ignored. It is past time for thoughtful dialogue to replace the silence that has prevailed on this issue. *Can a 1<sup>st</sup> century concept found in the Acts of the Apostles be a 21<sup>st</sup> solution to the shortage of priests? If*

*prayerful men and women gather to discuss this idea, I have no doubt that the Spirit will be there to guide them.*

How does team of elders differ from viri probati?

Teams of elders would work *in combination with* the existing priests instead of replacing them.

The earlier proposal of Viri Probati envisaged the ordination of one proven person at a place where there was no priest, doing most of what the priest had done before. This caused people to understand this concept as a kind of replacement for the missing priests. “Combination” means that both are needed. Both feel needed. This proposal also safeguards the position of the existing celibate priests.

In practice, this means that the team of elders conduct the complete normal liturgical life of the community. Sunday liturgies, baptisms, funerals; care of the sick will be their responsibility. The team will govern the parish community through the parish pastoral council. This includes the normal tasks of administration. The diocese will regulate how administrative tasks will be accomplished.

However, the jurisdiction for the sacrament of reconciliation is a different matter.

It is an established principle that regular private confessions should not be administered by somebody with whom one is closely associated. This will in many cases lead to the rule that elders should normally not administer the form of that

sacrament which includes individual confessions. Canon Law allows for group absolution.

Full-time priests will be Formator priests. They will conduct on-going formation sessions for the elders. The sessions will include evaluation, planning and training, and resolving problems. The full-time priests will also visit individual parishes from time to time to celebrate the Eucharist together with the elders and to meet with parish leaders and parishioners. Just as the bishop tries to visit parishes of the diocese, formator-priests will make such visits as representatives of the bishop, and celebrate the Eucharist in parishes from time to time as the bishop would. (Primus inter pares?)

### What is your vision of Church?

The shortage of priests prompts us to examine the state of Church ministry. However, the shortage of priests is only the trigger, the starter motive. The shortage of priests has forced us to ask ourselves: “What is our vision of Church? Who are we as members of the Church?” If the answer is: “We are people who have to be cared for – never mind by whom,” then this distorted vision can lead to all kinds of strange solutions, such as looking for any kind of substitute for the missing parish priest. If, however, the answer is: “We are called by Christ. We are all called and we are all sent. We have talents and charisms in our midst and want them to be used,” then this vision of Church will lead to an ever increasing sharing in ministry. The vision of

Church is decisive. The key idea should always be: every parish community should bring forth its own ordained Team of Elders.

### The diocese of Pittsburgh:

I would like to tell you what is happening in the diocese of Pittsburgh to illustrate the critical issue of a dwindling priesthood; and of course this situation is not unique to Pittsburgh:

In a letter from the bishop of my diocese in 2015, we priests were informed that, while we have 215 parishes, and approximately 618,750 registered Catholics in the diocese, the projected number of priests in several years will be less than 100. Contrast these statistics with the Pittsburgh Chancery report released in 1949 that showed 805,000 Catholics in 384 parishes and 1,024 priests and 3,857 Religious sisters. Diocesan officials now tell us the 215 parishes will be reduced to ..... 59....parishes in three years.

Many people are disturbed by this alarming situation. However, some of us believe the Holy Spirit is providing the Church with a positive opportunity as evidenced by the commitment and dedication of the laity to their parishes. They love their parishes. God bless the laity for preventing Church walls from tumbling down, as in the Walls of Jericho.

I would also like to share one incident as a retired itinerant priest that highlight some repercussions of absent clergy.

Parishioners at one parish told me when a priest is not available for Sunday Mass, the laity conduct a communion service which they enjoy. No priest. No liturgy of the Eucharist. No

homily. 15 minutes. They are going home. What attitudes are we creating when we underserve our laity and provide them with the minimum? Minimalism undermines a person's faith.

