Who Shall Lead Them?

Data shows a complex dynamic at work in the American church

By LARRY WITHAM

Every pastor probably has prayed at a civic event. But as for being in the spotlight, nothing compares with a presidential inauguration. When these inaugural prayers stir controversy, they speak volumes about ministry in America.

At the first Bush inaugural in 2001, for example, evangelist Franklin Graham closed by declaring the name of Jesus Christ. Four years later at President Bush’s second inaugural, Episcopal priest Luis Leon offered prayers from a “nation under God” and concluded in “your most holy name.”

Both prayers got tongues wagging.

For some, the first seemed too doctrinal for a pluralistic America. Others deemed the second too tepid for a “Christian” nation. Whatever the view, the prayers illustrate two important points in the debate over Christian ministry today. First, ministers clearly conceive of their ministry either in more exclusive or more inclusive ways. And second, ministers still have central duties in our society.

Both of these points, in fact, are reassuring when placed against the more pessimistic news about modern American ministry: how it is aging, losing prestige and fraught between “ordained” and “lay” workers in both Catholic and Protestant circles.

Still, it is reassuring to see a vital tension between the more exclusive approach (teaching “the only way”) and the more inclusive approach (offering “a good way”). It also is reassuring to know that ministers still offer many gifts and services that nobody else provides, and this goes far beyond delivering civic prayers, even prayers for U.S. presidents.

The debate about the future of ministry has countless aspects to consider. But the exclusive-inclusive dynamic and the public role of ministry is one place to begin.

Us and them

The exclusive-inclusive debate starts on a very practical issue: how to grow churches and recruit new blood into ministerial ranks.

Among Protestants, the church growth movement argues that the more exclusive the claim of a church — “We are ‘the saved,’ so please join us” — the better it is at drawing and keeping members. More inclusive churches, meanwhile, seem to be declining.

The same exclusive-inclusive dynamic has shaped the Catholic priesthood, according to new studies.

The new generation of American priests, for example, is far more conservative than priests longer in service. At a time when vocations to the priesthood have dropped precipitously, a more exclusive image of the priest seems to have greater drawing power.

Yet while the “exclusive” dynamic seems to be winning the day, it has little chance of serving all of America without its twin, the “inclusive” idea of ministry. In the Protestant example, studies also show that hard-edged exclusivity bordering on fundamentalism finally can backfire, especially as a church proceeds through its generations. It is turning out that doctrinal or leadership rigidity alone does not always make a growing congregation. Most essential to growth is a high standard of belief or commitment, whether that belief is conservative or liberal. Both an exclusive and inclusive ministry can achieve this goal.

With apparent success, a more exclusive view of the Catholic priest as alter Christus, another Christ, has indeed increased vocations in the past decade. Yet this alone cannot keep American Catholicism vital for a simple demographic reason: These priests still are few, lay teachers are many and an older generation of more progressive priests still abounds.

According to studies, new priests tend to favor a “sacramental” role, much as priests did in the 1950s. Priests trained in the Vatican II era, however, tend to favor a “servant-leadership” role, with its emphasis on social justice, collaboration and ecumenism.

More laity

The Vatican II era also invited lay workers into church ministry, from married deacons to lay ecclesial ministers. By augmenting the priesthood with lay ministry, Vatican II
was apparently hoping that an exclusive-inclusive kind of ministry could flourish.

Indeed, it is demographically necessary today. The number of priests still is shrinking while the number of lay ministers — about 30,000 in U.S. parishes — is expected to double in the next decade. Fewer younger priests (51 percent) welcome this “lay” expansion than older priests (91 percent), according to one survey. Hence, a young generation of priests must find ways to reconcile themselves to this new picture of ministry, a picture that shows lay ministers sitting at the table with their priests and taking up administrative and teaching roles in more parishes.

When the U.S. bishops surveyed American parishioners around 2000, most respondents favored “an increasing use of deacons and lay ministers” in response to the priest shortage (as compared to closing or merging parishes).

One message the Holy See does not like to hear, meanwhile, is that by far most Catholics would accept married priests. Already, nearly all of today’s permanent deacons are married.

The role of women in Catholic ministry also has gained a higher profile. Among lay ecclesiastical ministers, women make the strongest showing (perhaps 80 percent). In 2004, moreover, the U.S. bishops reported that half of all diocesan administrators are women, comparing favorably with the secular workplace.

Set apart

In some ways, this new diversity has demanded that the priest be “set apart” even more, a strengthening of priestly identity encouraged by John Paul II and the new seminary manuals. Yet the generational divide remains among priests. Older priests mostly welcome a broader variation in ministry and sharing of authority. Newer priests are more opposed to such leveling; they are far more likely to reject such radical ideas as welcoming back priests who left parish ministry to marry.

Despite the new tensions, both exclusive and inclusive outlooks in ministry have obvious roles to play. “There are things only a priest can do,” said Sr. Katarina Schuth of St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity in Minneapolis. Yet lay leaders are making more decisions in the absence of priests, said sociology professor James D. Davidson. “De facto, this is happening whether everybody in the church agrees with it or not.” What is more, he said, “The expansion of lay ministers and declining number of priests and sisters has led to a more decentralized church.”

