

The church outside the walls

Jamie Manson | Apr. 9, 2009

I first felt called to the priesthood at the age of 13. It was my first Holy Thursday liturgy. And at that moment, at the close of the liturgy, when the "Pange Lingua" is chanted and every fragment of the Eucharist is carried outside of the church, I experienced something that was both irresistible and quite scary.

I wasn't sure what I was feeling, but I felt compelled to dedicate my life to whatever was unfolding before me.

Years later, as an undergraduate theology major, I would learn that this experience had been given a name ? in German, of course. *Das Heilige*, or, "the Holy," had been defined by the philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto (in Latin, of course) as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. That is, a mysterious experience that fills a person simultaneously with fear and desire, trembling and fascination.

Nearly two decades since that Holy Thursday evening, I still believe that this encounter was my initial call to some form of ministerial leadership.

Ironically, just as ordination in some form in my own tradition has become an option for me, thanks to movements such as the Roman Catholic Women Priests, the Ecumenical Catholic Church, and other Catholic reform groups, I find myself questioning deeply the relevance of ordination. The more that time separates me from divinity school and traditional parish life, the more I become aware of the changing spiritual needs of those who have little or no connection to church.

In my work with the poor and homeless, among the six young, deeply committed people who make up our outreach team, we have the pleasure of employing three students from Union Theological Seminary in New York. Every few months, I try to invite them to my home for dinner. At one recent meal, the conversation turned to the shrinking of mainline Protestant congregations and Catholic parishes in the United States. Church, it seems, is no longer speaking to newer generations, and the seminarians are justifiably concerned.

Ideas were tossed around about what a meaningful and engaging church service might look like. I listened quietly, witnessing this group of six justice-oriented, spiritually-conscious, well-intentioned young adults sit around the table, eating and drinking, and sharing some of their deepest concerns and passions.

Realizing that I had been quiet, one of them turned to me and asked what I would have church look like. "Just like this," I answered. We were participating in the church that we are afraid is eroding away. That we were creating church in that moment had little to do with our seminary affiliations, and everything to do with the way in which we were being present to one another.

Though the traditional symbols of church -- priesthood, parish, Mass -- seem to be losing their relevance among young people, other manifestations of church, like shared meals, dialogue, and community seem to break through whenever people gather together out of a shared sense of values, commitment or meaning. Small community gatherings can offer a sense of support and wholeness where people are invited to really listen to one another and to the yearnings of their own inner voices. Whenever people gather to eat together, share

stories, and offer support to one another, something at once profoundly human and deeply sacred is at work because we are learning to be present to one another. If the church is to remain meaningful to new generations, I believe that we who feel called ministry must seek to find and support these "churches" outside of the walls of the church.

While there is an intrinsic value in the role of the minister, the medieval trappings of the current priestly model creates barriers for people, especially those who are unchurched. The beauty of newer generations is their eagerness to participate in the cultivation of their spiritual selves. This new autonomy runs in conflict with the passivity that is still perpetuated by the function of the priest, where the he alone performs the rituals, makes the meaning, confects the Eucharist. Ministers should encourage young people to seek out the ways in which God is already fully alive and present in gatherings of friends, co-workers, even strangers.

Regardless of how secular and postmodern we become, human beings will always seek spiritual leaders to guide them, especially during rites of passage, like birth, commitment, sickness and death. There will always be a need for spiritual leadership, and God will continue to endow some people with profound gifts to serve, challenge and comfort. What kind of servant leaders will be needed to satisfy the hungry hearts of the future? Will people still want to flock to large parishes? Or will smaller, intentional communities offer a deeper sense of belonging, especially as our society becomes increasingly individualistic and isolated. What words, rituals and gatherings will help us make meaning of their lives? Will it continue to be prescribed liturgies, or will the Eucharistic table look a lot more like the dining room table that Jesus and his disciples gathered around on many evenings?

Holy Thursday, in its essence, celebrates the priesthood of all believers. It took me nearly 20 years of discernment to begin to see how profoundly relevant such an idea will be for the generations to come. It is no small paradox that this discernment would not have been possible if my gender had not kept me outside of the walls of ordained ministry. By not being allowed to immediately fulfill my own need to be ordained, I was allowed the vital opportunity to be present to the needs of others. Perhaps my real calling that Holy Thursday night came not so much in the feelings of holiness that I was experiencing, but in the vision of the Eucharist being carried toward new life, new presence, and new wholeness to the many living outside the church's walls.

Jamie Manson received her master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology, personal commitments and sexual ethics with Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. She is the former editor in chief of the Yale magazine Reflections, and currently serves as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, working primarily with New York City's homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the Women's Ordination Conference.

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