

Week Twenty-eight

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. —1 Peter 2:9

Consider these questions from the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer:

Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?

A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

Q. What is the ministry of the laity?

A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.³²

What is ministry? What images come to mind when you hear the word "minister"? The Episcopal Church teaches that we all are called into ministry through our baptism, yet how are we to understand the ministry of all in a church with ordained ministers, those who look to society around us like professionals, not unlike lawyers and physicians, whose occupation is "ministry"? It is frequently suggested that Education for Ministry should change its name because the term "ministry" has too clerical a connotation today in the United States. Some mistake the program for a course in preparation for ordained ministry. Lay persons may resist identifying themselves as ministers outside the boundaries of the church proper.

In cultures where professional classes are privileged, there is sometimes an implied hierarchy of ministers, with the ministry of the ordained set higher than that of the laity. This clericalism, as Fredrica Harris Thompsett notes, can be a mutual endeavor.

"Clericalism" exaggerates the status of clergy while devaluing and patronizing laity. In this mutually disabling relationship, distinction among church people is turned instead into divisions between them. Such separations in function and status raise questions about how we can be different but not alienated, neither domineering nor passive, patronizing nor lazy. Symptoms of clericalism include intimidation, hoarding educational resources, controlling so-called real theological language, congregational passivity, and renunciation of authority.

32. The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation and Seabury Press, 1979), 855.

One clear example of clericalism is to describe a congregation that is searching for a new rector or vicar as “vacant.” In clericalist language laity are often invisible, even in those moments when their energy is most in demand.

Yet clergy and laity both participate in clericalism. There are laity who expect clergy to be elitist and who sharply separate church from society; there are clergy who see part of their role as giving laity jobs to do in church, and whose own theology of authority places them somehow closer to God than to the people of God. Clericalism thrives on low expectations of lay people. Ultimately it inhibits the mission of the whole people of God.³³

William Countryman suggests that one way to recover an appropriate understanding of the ministry of the whole people of God is to reexamine the concept of priesthood. There is, Countryman asserts, a fundamental human priesthood to which we belong, lay and ordained alike, a shared priesthood “forever in process of formation.”³⁴

Read

Countryman, Preface, Part I, “Rediscovering Priesthood,” pages xi–78

Focus

Note how Countryman uses these terms:

Fundamental human priesthood; priesthood of religion; arcana; the borderlands; THE HOLY, TRUTH, etc.

Respond

Countryman says that “ministry” and “priesthood” should be understood as interchangeable terms. Do you agree or disagree? What challenges, if any, do you find with this assertion?

Practice

Identify

What images come to mind when you think of a priest? Choose one to explore.

Explore

What theological perspectives—the world, sin, judgment, repentance, redemption—come most immediately to mind as you consider this image?

33. Fredrica Harris Thompsett, *We Are Theologians: Strengthening the People of the Episcopal Church* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1989), 97–98.

34. L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy*, 30

Connect

How are priests depicted in your contemporary culture?

What are your personal beliefs about priesthood? Do you think of yourself as a priest?

Who are the priests in your life? How are you, or how have you been, a priest to others?

Apply

What new understandings of priesthood/ministry are forming for you now?

Where might you look for opportunities to exercise your own essential priesthood?