Bonding or bridging

This leads to another important aspect of the exclusive-inclusive qualities of ministry, and that is “social capital” — the ability for people to store up Christian character and virtue like money in a savings account. The more exclusive church produces “bonding” social capital. Individuals and families are bonded to a close-knit community, with all the moral benefits. The more inclusive church, however, produces “bridging” social capital, the ability to connect many sects and interest groups in a wider social cooperation. Obviously, both kinds of social capital are essential to a good society and healthy religious life in America.

Ministry typically chooses one or the other as a focus, however. One example is how these different groups tithe.

Protestant evangelical and fundamentalist churches give more exclusively to their church, but mainstream Protestants and many Catholics give more to other social causes in addition to their parish; they are equally generous, but give more widely.

Politics illustrate the two approaches as well. Evangelical Protestants and conservative Catholics focus on a few single issues and are more likely to ask whether a candidate is “one of us.” Mainline Protestants and many Catholics see political “values” more broadly, which can dilute their focus.

Yet, again, both exclusive and inclusive approaches are essential to forming healthy ways that ministry touches civic life. What is often overlooked, in other words, is the impact beyond the national political headlines. Local ministry, for example, remains crucial in bolstering social services and fair political policy, especially in poorer neighborhoods, according to studies.

Whether ministers take the exclusive or inclusive approach, their efforts would come to nothing without having status in churches or society. Here we return to that second reassurance: There are still some things ministers can do that nobody else can do in society.

A needed role in society

Just fewer than 600,000 ordained ministers serve America today (11 percent Catholic priests). About 60 percent of these ministers (both Catholic and Protestant) are “active” in parish leadership, while the rest have other duties or are retired.

American clergy are an older group compared to U.S. citizens in general, averaging above age 50, with
more experience and education. New recruits, in fact, are older than ever before, with ordinations in some mainline Protestant sectors averaging in the 40s. Twenty years ago, most Protestant and Catholic ordinations took place when people were in their mid-20s. The challenge now is to recruit the best and brightest young people into ministry.

Both Protestants and Catholics are doing their part. The old feeder systems have evaporated. For Protestants, it was youth ministry and the church college; for Catholics, the ethnic enclave, the large family and the devoted mother who urged a son into ministry.

Now, evangelical Protestants are raising up apprenticeship ministers in megachurches, while mainline Protestants are reaching out with financial incentives to spiritual-minded college-age students. Catholics, who are educating lay ministers in record numbers, have also re-emphasized asking young men to consider the priesthood. “It is imperative that an invitation be verbalized,” said Fr. Edward J. Burns, who assists dioceses in vocation work. Or, as one Chicago billboard said, “If you’re looking for a sign from God, this is it. Consider the priesthood.”

Why they leave

Once ministers heed the call, it is no small task to keep them in lifelong ministry. Studies of young Catholic priests find that their most common reason for leaving is disillusionment, usually with superiors, fellow priests, the parish or church bureaucracy.

The next largest segment leaves for not having the “gift” of celibacy; in most such cases they want to marry.

The older the Catholic priest, however, the less likely he is thinking about leaving. About a third of Protestant clergy consider departure, finally doubting their call. Among Southern Baptists, where the friction between pastors and lay leaders has been legendary, about 1,000 pastors every year are fired.

When considering the ministry ranks of the future, funding has become no small matter either. In new studies of clergy pay, the Catholic system is given high marks for being more equitable, if slightly lower-paying (with the median priest’s salary and housing allowance being $25,000 a year). The median for Protestant pastors is $40,000, but the differences vary wildly. Some Protestant ministers make six times more than others.

Wisdom counsels, however, that clergy are not in their work for financial benefits, though their focus on ministry can often be crippled by a lack of resources or financial security. Across the board, a more generous church may boost the lifelong call to ministerial work. What should that standard of living be? In one Protestant assessment, clergy pay should be sufficient for pastoral “hospitality and a well-lived life.”

While Catholic clergy are spread thin across geographical parishes, the picture of Protestant ministry is more one of feast and famine. For example, just 10 percent of clergy (those with large congregations) preach to half of American churchgoers. Another 40 percent of clergy, however, serve just 10 percent of churchgoing Americans in countless congregations of fewer than 100 members. Well before the excitement over megachurches (those with more than 2,000 in weekend attendance), many a Catholic priest knew parishes of that size and more. Yet in all, the big church is a major trend in modern America. It is requiring new levels of leadership ability and new frontiers of clergy-lay cooperation. Unfortunately, many small churches on the U.S. landscape are doomed for closure.

Getting it done

Dedicated ministers retain a unique role in church and society; yet that status is always in need of new buttressing. An esprit de corps sometimes helps. Actor Robert Duvall, who portrayed a Pentecostal minister in “The Apostle,” put it nicely when he saw a Catholic bishop blessing fishing boats in New Orleans. “You do it your way, I do it mine,” he said. “But we get it done, don’t we?”

Ministers get it done everywhere, including Washington, where a Catholic chaplain for the first time graces the House of Representatives and presidential inaugurals still lean heavily on Protestant clergy. In any case, ministry gets yet another spotlight and the prayers do the job of both bonding and bridging in America.

