

Setting a new course for Catholic priestly ministry

Longtime pastor calls for widening the pool of candidates for service in the Church

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There was a novel outpouring of ordained ministry as a new way emerged to meet the people's longing to be fed and nourished with gospel compassion and daily bread (Acts 6, 1-7).

We Catholics and many other Christians of the western liturgical tradition were presented with Luke's account in the first reading this past Sunday, the fifth in the Easter season.

It seems the baptized were called to ministry and had hands laid on them to meet a need – trained sufficiently for the task and set out immediately to do it.

The second reading (1Peter 2, 4-9) then affirms that the priestly charism is in all the baptized, calling all to ministry to sing the praises of God who called us out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

This comes through baptism and nothing more. No extra laying on of hands is required. In baptism we receive the ordained task of leading and enriching the community as a regal, prophetic and priestly people.

As if to emphasize the radically new idea of priest emerging in the early communities of The Way, Luke adds the touch that in Jerusalem many Jews – specifically from the priestly cast – abandoned the old idea of a Jewish cultic priesthood and joined the community of Christians.

Jesus and the temple system

By laying hands on many of the baptized, the community thereby normalized priesthood, radically changing its nature from "one set apart to enter the holy of holies to plead on behalf of the people" to one called to live their baptismal call for a specific role to meet the longing of the community.

The gospel (Jn 14, 1-12) reflects on a frightened and unprepared twelve supping with their beleaguered leader and guide who is facing execution.

He is garnering them to set a new course for creating a life-giving community unencumbered by the baggage of their religious tradition that left God aloof, judgmental, inaccessible and controlled by gatekeepers or shepherds that sometimes closed gates rather than opened them.

Jesus had little good to say about the temple system as he sat opposite it watching the walls swallow up the pennies of widows schooled to believe it would gain them access to the divine.

Jesus threw that out – no more leaders lording it over others or making their power felt in a cruel manipulation and corruption that saw class and privilege oppress the disadvantaged while continuing to line the pockets of the already well-healed.

There was to be no more gatekeeping. All are now a chosen, priestly and consecrated community where hierarchy and class are banished in favor of equality and love in service of one another.

No wonder the twelve talk of their longing in this gospel passage when they say: "We do not know where you are going so how can we know the way?"

They were incredulous that Jesus would trust them to fashion a new religious identity based on his courageous – dare we say "dangerous" – outbursts against the establishment and its traditions, so unprepared.

Why would Jesus think such simple fisherman and tradespeople could carry on without the Master?

Jesus had an answer to that longing and fear in their hearts: I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to God except through me. If you know me, you know my God too.

From this moment you know God and have seen God.

What? Without the Temple and the priests? Without religious books and laws and structures? Without prelates and a myriad of rules to guide us?

The Jesus answer and the early Church answer is a simple YES: "I tell you most solemnly, whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself, they will perform even greater works."

Cunning as serpents and gentle as doves

Jesus trusts us if only we be daring enough to be transformed by passion, surprise, creativity and, most of all, love for one another which cries out from the poor, women, refugees, LGBTIQ+ people, and men who are not gifted with celibacy, but are called to be believers – all royalty, priests and prophets through baptism.

What image do we need for this remarkable turn of events in our time?

Shepherd seems too lame and acquiescent, even in the land once riding on the sheep's back, like Australia. Shepherds here herd thousands of sheep at a time by helicopter and the sheep meander over millions of parched acres trying to fatten themselves for the slaughter.

This doesn't approach anything like the biblical image for me. Maybe there is a biblical image more appropriate for today.

We need communities full of diverse gifts and ministries where leaders and ministers are as cunning as serpents and as gentle as doves, regardless of their gender, marital status, diverse gender identity or sexual orientation, disability, cultural or language background.

We need people alive and awake to the forgotten, silenced, hurt, alone, discriminated against and afraid.

We need folk who can articulate the joy and pain of human vulnerability in such ways that facilitate gatherings of storytelling with word and sacrament in modalities that inspire a new story, dance or song.

We are the baptized incredulous that Jesus would entrust with gathering and inspiring others to be liberated in dangerous ways that connect our lives to the hope and challenge of the Jesus story.

We are called to help them be transformed and more awake to the reality of those around us and less blind to the injustice and inequality that leaves some crying for bread while others are exhausted by their unhealthy wealth and its corresponding emptiness.

We need the kind of presbyters that Peter and Paul "ordained" and that the bishops of Vatican II decreed to be restored, not sacerdotal judges ontologically changed through ordination to emphasize the gap between God and people that can only be bridged by "priestly magic".

It seems that in recent times we have tried to restore something more akin to the ancient sacrificial religious cults, the very thing Jesus and the bishops of Vatican II called us to put behind us.

The restorationist blindness of the last 40 years on ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic tradition has to change not just for survival, although that is now a real risk, but to be faithful to the Gospel, to our prophetic calling and to reaffirm the biblical call of the priestly charism of all the baptized.

Our present path is not only denying people the wonder of the Eucharistic presence wherever two or three or 200,000 meet in Jesus name over a table of bread and wine. Worse, it is letting them think Jesus' promise is unattainable.

There is a real heresy in the trend to return to the sanctuary pietism of sacerdotalism and the trappings of clericalism.

A "titanic" task lies before us

Can we chart a new course with all the daring of the gospel and the challenge of Vatican II? The bishops at the Council (1962-65) chose to call the document on priestly life and ministry *Presbyterorum ordinis*.

In doing so, they wished to emphasize the New Testament notion of priestly ministry as service by presbyters or leaders of community in worship and acts of kindness and justice.

By 1979, Pope John Paul II's first Holy Thursday Letter to Priests had already reverted to the emphasis being on the sacerdotal – the sacrificial, sanctuary model of the Tridentine tradition.

The direction of Vatican II has yet to be tried, although we must recognize the constant efforts of Pope Francis to critique the dangers of the sacerdotal "one set apart" model of clericalism.

It's a "titanic" task to turn around this overloaded sacerdotal ship of Catholicism.

It is just as difficult to avoid the now clear and present danger of sinking as we scrape alongside the iceberg of complacency and the cult of culture warriors who invoke victimhood and discrimination against the establishment.

Jesus only used those terms to unmask the hypocrisy of the establishment and their entrenched power elites.

A new course is essential and we need all the leaders and ministers we can "ordain" to begin pulling the levers and hauling up anchors so we can set sail in a new direction where no one is excluded from the priestly, regal and prophetic community on board the Catholic ark.

Let's set sail with a new vision where each can fulfil his or her God-given giftedness without prejudice.

Let's imagine and create a ship with an ordained community of the baptized – hands laid on, if necessary, for commissioning some community tasks, based on the kaleidoscope of diversity in age, gender, spirituality, training, sexuality, marital status and different abilities.

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