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The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard in Matthew (20:1-16) – Who are the Workers in the Lord’s Vineyard in the American Church?

By Leonardo D. Mendoza

Abstract: The parable of the workers in the Lord’s vineyard in the Gospel of Matthew (20:1-16) provides an insight into the work of God in relation to building the Kingdom of God in our midst. This biblical story provides communities of faith, students of the bible, and people of goodwill with a witness to how God calls people to labor in God’s vineyard and who some of those laborers truly are. Thus, this paper will question who the laborers in the vineyard are in the context of the Church in the United States. Questions posed will challenge the kinds of persons recruited for orders and those who are ordained. Who are they? What are their true intentions? Do they have an authentic vocation? This paper will seek to answer these questions in four parts. The first section will define and debate the concept of the Kingdom of God by juxtaposing the definitions offered by Ratzinger and Romero. The second section will dive into the biblical narrative in Matthew (20:1-16). The third section will discuss the state of ecclesial ministry in the American Church as it relates to the biblical passage. Finally, the paper concludes with a call to action which provides a working framework for reforms that are grounded in the present reality of the Church and the People of God in the United States.

Keywords: Matthew 20, Parable of the Vineyard Workers, Bible, American Church, Ordination, Priestly Formation, Reform

The parable of the workers in the Lord’s vineyard in the Gospel of Matthew (20:1-16)¹ provides an insight into the work of God in relation to building the Kingdom of God in our midst. This biblical story provides communities of faith, students of the bible, and people of goodwill with a witness to how God calls people to labor in God’s vineyard and who some of those laborers truly are. This biblical passage portrays the themes of ordained ministry, clericalism, and church politics. These themes are rooted in the personal sin of envy and have led to the creation of structures in the church that have birthed an environment of structural sin. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to examine the ecclesiology

¹ All biblical citations in this paper are taken from The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV unless otherwise noted.



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of the American Church to build a systematic argument for reform in the structures and power dynamics that are currently present in the life of the church.

The methodology that will shape the scope and purview of this theological inquiry will be the method which Francis Schüssler Fiorenza calls “Decentering Progress: Tradition and Memory as Interruption.” The endgame of this approach is to propose a corrective to an already existing theological notion.² Thus, this method is adequate for the parable of the workers in the Lord’s vineyard and the corrective discourse offered to the ecclesiology of the American Church. The paper will be divided in four parts. The first section will define and debate the concept of the Kingdom of God by juxtaposing the definitions offered by Ratzinger and Romero. The second section will dive into the biblical narrative in Matthew (20:1-16). The third section will discuss the state of ecclesial ministry in the American Church as it relates to the biblical passage. Finally, the paper concludes with a call to action which provides a working framework for reforms that are grounded in the present reality of the Church and the People of God in the United States.

The guiding sources which will serve to connect the broader scope of this paper will be *The Scandal of Redemption – When God Liberates the Poor, Saves Sinners, and Heals Nations* written by Saint Oscar Romero and edited by Carolyn Kurtz and *Jesus of Nazareth – From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* by Pope Benedict XVI. Romero and Benedict XVI provide distinct definitions of the Kingdom of God which provide the necessary scope to engage in a theological debate regarding the way in which the clergy in the American Church engage in pastoral ministry and how it ought to engage in ministry.

Another source that will support the arguments made in this paper is *The Revelatory Text – Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, by Sandra M. Schneiders. *The Revelatory Text* will guide my proposed interpretation of the parable of the workers in the Lord’s vineyard. Lastly, the words of then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio found in the book *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the Twenty-First Century* will provide the context and evidence that support the call to reforms in the church.

The Kingdom of God is the central aspect of liberation theology³ and the biblical story of the workers in the Lord’s vineyard in the Gospel of Matthew begins with the analogy of the Kingdom of

² Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, “Systematic Theology: Tasks and Methods,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* Fiorenza, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2011), 69.

³ Jon Sobrino, “Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology,” in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology: Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1996).