In the closing benediction of Bush’s second inauguration ceremony, the black Methodist minister Kirbyjon Caldwell of Texas tried to do a little of both. “Respecting persons of all faiths,” he prayed, “I humbly submit this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”

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Invitaciones

El culto y la vida para el mes de julio 2005

PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ
y RAFAEL SÁNCHEZ ALONSO

“Tenemos el gusto de invitárselas a celebrar...” “Nos complacemos en invitarlas a la fiesta de...” Invitaciones como éstas nos llenan de gozo porque sabemos que vamos a compartir un acontecimiento muy especial con amigos y familiares. Una invitación expresa una bienvenida cariñosa, un llamado a estrechar ese vínculo especial entre los que invitan y los invitados.

Con esto en mente, reflexionemos sobre las Sagradas Escrituras de julio por las que recibimos varias invitaciones, algunas muy directas, otras más sutiles, y todas provenientes de Dios. Entre las invitaciones más acogedoras tenemos la de Isaias (31 y 10 de julio). Por él Dios invita a quienes tienen hambre y sed para que vengan y participen en la gran fiesta de la palabra de Dios: Vengan y coman, vengan y beban, vengan y escúchenme, vengan sin dinero y haré con ustedes un pacto eterno de amor. Para responder a esta invitación, necesitamos tener hambre y necesidad de Dios. Aceptar la invitación de Dios es acoger su palabra en lo más íntimo de nuestro ser, permitiendo que su voluntad se cumpla en nuestras vidas.

Jesucristo es la palabra y la voluntad de Dios encarnada. No sólo personificó esa palabra sino que la hizo asequible a todos mediante sus invitaciones: Vengan a mí, todos ustedes que están cansados y agobiados por el peso de la vida (3 de julio)... por el trabajo que les toma tanto tiempo pero les paga tan poco... Vengan ustedes, las víctimas de esas grandes compañías que despiden a muchos para incrementar las ganancias de pocos... vengan los que se quedan sin trabajo, sin beneficios y viven en la ansiedad de la incertidumbre... Vengan a mí cuando la violencia, las armas y las guerras se multiplican... Vengan a mí los pobres, que tanto sufren en donde la injusticia reina... Vengan a mí las personas mayores, quienes sienten ser una carga para los hijos... Vengan a mí los alcohólicos, los adictos al juego y a las apuestas, los fumadores y drogadictos, y dejen sus adicciones en mis manos acogedoras... Vengan a mí los indeseables, los abandonados, los absuados, los abandonados... Vengan a mí los que tienen problemas en sus relaciones... los esposos infieles... los padres que sufren... los niños rebeldes... Vengan a mí todos. Vengan y aprendan; vengan y descansen en mí.

Algunos evangelios de este mes también nos sugieren varias maneras de responder a las invitaciones cordiales de Jesús. El 10 y el 17 de julio, las parábolas del sembrador y de la semilla nos animan a recibir, a abrirnos, a escuchar y aceptar la palabra de Cristo para que crezca en nosotros y nos transforme. Para ser tierra buena hay que recibir y aceptar su palabra con humildad, fuerza y sinceridad para cambiar lo que se resiste en nosotros a la palabra de Dios.

El 17 de julio, Jesucristo nos dice en la parábola de la levadura y la harina que debemos no sólo aceptar la invitación de Dios sino asimilarla; así su gracia, como la levadura en la masa de harina, transformará nuestro corazón y creceremos hasta alturas espirituales que están más allá de nuestras fuerzas.

El 24 de julio las parábolas gemelas del tesoro escondido y de la perla de gran precio nos recuerdan que las invitaciones de Dios exigen que paguemos un precio muy costoso. La parábola de la red cuenta que arrastra y recoge en sus mallas todo lo que hay en el mar... Así nos enseña que Dios llama a todos y da su gracia tanto a los buenos como a los malos. A Dios y no a nosotros pertenece decidir quién es bueno o malo. Nuestro papel es estar alerta y dispuesto a responder a las invitaciones de Dios, sabiendo que tales invitaciones quizá lleguen de una forma inesperada, mediante personas a quienes juzgamos no ser las más agradables.

El 31 de julio, Jesucristo nos hace una de sus invitaciones más importantes. En la primera lectura, Isaias nos invita a que participemos en el banquete. En el evangelio, Jesús pide a sus discípulos que tomen seriamente sus responsabilidades en el banquete: “Denle ustedes mismos de comer...” Y los discípulos, obedientes a Jesús, tomaron sus cinco panes y dos peces y dieron de comer a toda multitud que les seguía. Las acciones de Cristo –lo bendijo, lo partió, y lo dio–, y su invitación sirven de preludio a la cumbre de sus invitaciones: la ofrenda de sí mismo en la cruz, a quien conmemoramos cada vez que reunidos bendecimos, rompemos, damos y compartimos el Pan de su Cuerpo. En la Eucaristía, Jesucristo renueva su invitación. Y junto con el alimento del Pan de la Palabra y el Pan de su Cuerpo, recibimos el reto de hacer de toda nuestra vida un R.S.V.P., una respuesta sincera a las invitaciones de Dios.
PATRICIA DATCHUCK SÁNCHEZ
AND RAFAEL SÁNCHEZ ALONSO

“You are cordially invited” ... “The honor of your presence is kindly requested” ... these familiar words have the potential to strike a happy chord in the human heart for they carry with them the promise of a pleasurable time spent in the company of family or friends. With these words, a gift is given, and with it we receive an opportunity for celebrating another of the many moments that constitute our lives and punctuate them with joy and companionship. Invitations speak warmth and welcome and form bonds between those who extend them and those who respond to them.