Teams of elders can help resolve this dilemma. A team of elders will be fully committed to *one* parish, merged or not. Elders will continue to live in the community where they have been residing. There may be several former parishes within the new network of a merged parish. Each team of elders who live in that community will serve in that parish community. They already have strong bonds with fellow parishioners. Fellow parishioners trust them because they have elected them to be their elders.

Moreover, *young* elders on a team of elders would be available to interact with children, young adults and millennials. All Elders will know their grieving neighbors and grieve with them; they will know their neighbors' children and be their teachers and role models. They will be brothers and sisters in Christ.

Bishop Lobinger believes the crisis can be used as a steppingstone to help the Church evolve and grow into a participatory Church. It will require imagination and creativity. Present-day prophets are scrutinizing the signs of the times. Bishop Lobinger is one of these prophets.

Prophecy, creativity, pragmatism, and accommodation are required at this time in the Church's history to resolve some of its glaring problems. We can also learn what to do now about the priest shortage by looking at what was successful in the past. When we look at the history of the Church, we often find an approach that was pragmatic. Changes and innovations were

made as different situations arose; and, then, theological reasoning was devised to justify new structures.

*Once again, let's consider what St. Paul did 2,000 years ago. Paul and his companions would visit newly-established Christian communities and when it was time to leave, they realized that it would be difficult for members to be faithful to the gospels without ordained leadership and Eucharist. Acts 14: 23 relates what happened: "In all of these Churches they appointed elders." So, in those formative years in the early Church, two kinds of ordained leaders led the followers of Christ: the visiting apostles and the local teams of elders.*

Bishop Fritz Lobinger makes the case for doing what the early Church did. He encourages the Church to ordain a group of proven leaders, a team of elders, in every well-developed community. Each team would minister only in their own community. Teams of elders and their parish communities would have the oversight of full-time diocesan priests. In this structure, there are two kinds of priests. Both the full-time diocesan priest and the part-time team of elders. Both would administer the sacraments and preach the gospel. Bishop Lobinger makes it clear, however, that he does not want elders to be substitutes for missing priests. *To the contrary, he wants the Church to establish a new form of ordained local leaders with the specific requirement that they live and work in their own community.*

If this idea were implemented, we would certainly have a different kind of Church - a Church that could provide plenty of competent and faithful leaders, readily accessible to parishioners in each Catholic community. Among other positive effects, *teams of elders would assure us that*

*the the Eucharist, the central sacrament of our faith, the source and summit of our spiritual lives, would be available to us on a regular basis.*

According to Bishop Lobinger, the basic principle of teams of elders is that they are a very different community-based form of the one priesthood, emerging from within a community and being part of its life. Teams of elders would work together with diocesan priests instead of replacing them. *The Church would create two different kinds of vocations. It would be the same sacrament of Holy Orders, lived out in different forms.* As St. Peter told us: “Put your gifts at the service of one another.” (1 Peter 4:10)

The concept of teams of elders is *not* a stop gap measure to alleviate the shortage of priests. It is a refreshing new vision of a participatory Church. Bishop Lobinger has begun the dialogue by promoting a pragmatic, creative, theologically and scripturally sound proposal that deserves consideration.

In the March 2010 issue of *U.S. Catholic*, the cover story “Homegrown Clergy: One bishop (Bishop Lobinger) makes the case for a new kind of priesthood.” U.S. Catholic subscribers responded to the concept with enthusiasm; here are some responses:

- 65% BELIEVED THAT ORDAINING ELDERS IS A GOOD WAY TO SOLVE THE PRIEST SHORTAGE.
- 67% AGREE THAT BISHOPS SHOULD BE EMPOWERED TO IMPLEMENT LOCAL SOLUTIONS TO THE PRIEST SHORTAGE (SUCH AS ELDERS) RATHER THAN HAVING TO WAIT FOR A UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED SOLUTION FROM ROME.



These are signs that a large percentage of Catholics are open to a second kind of priesthood. However, more dialogue is needed. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council spoke of the need for the Church to respond to the “signs of the times.” When we look around, we see some signs that Bishop Lobinger’s idea is one whose time has come.

