

Feast of St. Alban
NNECA meeting, 22 June 2004, 7:30 pm Eucharist
1 John 3:13-16, Matt 10:34-42

We've spent the day hearing about total ministry, mutual ministry, and ministry of all the baptized. You've discovered that we don't agree on the language to talk about this phenomenon, other than to affirm that all ministry is grounded in baptism. You've also probably discovered that we believe that effective ministry is collaborative and grows out of the Body of Christ gathered.

You've asked hard questions about evangelism and church growth, and about stewardship. We Nevadans firmly hope you've gotten something of a taste for the gifts and challenges we face in doing ministry here. We don't have all the answers, and we struggle with many of the same issues as does any faithful person in this age. We have gifted people here, as you do in the places where you live and work.

We understand that we have been called together here to change this place into something that looks more like the Reign of God. That is our mission, and it has shaped our ecclesiology. If you take nothing else away with you, I hope you will come to understand that Total Ministry is not a ministry model or a way to provide priests in rural areas. It is an ecclesiology, and it is most fundamentally about how we see ourselves as the Body of Christ.

In my travels around the church in the last ten years, I've been repeatedly struck by the fears and resistance that rise when Total Ministry comes up. What is it that so threatens people when we begin to talk about gifted baptismal ministers and ministries? When we insist that ministry is a mark of the Body of Christ, rather than the right or possession of an individual?

I am certain that some of those fears surely have to do with a perceived threat to professional clergy. I've heard those fears, "what will happen to my job and my livelihood?" Sometimes it's even deeper, "what will happen to my position? my authority?" And from congregations, "if the priest is no longer the resident expert with all the answers, how will we survive? Where will we look for answers or direction?"

I am convinced that we will need all the seminary graduates we can produce in the coming years. But they will need to be formed and deployed differently. In the West, especially the rural West, we desperately need well-educated ministry developers. We need people who can invite others into ministry as equippers and collaborators. But the reality also is that most small rural parishes cannot provide either financial or ministerial rewards adequate to employ such a highly trained professional. There is simply not enough "church work" to fill 40 hours a week in Austin, Nevada. However, there are lots of opportunities for the Episcopalians there to use their gifts in baptismal ministry 24/7, and the church's role is to continue to equip and support those daily ministries. A priest is needed at most a few hours a week. There's probably more work for a deacon, but that congregation doesn't have one – yet.

This is a stewardship issue. To form and educate a "professional" cleric takes \$100K and a three-year displacement, often from family and usually from livelihood. To invest that kind of resources in someone who will serve a congregation of 12 people seems, at the very least, wasteful. Nevada does need someone with those gifts, but right now we need one person available to the whole diocese, as well as the priests who serve larger congregations.

The other significant fear that underlies resistance to mutual ministry surely has to do with the underlying expectation that the baptized will take up their ministerial crosses daily, and

grow up into the full stature of Christ. The reality is that the Church has long been in the business of engendering dependence, and that clearly does not lead to full baptismal ministry!

We need leaders in the church – and I insist that every baptized person is a Christian leader somewhere – we need leaders who know how to lay down their lives for others. We need leaders who are engaged in daily ministry in the world, we need ordained leaders, and we need those who blur the boundaries.

We don't need prima donnas, who need to be the center of ecclesiastical attention. The last time I checked, the Body of Christ already had a head, and it's not you or me or the rector down the street.

Nor do we need passive consumers of ministry who refuse to be adults in this Body. Being children of God does not mean being childish.

We need people who know how to give themselves and their ministries away. Most of you know that old theological term, *kenosis*, emptying. It's most often used of God in becoming human. If we are made in the image of God, it should characterize our being as well. You heard a number of examples today, especially in the sense that social ministries started by this church should be turned over to the community. Our ministry needs to be kenotic as well. The ordained are called to be icons, models, but not the primary doers of ministry! Our job is to equip the saints, to provide formation, education, guidance, support, and then to get out of the way. Sometimes it means leaving a hole, an opening for another to serve.

We're celebrating Alban's feast today, as one who laid down his life for a friend. His martyrdom was baptismal ministry. It was not the priest who was martyred, but the newly baptized, the one washed so clean his name becomes symbol of his baptism, the one whose family and race is Christian. There's a wonderful question in Alban's story. Where was the priest? Was he hiding, or was he getting out of the way so Alban could make his witness?

I sat down a month or so ago and thought hard about the crises we've weathered since I came to Nevada. All of them, without exception, were about the abuse of authority and position, either by clergy or parish officers. We've dealt with child abuse and sexual exploitation, we've seen one person exploit a parish by retiring in place to satisfy that cleric's financial needs. We've seen clergy and vestry officers misuse and steal parish funds – usually because of gambling addictions. We've had both clergy and lay leaders bully others in order to get their way. We've seen other leaders manipulate almost everything to focus on themselves. Universally, these crises are precipitated by narcissism, egotism, self-centeredness, or in our technical terms, idolatry – and sin. They're initiated by people who cannot, will not, or do not know how to lay down their lives for others. And believe me, it's equal opportunity – it occurs among the ordained, both locally and seminary-trained, and lay leaders.

Laying down one's life for others usually begins in letting go of our fond prejudices, and letting God surprise us. It means looking beyond our own narrow desires or ancient expectations. Dying to self is both the crux of ministry and the cross. There is no other way to Easter or the Reign of God.

A baptismal ecclesiology begins in the belief that every member of this church is gifted for, and called to, ministry. It asserts that no ministry is more important than another, but that all are equally valued expressions of members of the Body of Christ. And this ecclesiology announces that the Reign of God is our end. We go toward it as we lay down our lives for the rest of what Sallie McFague calls the Body of God – those in the church and those beyond it, humanity and the rest of creation.

As leaders in this Body, our job is to welcome the prophet, the one who speaks for God rather than self. Our job is to equip those around us to see beyond their own needs and wants. Our job is to model that kind of sacrificial living. That is baptismal ministry and it is the foundation of ordained ministry.

Lay down your life and receive it back a thousand-fold.

Sermon by Bishop Jefferts-Schori of Nevada on Total Ministry