With these thoughts in mind, we turn to the scripture selections for July and find that they include a series of invitations, some quite direct, others more subtle, but all of them issued with the gentle, warm welcome of God.

One of the most appealing invitations this month is mediated by Isaiah, who on July 10 and July 31 speaks for God and bids all who are hungry and thirsty to come and, without money, to feast on the rich fare of God’s word. Come and eat, Come and listen, God implores. Come, that you may have life and refresh you. Come and learn, come and rest your weariness in me.

Some of July’s Sunday Gospels suggest how best to respond to Jesus’ cordial and promising invitations. On July 10 and 17, the parables of the sower and the seed encourage a willingness to hear Jesus’ words and offer them a welcome in which to grow and transform our lives. Good soil means being humble enough to hear, strong enough to listen and honest enough to change in ourselves whatever might resist or reject God’s word.

Through the image of the yeast and the three measures of flour (July 17), believers learn that the word of God must be invited in and fully assimilated so that like leavened dough, it becomes the better part of who we are, it rises up in us like redemptive grace, giving us a warmth of heart we could never hope to achieve on our own. On July 24, through the twin parables of the treasure hidden in a field and the really valuable pearl, we are reminded that God’s invitations to grace and goodness command a great price. Indeed, these cost not less than everything we are and all we ever hope to become. That same Gospel includes a third parable, that of the great dragnet that gathers in all things from the sea. From this we learn that God’s grace falls on the good as well as the bad, and only God decides the difference. For now, rather than judge the value of others or even ourselves, we are to remain alert and responsive to God’s invitations, aware that these may be extended in a manner and through people and events we may least expect.

One of the most important of those invitations is offered by Jesus in the Gospel for July 31. Making good on the banquet invitation extended by Isaiah (first reading) and urging his disciples to recognize their responsibility for similarly extending the invitation (“give them something to eat yourselves”), Jesus, with five loaves and two fish, fed the crowds who had gathered to hear him. Jesus’ invitation and his actions of blessing, breaking and giving served as a prelude to another far more important invitation: the offer of himself, broken in death on the cross and forever remembered and celebrated in the blessing, breaking, giving and sharing of the bread of his body. Each time we gather for Eucharist, we ever hope to become. That same offering was made at Cana (first reading) and at the wedding feast of Jesus’ cousin John. Each time we gather for Eucharist, we ever hope to become. That same offering was made at Cana (first reading) and at the wedding feast of Jesus’ cousin John.

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When Jesus incarnated the words and will of God, he also embodied and made accessible God’s many invitations. Come to me, you weary ones who are burdened by the strain of living (July 3), by jobs that swallow your time and energy and pay too little. Come to me, you victims of economic downsizing, whose lost jobs and benefits make anxiety a daily drudge. Come to me when weapons and wars proliferate. Come to me, you poor: Come when injustices abound. Come, you elderly who are made to feel like a burden by the children to whom you gave your lives. Come, you alcoholics, gamblers, smokers and drug abusers, and leave your addictions in my caring hands. Come to me, you unwanted, you aborted, you abused, you abandoned children.

Come to me when relationships become a struggle, when spouses resist or reject God’s word. Come and listen, God implores. Come, and I will refresh you. Come and learn, come and rest your weariness in me.

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Creating a Missing Persons Bureau

Keeping track of absent seniors isn’t nosy; it’s a sign of caring

By CAROL LUEBERING

With four other people, I have been assigned to take Communion to an elderly couple for some time now. Each of us has a regular date; the last of us covers the fifth Sunday of the month. I look forward to the first Sunday every month because I really enjoy visiting and praying with these two. When I left them at the end of my first visit, they thanked me profusely — and added that they hadn’t received the Eucharist for several years.

I was appalled! How, in a community as caring as I believe mine to be, could such a thing have happened? The answer is pretty simple: No one knew they were no longer able to get to church.

I’ve written before about spreading the bad news. But passing on what we know sometimes isn’t enough. We may have to do a little digging, as well. People are confined to their homes not just by catastrophic illness but also, like this couple, simply by advancing infirmity. Furthermore, privacy laws now prevent hospitals from notifying churches about someone’s admission. Most of all, elderly folks, unwilling to “bother” anybody, often don’t ask for help. Whatever family members there may be don’t always know (or care) about church connections, or they may assume that the community knows.

It isn’t that the absence of these people isn’t noticed. When I first began appearing regularly at a liturgy I don’t usually attend, my neighbors in the pews began to ask what I was doing there. When I told them, their response was usually, “Oh, I wondered what happened to them. I just assumed they had moved.” People do move. They go into smaller quarters, into assisted living or a nursing home; they settle into family member’s home.