Let’s look at some of the signs:

The first obvious sign is the large number of competent faithful ecclesial ministers, who are currently serving their own parishes in a variety of ministries. They are doing virtually everything that priests and bishops do except preside at Mass, hear confessions, anoint the sick, and administer the sacraments of Holy Orders and Confirmation. Given the present numbers of lay ecclesial ministers, we actually have a superabundant pool of candidates for teams of elders.

This means the full time diocesan priests are responsible for identifying charisms of parishioners, coordinating their charisms for ecclesial ministry, teaching elders through on-going education and formation to be leaders in their parishes.

shepherds who live with their sheep; to quote Pope Francis “they would smell like their sheep.” They are not strangers. They are neighbors. They are fellow parishioners. They are sheep in the same flock.

And so, I ask you this question: Is God challenging us to become a different kind of Church?

The Church has not been a static entity. For 2,000 years it has evolved and adapted to the culture and the spirit of the times. While its human structures have changed to best meet the needs of God's people, the mission and the message have remained the same. St. Thomas More said that tradition is the adaptation to changing kinds of society of the one fundamental message. God is challenging us to be the kind of Church that is needed for this time, for these people.

A new vision of Church is at stake. It is the same sacrament of Holy Orders for two different roles. This is not an emergency plan. It is not a transitional measure that will be abandoned if one day we were to have a sufficient number of full-time priests. Each community should use the charisms which the Spirit has given to their own members. Even if we would have many vocations to the priesthood in the future, teams of elders would remain in their parish communities.

Church leaders will cause great harm to the Church if they continue to do the same things over and over again and expect different results. Isn't this Einstein's definition of insanity?

And - Remember what Adam remarked to Eve as they were driven from the Garden of Eden, "My dear, we are entering into a period of transition."

As dioceses develop consultative planning processes to transition into restructured parishes and ministries and reconceptualized roles of its ordained and non-ordained ministers, tradition must be related faithfully, yet there must be a creative response to the needs of new demands in present and future generations.

Change is an on-going aspect of life. Change is a cyclical process of genesis, growth, breakdown and disintegration leading to a new genesis. Arguably, our Church is in the process of breakdown and disintegration – leading to a new genesis.

As in every time and culture, the Church is always called upon to adapt to the changing needs of men and women in the Christian community. Church leaders have the responsibility to discern what needs to change and what needs to remain stable and constant.

When we are sealed in our past, we prevent God from doing something new in our lives. The very ground is shifting beneath us. What is called for is nothing less than all of us to reconceptualize our roles.

Bishop Lobinger is reconceptualizing our roles. He is thinking about who we can become. He believes our problems are opportunities for each mature community to have its own team of ordained elders.

Bishop Lobinger emphasizes the need for always ordaining three, four or even more as a team. This means:

- . They should not want to work alone.
- . Working as a team, they would not be overburdened.
- . They would provide more variety if liturgies are led in rotation by different persons on the team.
- . A team concept would attract community-minded candidates and discourage lone wolves.
- . A team can include younger candidates, as well as older candidates.
- . A team can adjust to the changing times more easily than one person.
- . When somebody becomes less suitable, that person can step back.

#### STEP ONE:

Before a community can even begin to think about having a team of elders, it must be a MATURE COMMUNITY – a self-ministering community – a full-ministry community. It must be a parish that is vibrant and vital; having small faith

communities, active ministries; teams for leading their liturgies, catechetical leaders, youth leaders; not a parish with passive parishioners, but parishioners who are involved and committed.

Bishop Lobinger believes strongly that this is the indispensable Step One. We are not waiting for someone to come from outside the parish to do all this for us. Together, we continue the Mission of Christ.

This also means that the majority of parishioners, what I call the Critical Mass, have overcome the stage where they prefer to be served by a priest who comes to them from outside the parish community. He believes that many parishes have already become self-ministering communities. What do you think?

I personally know of parishes that are self-ministering. Can you identify some?