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God. This therefore begs the question, what is the Kingdom of God? For Pope Benedict XVI, the Kingdom of God is Christological, mystical, and ecclesiological. The Kingdom is Christological because it manifests the presence that God has with God's people. The Kingdom is mystical because it is not of this world, rather, the Kingdom is in the hearts and minds of each person.⁴ For Benedict XVI, the Kingdom of God is the unchanging truth that God works and dwells among God's people within the Church.

For Archbishop Romero, however, the Reign of God is the building up of a community to become the people that God wants them to be. A community that is free to love one another as God loves them, a community that comes together to stand in solidarity with one another, a community that makes heaven on earth.⁵ The building up of the Reign of God is a work that is begun first by God but it requires the full active and conscious participation of each person. Each person is called to cooperate with the work of God to bring God's Reign into being. For this the Church and the People of God must speak out against injustices and violations of the dignity and rights of all persons and the Church and the People of God must turn those words into tangible actions by providing support to the marginalized and victimized.⁶ The Reign of God was first made manifest by the birth of Jesus where God revealed Godself and from that point to the present age has walked with the people of God in solidarity in the midst of their lived experience.⁷ For Archbishop Romero, the Reign of God is more than a theoretical concept in Catholic thought, it is the radical collaboration between God and humanity to create a just community rooted in the Gospel message of love of God and love of neighbor.

The liberationist articulation of the Reign of God is not one that Benedict XVI viewed as legitimate, to the former pontiff, certain theologians "violently twist biblical passages to make them fit a predetermined narrative."⁸ Certain articulations of the Reign of God according to Benedict remove God from the conversation and places humanity at the fore instead. In doing so, the concept of the Reign of God is relegated to an "ideological utopian dream" that is incompatible with the Christian religion.⁹ The criticism levied against certain articulation of the Reign of God by Benedict XVI can certainly be applied to the liberationist understanding of the nature and meaning of the Reign of God. However, the

⁴ Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 49-50.

⁵ Óscar A Romero, *The Scandal of Redemption: When God Liberates the Poor, Saves Sinners, and Heals Nations*, ed. Carolyn Kurtz (Walden: Plough Publishing House, 2018), 108-109.

⁶ Romero, *The Scandal of Redemption*, 92-93.

⁷ Romero, *The Scandal of Redemption*, 97.

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 52.

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 54-56.

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liberationist theologians would respond to this criticism by arguing that the purpose of the Church's ministry is to work with the inspirations of the spirit to build the Reign of God in the present. Moreover, liberation theologians will argue that it is complete only in the life to come but that in the meantime the Church must do all that it can to build up the Reign of God and make it a tangible reality for the people of God, especially the marginalized.¹⁰ The liberationist interpretation of the Reign of God undoubtedly provides the church with a framework on how to be a church that ministers to God's people.

Modern methods of biblical interpretation make it possible for theologians today to discuss contemporary issues in light of the lived experiences of the people of God and the reality that the Church faces in our own age.¹¹ This paper therefore will seek to examine this question using the story of laborers of the vineyard to ask who those laborers are in American Church. In a way, this excursus will use the parable as a "window"¹² to question who the laborers in the vineyard are in the context of the American Church.

The witness of the New Testament regarding the teachings and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth have provided the Church with a way to form its mission and ministry in the world, and it has been used by those in positions of power in the Church to justify aspects of their ministry through the ages. The parable of the workers in the Lord's Vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16), is no exception. When Joseph Ratzinger was elected to lead the Roman Catholic Church, he announced to the crowds assembled outside the Basilica of St. Peter that "After the great Pope John Paul II, the Cardinals have elected me, a simple and humble laborer in the vineyard of the Lord."¹³ For Benedict XVI, the parable of the workers in the Lord's Vineyard is about service to the church, particularly service by way of ordained ministry.

This biblical story contains imagery that is filled with deep meaning. Benedict XVI taught that the underlying message of the Vineyard is about having the vocation to priesthood, serving God and the Church in this manner. The wage, which was the same for all the workers regardless of the time spent working in the vineyard was a symbol for everlasting life. Addressing the aspect of the workers that were unhappy with the equal wage for all who labored in the vineyard, Benedict XVI taught that those were representative of those who did not have an authentic call to such labor but did so only for power

¹⁰ Romero, *The Scandal of Redemption*, 97-98.