This couple remained in their own home with a recently divorced son in residence. There was no reason for anyone to look for them anywhere other than where they had always been. But what a difference it would have made had someone just picked up the phone and given them a call! It seems a natural enough gesture to ask about them: “I haven’t seen you in church and I just wanted to make sure you are all right.”

A crucial part of our ministry, therefore, is to turn the whole community into a detective force. In bulletin notices and announcements, ask the community to be sure to take notice when a neighbor is absent from his or her usual pew for a few weeks.

Urge people to see if they can find out what’s going on by making a phone call to the missing person’s home or to a neighbor or family member. That’s not being nosy; it’s an expression of care — and we all yearn to have someone care about us.

Alerting folks to help uncover hidden needs is not something we can do once and then sit back and relax. Constant communication is called for here lest people forget that they are indeed their brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, and that someone has to report on the need before the rest of Christ’s body can take any action.

Even when a need has been discovered and met, communication remains a key ingredient of our ministry. One time when I called the couple to whom I take Communion to arrange a time, their son answered the phone. How fortunate that I caught him there! His dad was in the hospital having bypass surgery; his mom was temporarily in assisted living. My next call, of course, went to the church office.

I had asked the son to call me when his parents returned home, and he graciously did. I passed that word on to the second-Sunday person and asked her to see that the message got on down the line. That month, unfortunately, did not have a fifth Sunday. Neither did the next. The couple didn’t get a visit on the fifth Sunday of the month until someone remembered this in casual conversation about them.

Love, someone once said, is a lot of hard work. Feeling love isn’t hard; intending to act lovingly is pretty easy too. But living it out requires a lot of attention to detail. That is the kind of job I resist myself. I like projects I can finish much better than those that turn into never-ending chores.

But keeping up on the needs of seniors is like cleaning house for the whole community. The dust keeps on settling even while we sleep. Good housekeepers not only notice that the table needs to be dusted; they also run a finger across the top of the doorframe.

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Adorning the Altar

The altar of the living God has become the dining table

By DAVID PHILIPPART

At the center of our life as church stands the altar. On the day of its dedication, the bishop came, washed the altar with water and anointed it with sacred chrism. Then others robed the altar in fine linen and placed lit candles around it. Does this sound familiar? This in fact is precisely what was done to us, what is done to all those whom God calls to gather around this altar: the baptized. Dedication transforms this lovely table into a consecrated sign of Christ among us. Baptism makes us members of Christ’s body and gives us a seat with Christ at the table with God.

The word “altar” comes from a Latin word that originally meant “to burn up.” Before Christ, altars were fearful places where blood was spilled, flesh seared, incense, grain and oil sacrificed in smoke and fire. Our ancestors sensed that in sacrificing life and that which sustains life, God would be near. Jesus’ self-sacrificing love made the cross the ultimate altar. Because Christ offered his own body to be broken, his own blood to be poured out on the altar of the cross, we no longer have to spill blood or break bodies in violence or in war; in inner city alleys or on “death row,” in the streets of Iraq, the mountains of Afghanistan or the fields of Darfur: Were not Christ’s sacred body and precious blood enough?

So the Christian altar is no longer the blazing pit or the executioner’s weapon. Rising from the dead, Christ has changed the cross into the tree of life, shading beneath its boughs a table. Before suffering and after rising, Christ gathered people together and to God with food and drink. The altar of the living God has become the dining table, our sacrifice the lifting up of our hearts and the sharing of the Easter banquet. At this holy table, we are fed and made whole. From this holy table, we are sent to set a table for the homeless and the hungry.

We bow slowly to the altar, deeply from the waist. The priest and deacon kiss the altar at the beginning of liturgy. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) states that “only what is required for the celebration of Mass may be placed on the mensa (top) of the altar.”

From the beginning of Mass until the Gospel: the Book of the Gospels, if used.

From the preparation of the gifts until after Communion: the cup, plate and additional Communion vessels, the linens (corporal, purificators, and if used, the pall), the Sacramentary. Microphones “that may be needed … should be arranged discreetly” (see paragraph 306).

Candles and the cross “are to be appropriately placed either on or near the altar in a way suited to the design of the altar … so that the whole may be well balanced and not interfere with the faithful’s clear view of what takes place at the altar or what is placed on it,” namely, our gifts of bread and wine (see paragraph 307).

It’s become a good custom to use the processional cross as the altar cross. Carried in, it’s set up near the altar, suggesting the tree of life that shades the Lord’s table.

The altar is covered with “at least one white cloth, its shape, size and decoration in keeping with the altar’s design” (GIRM #304). Additional cloths of “other colors possessing Christian honorific or festive significance according to longstanding local usage” (think of kente cloth in an African American parish, for example) may also be used, “provided that the uppermost cloth covering the mensa is always white in color” (GIRM #304). Think of the altar cloth as the altar’s baptismal garment.

The General Instruction gives this sound principle: “Moderation should be observed in the decoration of the altar” (#305). Don’t use the altar as a backdrop for anything—a children’s banner or the crèche, for example. Leaving space around the altar is a way of indicating its holiness. Try placing candles, the cross and any plants or flowers near, but not up against it. Stand back and make sure that the altar still appears as a holy table, that its shape and purpose are not obscured by plants or flowers. Again, the General Instruction has great advice: “Floral decorations should always be done with moderation and placed around the altar rather than on its mensa” (#305).