That's Step One: parishes must be in the stage of readiness.

STEP TWO: the ordination of a team of elders can become a reality when several criteria have been fulfilled:

- . The faithful have become a self-ministering community, and have proved to be such for a number of years.
- . The bishop and a large part of the diocese have become convinced of this development.
- . The leaders and the priest have accepted the principle of on-going formation.
- .The priest is willing and prepared to become an animator of parish communities and the formator of the local leaders.
- . Before a diocese asks for permission to ordain elders, priests must be ready to assume roles of animators and formators. They would conduct retreats and training sessions for elders and candidates. This does not mean these new roles are their only roles. Ways must be found for them to carry out their traditional roles, such as preaching and sacramental roles.

However, some priests might be asking “do they still need us if elders are doing all the things we used to do?”

Some may see this attitude as a major challenge for accepting the whole theory of Teams of Elders. How do we preserve the fundamental idea that a priest will continue to do what he has always been ordained to do: preside at Eucharist, preach the gospel, forgive sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation, anoint the sick and dying, and be a shepherd to a designated flock?

Ways must be found to assure a priest that he is still a priest without feeling redundant. Specific answers to these questions will provide a stronger argument for priests to accept teams of elders.

What are some other possible reactions to all of this?

We have known no other form of priesthood than what we have today. Many people will find it difficult to accept the idea of a new kind of ordained person who is very similar to them, and as a matter of fact, one of them. There will be resistance. Some resistance will come from some priests.

Women will ask why only proven men and not proven women are admitted. Women will rightly point out that among the “proven” members of the Christian community women are certainly the majority. Bishop Lobinger believes the first hurdle to be taken must be the inclusion of women in the diaconate, which is now open to debate. And, of course, the major obstacle is church law prevents women from ordained priesthood.

Militant conservatives will react forcefully. They have strongly opposed the changes in the Church since the Second Vatican Council. The possibility of a change in the ordained ministry will be alarming to them. They could refuse to receive the sacraments from married elders. They may also threaten to find their own traditional priests.

Elders will not be called “Father” but as “Mr. so and so” like all other people without any special title. Many people will feel uncomfortable about this. They

will remember vividly that the priest was always different from the rest of the congregation.

The two forms of priesthood are purposely different and complement each other. The principle should not be “as similar as possible” but rather “as different as possible.” The ordination is identical, the appearance is different.

And, we must define the roles of deacons in the Church when Teams of Elders are introduced.

The present law of the Church regulates that those who are ordained but retain their secular profession (such as permanent deacons) need not wear clerical dress (canon 288). Elders should not wear clerical garb. They should not try to imitate the priests. They should identify with the local community.

People will ask elders, “are you a priest?” They should reply “we are elders of the community.” They will explain that they have been ordained by the bishop in the same way as the priests and add that in their parish there is no longer a full-time priest.

Let’s look specifically at how elders and priests are similar and yet different.

- . Priests serve a wider region and reside at a regional center, while elders live in the community.
- . Both are priests, but some are called priests, others are called elders.
- . Both are ordained by the same sacrament of Holy Orders.
- . Both proclaim the gospel in the name of the Church.
- . Both administer the sacraments.
- . Both lead the community with and under the bishop.
- . Both are ordained for the whole of their life.
- . Priests are sent to any of the parishes of the diocese, while elders will only serve the community where they live.

- . Priests are called to serve the Church by being totally available, forsaking marriage and family.
- . Elders are called to serve the Church by being involved in people's lives, in their secular jobs, and in family life. If they travel to other parishes they will not exercise their office there.
- . Priests and elders complement each other and work in a combined, collaborative way. They will need each other.
- . Individual promotion is not available to elders. Also, elders must not preside alone; they must preside as a team; they rotate; a single elder does not continually preside.
- . We must not make the mistake of heaping all the community's tasks on the elders. Each parish pastoral council will be responsible to determine how the tasks can be shared among the elders, deacons and ecclesial ministers. The guiding principle should: "What can this person do for the good of the parish community?"
- . Elders should not be given stipends for their services. Salaries from their secular jobs will sustain them and their families. However, full-time priests who have no other sources of income would receive appropriate salaries.
- . If the present trend continues, we will have many elders and fewer priests. This partnership will be sound if it is based on a correct numerical ratio. For instance: in a large network of parishes there could be forty elders and two animator priests; a ratio of 20:1. In some places the ratio may be 15:1 or 50:1, or 60:2.
- . Let's face reality, there are parishes where community building is difficult or improbable.