¹¹ Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 102-105.

¹² Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 113.

¹³ Benedict XVI, "Urbi et Orbi": Apostolic Blessing: First Greeting of His Holiness Benedict XVI, "The Holy See, April 19, 2005, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050419_first-speech.html.

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and prestige.¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI highlighted a key aspect that is of vital importance to the question of this theological investigation, he posits the claim that one should indeed ask who is working in the vineyard? For the vineyard is a symbol of the vast Reign of God.

This parable compares the vineyard and its laborers to the Reign of God (Mt. 20:1), so if Benedict is correct in his interpretation that the parable itself is a symbol of priestly ministry, then the Reign of God made manifest by priestly ministry be reflected in the fruits of such labors? This way in which the Reign of God is made real to the People of God is by making it known to them that the God who sent Jesus Christ to redeem and liberate them from the bondages of personal and structural sin and sent the Holy Spirit to carry on the liberating work of Jesus does in fact love them.¹⁵ This is done through works rooted in faith that the grace of God will provide and make up for that which humanity cannot do for themselves.

The parable (Mt 20:2-13) then goes on to discuss themes such as vocation, ministry, and wages. The parable states that the landowner went out in search of laborers to tend to the vineyard. If one interprets this as a vocation to ordained ministry, then it is the landowner who represents God, who chooses those that are called to serve. Notice how the laborers are not the ones actively seeking to work in the vineyard, they were not competing for a place in it, and the parable states that in some instances, the landowner found them “idly standing by.”

Notice also that there are no mentions of what kinds of tunics they would wear or how great and noble their labor would be. Rather, they are offered a chance to work for something other than themselves, something greater than themselves. This is what attracted them to work in the vineyard. This, however, is not representative of all the laborers in the vineyard, for the parable also mentions those who “grumbled” and resented the wage they were given for their labor. These are representative of those who do not have a vocation but labor in the vineyard hoping that they will never have to worry about job security, hoping that they rise in the ranks to obtain power and prestige, hoping that they will be held in high esteem by those they have a moral obligation to minister to. How many times has the Church and the People of God been hurt by men without a vocation to the priesthood who are ordained? Whether it is the lack of faith, leading a double life, or grave sins and scandal such as sexual abuse and

¹⁴ Catholic News Agency, “Parable of Workers in the Vineyard is about being Called by God, Pope says,” *Catholic News Agency*, September 21, 2008, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/parable_of_workers_in_the_vineyard_is_about_being_called_by_god_pope_say

¹⁵ Jon Sobrino, “Systematic Christology: Jesus Christ, the Absolute Mediator of the Reign of God,” in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology: Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1996), 144.



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misconduct. Men without vocations have, in their quest for honor and power, disfigured the Church, the sons and daughters of God. Their pursuit for “holy” orders is nothing more than a pursuit for a comfortable life, paid for and by others. Indeed, many men in the seminaries and in ordained ministry do in fact see the priesthood as a means to live a life unburdened by the realities of life.

Why would bishops and priests tasked with the recruitment of vocations and formation of priests allow men without vocations into their houses of formation and seminaries? Why would they even ordain them? The answer to this is rooted in the reality that the Church faces in today’s world. The Church in the United States has, in recent times emphasized the need for vocations to the priesthood. The priest shortage has caused a sense of crisis in chanceries throughout the United States.¹⁶ The shortage has caused desperation among bishops, vocation directors, and seminary rectors. Their desperation to increase numbers in their enrollment and active clergy has led them to allow anyone who can meet some basic requirements such as being a fully initiated Catholic male who can pass a criminal background check. Such a desperate act of letting in just about anyone has made the clergy complicit in the mutilation of the Church and the children of God.