Outside of liturgy, even when we are cleaning or setting up or decorating, let’s not use the altar as a workstation. By showing profound respect for the altar, we love Christ (for whom it stands) and we learn to make of all the world’s tables altars for our God.

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Many today confuse their Christianity with their citizenship, always a mistake.

Sparking the Conversation
Homilists engage us all in dialogue between the Word and the world

By GABE HUCK

Over the past two months we have begun an effort to “unfold the mystery” of the Mass, to talk about what we baptized people do when we gather and when we attend to the Word. We did this in the context of specific Sundays of May and June. What follows is directed toward Sunday, July 3, 2005, the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A. It is of course also the Fourth of July weekend. That can’t be ignored. So here we tackle the whole context: the Ordinary Time scripture proclaimed in the eucharistic liturgy on a Sunday that is already loaded with content — and also subtly continuing to talk about the liturgy expected of all of us every Sunday. For that last, we are still talking about elements of the Liturgy of the Word. Note also that the homilist should be seeing the flow of scriptures and should be able to look back at recent weeks or forward to what is coming (in this case, next Sunday’s first reading, Isaiah 55:10-11).

Sunday by Sunday, the church gathers here, and when we are ready to engage ourselves in hard listening and pondering, we sit and we open the book of scriptures and we give attention. When we have read briefly or at length from the Hebrew scriptures, the letters of the New Testament and finally the Gospels, we have this time called the homily, or the sermon, or the preaching. This homily is to ponder the holy scriptures we have heard, and it is to draw on anything else that is done here this morning, and with this, to engage this flesh-and-blood church of ours in a conversation. That is not a conversation among ourselves only, but a conversation with God, to whose word we have given our full attention.

As the homilist, I have the responsibility to spark this conversation. I prepare to do that when I listen through the previous week many times to those readings, when I seek what others have said about them, when I let them come to my heart and mind fresh and strong and with power. I ponder these scriptures always within the place where they live, this Sunday gathering where we, the church, have met to hear God’s word to us and to do our best to gather our intercessions and our thanks and praise and so come to share holy Communion. The words of the scriptures are of a piece with all we do here.

I don’t do this preparation work alone. I do it with eyes and ears open to the church, all of us here, and to the world where this church is living, struggling. That “world,” of course, is not something other than ourselves. We are ourselves that world, some bit of it. So it is our business here to note that we meet today just before a national holiday, the Fourth of July, and that this comes in a troubled time when life-and-death matters are being debated in relation to wars, occupations, trade, jobs, health care, the environment, the use of economic and military power. All of this and more is on our minds, in our hearts, when we attend to the scriptures and figure out how to enter into this homily. The homilist does not speak only as a teacher here, but as a member of the church responsible for engaging the church and its scriptures. I may do this well or badly, but in any case I, along with all homilists, need your attention here and your conversation — not just your criticism — all through the week.

So today, though I am speaking, enter with me into a conversation. Begin with the words of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel that are read today, for these are words cherished by many people. In some Christian churches, especially in eastern and southern Europe, they are seen again and again in the image of Christ holding a book or scroll. Written on that book or scroll is today’s Gospel: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” Here are words held dear especially by those with little power over their own lives: by people whose daily work is hard and long and little rewarded, by people who have no work at all, by people bearing the burdens of debt for life’s necessities, by people addicted, people who are developmentally disabled, people weakened by sickness or by AIDS or by old age. Come to me and I will give you rest. How prisoners and women and harshly treated minorities have clung to those words!

They are words that have somehow seemed to many to sum up the whole of the Gospel of Jesus. They seem true to the one whose mother sang the praise of God bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. But above all,
these words “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened” seem true to the Gospel of that Jesus who did not back off when the people of power came for him — the religious leaders, the military, the bullies, the civil authorities. He became the burdened one.

The words of Jesus that begin today’s reading are a prelude to this “come to me” summons. These opening words are a prayer, a praise of God spoken by Jesus. Jesus began this prayer with words that all his listeners would know well for they were part of everyone’s daily prayer: “I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth.” They are still part of Jewish daily prayer and in fact are the way we pray when we come together to the table and begin our eucharistic prayer. For what is Jesus giving thanks and praise to God, to the Father? “You have hidden these things from the wise and the learned and have revealed them to little ones.”

Don’t we seem to know at once exactly what Jesus is talking about? Who can the “little ones” be? Children, yes. But also all those others who have no say, those whose faces are not seen in places where power is exercised, whose voices are not heard when decisions are being made or when the loot is being divided. Those, we say today, with no access. Those who don’t even know who the “gatekeepers” are. Jesus is saying: Praised are you, God, that you have been hiding from those with plenty of money and power and education, and have been showing yourself to those at the other end, those at the short end of the stick. Today the short end is shorter than ever and there are more people trying to cling for dear life.