In some parish communities people don't even want to talk about ordination of elders. They are not in the stage of readiness. But we should not be discouraged by this. In many parishes it is possible. Begin with them.

Let's begin with local pilot projects.

In a pilot project, the establishment of teams of elders can remain confined to one diocese without affecting neighboring dioceses. Bp. Lobinger has published a model application for the ordination of elders that could be presented to the pope. This proposal does not ask for world-wide change. It will only be introduced in a few dioceses that are in the stage of readiness. Apparently, Pope Francis welcomes Conferences of bishops to submit requests to him.

To be ready means that, first of all, we need a clear vision.

This effort will fail if the target vision is not sufficiently clear. This is why we need much more discussion and reflection on the exact aim of our undertaking. Bishop Lobinger admits the project is more complex than he had at first thought. The reluctance of people to change is more powerful than one would have expected. The old form of ministry is more deeply ingrained in us than it had at first appeared. Too many of us tend to leave this reflection to bishops and authorities in Rome. We can only develop relevant forms of ordained and non-ordained ministries when more people reflect and dialogue together.

When we are able to answer the question: what ministries are needed to develop self-ministering parish communities, then we will be able to design relevant forms to meet these needs; one form might be teams of elders. "Form follows function."

Bishop Lobinger strongly believes people of today long for participation. Even where there is no shortage of vocations, we have to search for patterns of ministry which are more participatory.

The principle of participation.

The crucial question for him is the principle. Why are we considering the possibility of ordaining local leaders as elders? Our motive should be the principle of participation. Participation will lead to more and more responsibility. It will eventually lead to the ordination of some proven members of the



community. The community will nominate its candidates, the bishop will decide and ordain.

To repeat: accepting the principle of participation is crucial. Participation is being re-discovered gradually today. Bishop Lobinger asks us to look at the isolated church communities in Africa, where he was bishop, and in Asia; he calls them “the Young Churches” in contrast to the “Old Churches of Europe.

The young churches never had a resident priest. Therefore, they never got the idea that all ministry lies in the hands of the priest who is sent to them from outside their own community. A shortage of priests was the way it was. It was virtually impossible to provide a priest for each community because of this shortage.

The bishops of those areas, full of the spirit of Vatican II, reacted by telling the communities to fulfill as many tasks as could be done without ordained priests. Thus the pattern of self-ministering communities came into being. It became a widespread pattern followed by half of the Church. In hundreds of dioceses in the Young Churches, practically all parishes consist of no other pattern than this one.

Something else happened. Even in the dioceses of North America and Europe vocations dropped drastically at the same time. It is no longer possible to say that the Church is envisioning a resident priest for every parish. Instead, the Church will realize that this emergency phenomenon may actually be the plan of God. Through the shortage of priests, God may be reminding us that in past centuries the role of the ordained was exaggerated while the role of the local community was undervalued. God’s principle is wide participation.

The final question: What can we do?

We priests and laity must convince our United States Conference of Bishops to submit a letter to Pope Francis requesting permission to conduct a pilot study in “mature parishes” in specific dioceses that are in the stage of readiness.

We should look around for parishes and dioceses where we have mature parishes, where some pilot projects of ordaining elders are feasible. Many are

not ready. Some are. They will be a sign and symbol for others who are not yet open or ready to accept Teams of Elders. Let some individual dioceses and parishes that are ready go ahead so that new legislation can follow later.

The Holy Spirit will guide us.