The vocations crisis has also led some bishops and directors of the office for vocations in dioceses across the United States to seek innovative ideas to recruit Catholic men to enter their houses of formation or seminaries. The innovative ideas employed by many dioceses range from videos with strokes of a dramatized and romanticized image of the priesthood.¹⁷ More conservative priests in charge of the office for vocations and seminaries include images of seminarians in clerical garb, most notably the black cassock and the roman collar in their promotional materials.¹⁸ While such efforts may be carried out with good intentions, these tactics provide legitimacy to questions concerning the people that are then attracted to enter programs for priestly formation.

If the endgame is to increase numbers rather than fostering actual vocations rooted in good discernment and an actual inquiry amongst the Christian people, these clever recruitment tactics are the new way forward. However, if the clergy truly want to follow the example of the responsible owner of the vineyard, the numbers game must cease, and true reforms ought to be made. These reforms will safeguard the integrity of the vineyard and prevent future disfigurements of the Church and God’s people.

¹⁶ For a concise article on the current vocations crisis, see Robert Mickens, “The Vocations Shortage has become an Acute Crisis,” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 6, 2015, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/roman-observer/vocations-shortage-has-become-acute-crisis>.

¹⁷ For an example of such a video used by the largest diocese in the United States see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApEPnW0oRfE>.

¹⁸ For an example of the use of clerical garb in vocation promotions see: https://www.facebook.com/pg/lavocations/photos/?tab=album&album_id=1340343379459173&ref=page_internal.

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Clerics tasked with the promotion of vocations and seminary formation must always remember that their mission is not to increase the quantity of men who enter formation and are ordained, but rather, their mission is to foster authentic vocations. They must always have the moral courage to resist the temptation to resort to tactics that would increase their enrollment numbers at the expense of God's people.

This theological inquiry has yielded evidence that supports the notion that the Church in the United States has "grumbling" laborers in the vineyard. By allowing men who are more interested in approaching ministry as a career, the garments worn, the benefits of a safety net, and the desire for positions of power within the structures of the Church, into the seminary, those tasked with the promotion of vocations and seminary formation have in effect neglected their duty to be responsible stewards of the vineyard. Thus, they have neglected to safeguard the Reign of God and the People of God. These men without vocations, some of whom are close to or already are ordained ministers can be compared to the laborers who grumbled, the laborers who were unhappy with their wages, who were ungrateful for the opportunity to labor for the Reign of God and the People of God (Mt. 20:8-13). When everything is handed to those in formation and those in orders, it becomes easy for them to forget that they are first and foremost called to serve and not to be served. This parable highlights the importance of remembering one's vocation, to remember how God has called them to share in the work of building up God's Reign in this world. Remembering why they entered the seminary in the first place will undoubtedly begin the necessary inner dialogue needed to begin the bigger conversations that need to take place with God and with those tasked with the formation of future clergy.

The evidence yielded by this theological inquiry has made it clear that the process for priestly formation in the United States needs to be reformed. The reforms most desperately needed are rooted in the academic, spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual formation that are received in the seminary. The recruitment, admissions, and screening processes of aspirants and candidates should be adjusted, certain practices must be stopped and the questioning the motives of aspirants and candidates ought to be more comprehensive. The process of formation must incorporate a process of ongoing discernment for all candidates for orders so that the candidates in conjunction with those tasked with the formation of priests so that they may adequately discern whether they have an authentic vocation to orders. Lastly, every seminarian, particularly those in advanced stages of formation must be involved in ministries to the poorest among them so that they may face the realities that confront the lives of the People of God in their everyday lives.

The first reform ought to be an overhaul of the formation process. The process as it stands now is broken. In many ways, the brokenness of the formation process is directly related to the human, pastoral, spiritual, and intellectual formation that seminarians receive in their respective seminaries. Very rarely

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do they interact with youth and young adults apart from retreats or praise and worship events. Very rarely do they engage in ministry with women who are victims of violence. Very rarely do they interact with people who are not the norm of what they are taught is a “typical Catholic.” The clergy who has been entrusted with the recruitment of vocations and seminary education must be willing to place seminarians where they work with and minister to people outside of a liturgical setting. This would contribute to a decline to the level of discomfort that often comes from a lack of exposure to the real lived experiences of the people of God. The academic, spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual formation must be directed towards the education of the whole person. All aspects of the formation process should have at its heart the mission of forming clergy who are truly conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, whom they are called to serve through the People of God.