These Gospel words call to mind that old summons to the preacher: Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable. They may have a sharper edge because of the weekend when we hear this Gospel. In 1776, a group of wealthy white males signed a document that put their lives and fortunes at risk. This was an assertion that when any government abuses the very reasons for there being a government, then the people (and yes, by “people” they meant only the wealthy white male people) have the right to change that government. Such ideas had been talked about, but here were people putting it in a Declaration of Independence, signing their names. That is what we remember this weekend: that governments are given power by the people, and when a government begins to do more harm than good, the people not only can but must take its power away. Of course there are questions: Whose harm? Whose good? What power? Jefferson and the other signers tried to answer those questions — for their place and time — very concretely. The heritage would best be honored not just with fireworks and parades but with soul searching and boldness.

Many today confuse their Christianity with their citizenship, always a mistake. But it is no mistake to say that as citizens who listen to the word of God in our church, we come to our citizenship with our eyes — and often our mouths, too — wide open. From our Gospel and our communion here we learn where to look and where to pay attention. And if we try to do that, we are always, always, always going to confront those powers in this world — political powers, economic powers, military powers, even institutional church powers — that trample the earth and the poor. Who were baptized are either those little ones, the burdened of the world, or we are their faithful advocates, their voices, their servants somehow.

What is asked of us as Christians who happen to be citizens of the United States? Where should our eyes and thoughts and voices be this weekend especially? We could listen harder to those few words from the prophet Zechariah in this morning’s first reading. This prophet too lived in troubled times when economic and military power were rampaging. The temptation then, as now, was to get on board the strongest chariot, the most expensive tank; to back the brutality and torture as long as it was happening to somebody else; to tighten the borders and draw clear lines between us and them. If we don’t do it to them, they might do it to us, right? Later Jesus would challenge how there could be a “them” and an “us.” But Zechariah took another sort of stance, a lot like prophets before him who spoke of beating swords into plows and studying war no more. Zechariah said: “The messiah/king will banish the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem; the warrior’s bow shall be banished.”

Is it pie in the sky or is it our Gospel duty to speak of banishing the instruments of war and oppression — chariots and horses, bows and arrows? How have we as a church let our prophetic voice be shushed even in a society that is founded on the need for prophetic voices? Standing as we do in the tradition of Zechariah and Jesus, how engaged are we here — we who this weekend remember a time when some people said power comes from the people and the people must stay very clear about that? How uncomfortable are we that so many horses and chariots and bows and arrows to keep our gasoline supply flowing and our shopping centers full? How uncomfortable are we that those horses and chariots and bows and arrows cost so much money that the schools and veterans and so many others are left with the scraps?

This is the conversation to which we are summoned today. God’s word has challenged us. When we gather here next week and open our book, we are going to hear this: “Thus says the Lord, ‘Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth … so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will.’”

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Finding God in the World

The language of religion is the language of mysticism

By RICH HEFFERN

A memory: I was 21, in Vietnam-era military police school, with 40 others in the hill country of central Texas. We were all exhausted, dirty and dispirited on a long march back from the rifle range. Suddenly one of our squad leaders started loudly singing “Monday, Monday,” a then current hit from the folk rock group The Mamas and the Papas.

To a man, we all took up the lyrics. Our drudgery shape-shifted into a make-it-up-as-you-go bugaloo down the gravel road. In a moment, fatigue-clad automatons were transformed into a spunky, badly harmonizing ragtag of uniquely peppy spirits with a whole new lease on life.

Another memory: While living on the West Coast, I was driving home from a concert in my battered little convertible across the Golden Gate Bridge. Below, the siren blast of a freighter outward bound for Cape-town or Singapore duetted with the foghorns on the bridge towers. Past the glittery, bay-reflected lights of Sausalito, I saw ahead the pastel lights of fog-stalked San Francisco looking ever so bedazzling, like the Emerald City of Oz. Off to the right, the titanic, heaving mystery of the Pacific Ocean brooded in darkness.

My mind and heart were swept off their feet and knocked out by how mysteriously, ravishingly beautiful our world can be. The only drugs involved were the salty night air and music pulsing from the radio — the sensual, sawdust charm of Bob Dylan’s voice singing with the organ and his own harmonica backup on “Lay, Lady, Lay” one of his best country fantasies: “Oh moment, stay! Thou art so fair!”

Here’s poet and Christian mystic Thomas Traherne writing in the 17th century:

Joy, pleasure, beauty,
kindness, glory, love
Sleep, day, life, light

Peace, melody, my sight,
My ears and heart did fill
and freely move
All that I saw did me delight.
The Universe was then a world
of pleasure,
To me a universal world of
pleasure.

Theologian Dorothy Soelle points out that the language of religion is the language of mysticism. But because religion has been experienced in authoritarian and patriarchal forms, frequently colluding with the market economy and with consumerism, perhaps this potential has never been realized for ordinary people.

Soelle writes: “The language of religion, by which I do not mean the stolen language in which a male God commands and radiates imperial power, the language of religion is the language of mysticism: I am entirely and wholly in God. I cannot fall out of God at all, I am indestructible. ‘Who can separate us from the love of Christ?’ we can ask with the mystic Paul. ‘Neither death nor life, neither height nor depth, neither what is, nor what is to come’ (Romans 8:35, 38).”

As an antidote to the addiction of consumerism and materialism, the mystical way is being reclaimed in world religions. A hunger for mystery is evidenced by the increasing attention to Tarot cards, crystals, Wicca, wind chimes, sweat lodges, Centering prayer, lectio divina, gurus, meditation, yoga, crystals, Tibetan religious paintings, the mindfulness disciplines of Buddhism, the ancient Catholic devotions to the Eucharist... the list goes on and on.