The second step in this process of purification ought to include a better screening of candidates.¹⁹ A better screening would watch for signs of “careerism,” this is also known as clericalism. Where the individual seeking ordination does so out to secure a safety net for themselves, to obtain power and prestige, rather than adequately discerning whether God is calling them to ordained ministry.²⁰ These kinds of disordered desire harm the integrity of the sacrament and is a disservice to the People of God, it negates that authentic vocations are responses to the invitation of God who has asked for one’s collaboration in the building up of the Kingdom of God. Admissions committees for American seminaries ought to have the ethical and moral courage to decline to accept candidates who do not have an authentic vocation to orders.

The third step for meaningful reforms must include an emphasis on the necessity of ongoing discernment throughout the entire process of priestly formation. An ongoing discernment during the entire duration of priestly formation is helpful to keep a person grounded. If the candidate for orders is constantly asking themselves if God is calling them, then they will be less likely to perceive themselves as worthy of orders. If the candidate honestly questions the authenticity of their vocation, they will less likely build a superiority complex that would sooner rather than later cause them to mutilate the Church and God’s children.²¹ Seminary formators, formation advisors, spiritual directors, and all other persons involved with the formation of priests should see to it that candidates in all stages of formation know

¹⁹ The 2002 Dallas Charter does not go far enough to safeguard the children or the integrity of the discernment process for the sacrament of Orders. A better screening process of candidates would not only be watchful for a criminal record and suitable mental health, it would also screen for spiritual maturity and affectivity. This however is a discussion for another day as it would derail the matter at hand.

²⁰ Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Image, 2013), 150.

²¹ Bergoglio and Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth*, 149-150.

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and accept that there is nothing wrong with discerning that they do not have a vocation and that they are not failing by leaving the seminary if they have discerned that they are not being called to this form of ministry.

Lastly, seminarians, especially those in advanced stages of formation should be required to engage in pastoral work that gives them an authentic glimpse of the realities of life that the People of God face in their everyday lives. Pope Francis has made this a requirement for all seminarians in formation for the diplomatic wing of the Vatican.²² His rationale for an additional year of formation was to ensure that future priests of the diplomatic corps would be cognizant of the realities of life that the people in their posts experience in their communities and broader societies. The reform which Pope Francis has made for priests in the diplomatic corps is rooted in the witness of the words and actions of Jesus in the scriptures. During his time on earth, Jesus walked with all those who allowed themselves to be encountered by him. Scripture and tradition manifest that every time, the persons who allowed Jesus to accompany them were forever changed.²³ In the present age, seminarians and priests have, by virtue of their calling the responsibility to make the liberating work of God a reality to the People of God.

This paper sought to provide a theological analysis on the kind of aspirants and candidates, and priests the American Church has in the vineyard. This discussion brought out the themes of vocation, clericalism, and careerism as well as the attitudes and approaches laborers of the vineyard have regarding the expectations of their work and their compensation. This in turn led us to a call for reform rooted in a renewed theological understating on the parable of the Kingdom of God in Matthew (20:1-16). The reforms I call for can create a framework that allows for a theological correction in relation to the way priestly vocations are understood, and fostered. Ultimately, this will allow us to safeguard the Kingdom of God and People of God from men who seek ordination for its benefits, namely a social safety net wherein all their cost of living is paid for by others. The theological corrective would keep away those individuals who do not to serve the Kingdom of God or God's people.

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²² Hannah Brockhaus, "Francis Requires Year of Missionary Work for Future Diplomat Priests," *Catholic News Agency*, February 17, 2020, <https://angelusnews.com/news/vatican/francis-requires-year-of-missionary-work-for-future-diplomat-priests/>.

²³ If the priest is truly a person conformed to the image of Christ and acts in person of Christ, then would it not also be reasonable to argue that they too should be forever changed by their experience of God during their process of formation so that they may truly be an "alter Christus?"

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