British theologian Mary C. Grey warns us that “privatized mysticism is easy for the competitive individualism characteristic of contemporary culture,” but what is really being sought at a societal level is “the recovery of heart, the deepest source of human desire, as an alternative to what is offered by the consumerist banquet of the global market.”

What we seek to recover, according to Grey, is “a community experience both of God’s energy — the Spirit’s greenness, or viriditas as Hildegard of Bingen calls it — and the mystery of intertwined joy and suffering, delight and darkness, the participation in both.”

The memories I listed above are examples from my own life of the Spirit’s greenness. Each of us can make up his or her own list from his or her own life experiences. Traherne was doing it 400 years ago. Hildegard of Bingen wrote this description of herself toward the end of the 12th century:

“Listen: There was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honor. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground, and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God.”

Hildegard wrote explicitly about the natural world as God’s creation, charged through and through with God’s beauty and energy, entrusted to our care, to be used by us for our benefit, but not to be mangled or destroyed.

How will the salvation of the world be accomplished? Perhaps partly at least by our wholeheartedly savoring its joys and embracing its sorrows. How can we ensure that our children’s children will have a viable future? By reconnecting to the mystical dimension of religion, by recovering our very hearts.

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Give the Rites Their Due

Effective liturgy requires clarity and focus

By MELISSA NUSSBAUM

I have reached the age when my friends are beginning to die and I am left to mourn. At most of these liturgies the wake is collapsed into the funeral. I call it the mall approach: “All your needs under one rite!”

This approach isn’t working, which is perhaps less a failure of the rites than a failure of the spaces in which the rites are celebrated. The Order of Christian Funerals explains:

“The vigil may be celebrated in the home of the deceased, (or) in the funeral home … (55).”

When did you last attend a vigil in someone’s home? I say “vigil”; you think “funeral home.” Bodies go directly from the deathbed to the embalming table to the “viewing room” to the church to the cemetery. Most mourners believe this is the law.

But 42 states have no laws requiring the services of a funeral home, and organizations like the Funeral and Memorial Societies of America exist to help us reclaim the rites of death and burial.

Mortuaries marry styles — non-denominational chapels meet Grandma’s parlor. It is a space for sitting quietly. It may be a space for a vigil, but not for a wake. And as long as the vigil is held at the mortuary, the wake will continue to lose its hold on us.

For the wake, that hinge linking vigil and funeral, needs room: room for talking and weeping, room for drinking beer and smoking cigars to leaven the taste of ashes in our mouths.

This is impossible in a mortuary, where multiple “viewing rooms” make it hard to wake a person well without overwhelming the mourners whispering in other funeral pods. How else to explain the plush carpets and piped-in music that are meant to muffle, not encourage, speech and song, mournful wails and wild laughter?

Where’s room for the keg in the funeral parlor? The salami and cheese? The community, gathered to weep and wander among the wedding photos — she so beautiful, he so young?

When these human needs are unmet, they do not disappear. They surface in the funeral liturgy.

At most non-Catholic funerals I attend there is no homily. There are eulogies. Words about God are kept to the beginning and end of the liturgy, when the presider/emerger comes out to introduce and conclude the reflections on Joe’s love of golf with a few words about God’s love for Joe.

Catholic funerals more often stick to the rite. Still, the practice of “reflections” (eulogies) from family and friends after Communion takes over the liturgy, because we’re waiting to hear what hasn’t yet been said. We want more.

We want hear the old story, “So, he got his ladder and a chainsaw…” and we’re not leaving until we do, even if the personal story has to be tacked on to the universal story of the God who defeated death on the cross.

They are distinct, though complementary, stories, serving distinct, though complementary needs. They require distinct, though complementary, liturgies in distinct, though complementary, places.

The rite for vigil instructs that after the concluding prayer, “A member or a friend may speak in remembrance of the deceased.” This doesn’t allow for many stories, nor do funeral homes make us want to linger and listen. We feel cheated. So we insert “wake moments” wherever we can, and get a funeral where verbal cues and gestures are all about God, but visual cues are all about Jane. (Is that a cross behind the photos? Is there an altar behind the awards and keepsakes?)

The same principle applies to weddings. One comes to mind in which the bride planned a liturgy that was part recital, part exchange of vows and part therapy session.

Guests at a recital need to listen and watch. Patients in therapy need to listen and talk. But witnesses at a wedding come to confirm and affirm the public promises made between a man and a woman. They do this by speaking and keeping silence, all of it governed not by personal emotion or need but by the rhythm of the rite. They do not speak for themselves; they speak for the baptized.

During the wedding, the rings were passed throughout the assembly so that each one might bless them, then pass the rings to others for their blessing touch, and so on back to the couple. Meant to be therapeutic, it was finally only sad. The rings were passed between relatives speaking to one another only through their attorneys. My daughter whispered, “Someone should take those rings and throw them into the fires of Mount Doom.”

We ask too much of any single liturgy — or any single liturgical space — when we ask it to satisfy every human need. Put “All your needs under one rite!” and neither one’s needs nor the rite will have their due.

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