In a Mirror Darkly

Praying with an Icon

James Eblen and Victoria Ries

In this essay, which received the 2001 NTR award for theological reflection, the authors develop an understanding of Church and ministry that is grounded in a prayerful meditation on a famed icon.

When Victoria came to the parish as the Pastoral Life Director, people realized that her assignment came from the archbishop, but they were also keenly aware that they had never before been led by a lay woman. In setting up her office, Victoria placed four chairs in a circle that included a table with Andrei Rublev’s icon of the Trinity. She wanted the circle of chairs to extend the circle of the Trinity, and hoped that all important conversations, decisions, and plans would take place in that circle of God’s life, truth and love.

Andrei Rublev’s fifteenth-century icon of the Trinity is currently enjoying great popularity, to judge by the magazines and book jackets that have recently used this image for a front piece. The topics vary from iconography to spirituality, from hospitality to ecclesiology.

Rublev’s icon also serves as a fruitful image for the contemporary discussion about the practice of ministry. This essay attempts to bring the results of praying with the icon into conversation with some theological considerations about the Trinity and then sorts out learnings for ministry.

James Eblen is associate professor of Hebrew Scriptures at the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University. A priest of the Archdiocese of Seattle, he serves at St. George, St. Edward, and St. Paul parishes in Seattle.

Victoria Ries is the Pastoral Life Director at St. Catherine Parish in Seattle. She is adjunct professor at the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University.
Much has been written about Rublev’s icon and its place in the history of iconography. Interpretations are not always in agreement, but the following observations can help our discussion. Every iconographer knows that the Godhead cannot be represented, but the story of three visitors to Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18) gave the artists an event in space and time that they could depict.

Rublev’s three angelic visitors have very similar facial features, matching haloes, and equal-length staffs—all hints about their equality. Gender distinc-
tiveness has been avoided. Their harmonious relationship is further suggested in the geometric shapes that they form within the icon—a circle, an octagon, and a triangle. At the same time, differences in posture and gesture, in clothing and color, and in the background objects make important distinctions. The icon holds the equality of the three and their difference in a wonderfully balanced tension.

One interpretation, relying largely on the colors of the clothing and the order of the Creed identifies the three figures from left to right as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The central figure, in a burgundy chiton and deep blue cloak, wears the dramatic colors of incarnation, the traditional colors of the Christ in many icons. The other figures wear softer, more ethereal hues (Ouspensky and Lossky, 202).

Another interpretation claims that the person in the center is the Father. Behind this figure, the tree marks the biblical setting under the oaks of Mamre where the visitors promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child. The Father is the source of life, seated in the axis running from the tree of life behind to the food on the table and the waiting world in front. The person at the Father’s right is the Son, seated in front of a house—at once the stylized tent of Abraham and Sarah, the place where God makes his Word to dwell, and “the temple of his body” (John 2:21), the Church. The person to the Father’s left is the Holy Spirit. The rocky outcropping in the background represents a mountain height, a place apart, where many have met the Spirit in ecstatic and intimate communion (Evdokimov, 249).

A third interpretation, labeled “persuasive” by some, takes the gesture of the central figure reaching toward the table offering as evidence for the Holy Spirit who thus “sanctifies the sacrifice.” The figure on the right of the icon is the Son who reaches out to welcome the sacrifice and also holds a cross—formed by the staff and the upper fold of his green cloak (Onasch, 10).

The interpretations taken together suggest at least two different possible identities for each character in the icon. Rublev has succeeded wonderfully in depicting the angelic visitors in such a way that their obvious differences cannot divide the group into three self-enclosed, unrelated identities. The equality of the figures and their mutual attentiveness and interaction push the viewer beyond any easy identification of Father, Son, and Spirit based only on differences. The separable qualities are there, but so are the relational qualities. The three figures do not have an identity separable from these relational characteristics. There are no persons without relationships just as there are no relationships without persons. Difference is never lost, but neither does difference triumph over relationship.

What Can Be Gained?

In more traditional theological language, Rublev’s icon holds in tension three characteristics of a trinitarian understanding of God:
• radical equality of persons,
• distinct identity in relationship,
• constant, mutual interchange of life, truth, and love.

The first characteristic was established as a principle of faith only after much argument and theological discussion in the early centuries of the Church. For Arius, the language of Father and Son seemed clearly to give priority to the Father, to make equality, at best, a generous gift from the Father to his only Son, once begotten. Would Arius have been helped by praying with Rublev’s icon? The careful arrangement and styling of the three characters argue eloquently—especially for visual learners—to the equality of persons in God.

The second characteristic is easier to understand from the economy of salvation proclaimed in the Christian Scriptures—to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Rublev’s icon of angel visitors cannot depict such distinct relationships in their exact trinitarian particularity, but he succeeds where two other styles of icon do not.

A common iconographic representation of the scene at the tent of Abraham and Sarah depicts the three angelic visitors seated side by side at a table, dressed exactly alike and facing forward. This representation teaches the equality in a wooden way that leaves no room for the distinctiveness.

Another representation of the trinity, known as the Paternity, depicts an old man (alluding to the “Ancient of Days” in Dan 7) holding a small boy in his lap. The child holds a mandala or discus with a white bird. This icon was actually condemned by the Great Council of Moscow in 1667 both for the “old man with a beard” representation of God and also because the Spirit should be depicted as a dove only in icons of the Lord’s baptism (Ouspensky and Lossky, 204, 165).

Rublev succeeds in maintaining distinctiveness in the three characters, but in such a way that the mystery of their equality cannot be overcome. Indeed, their regard for one another in posture and gesture suggests clearly that their distinct identity is achieved only in relationship.

This focus on interaction around the table leads to the third characteristic of the traditional theological understanding—constant, mutual interchange of life, truth, and love. One is reminded of the classic terms for this interaction: perichoresis (mutually encompassing, dancing around), circumincessio (walking around together), circuminsessio (dwelling together). The final term—circuminsessio, sitting around together, enjoying each other’s presence—is a particularly apt description of Rublev’s arrangement.

Would Arius have been helped by praying with Rublev’s icon?
Peter Drilling develops the appropriateness of these three characteristics from tradition for an understanding of church life and ministry. “The church is the community of persons who self-consciously live out the new interpersonal relationships established by the divine missions in human history” (Drilling, 35). When patterned on the Trinity, characteristics of the Church are:

- absolute equality of dignity among Church members,
- distinct identity of each member,
- *koinonia:* communion of life, truth, and love.

Baptism makes all the members of Christ’s body alive and reconciled—absolutely equal in their new dignity. At the same time, all receive gifts in the Spirit that make each member distinct. Communion results from each member offering their gifts in service and receiving the gifts of others.

In parallel fashion, when patterned on the Trinity, characteristics of ministry are:

- radical equality of each minister and ministry,
- different and distinct charismatic gifts,
- shared service.

Drilling makes clear the serious consequence of the first characteristic. “On the basis of a trinitarian theology of ministry, including the aspect of the divine missions in the world, there is no place, doctrinally, theologically, psychologically or sociologically for any gap between the ordained and the rest of the baptized” (Drilling, 52). This does not deny differences in ministers and ministries, but those distinctions must not overturn the radical equality of all who minister.

The second characteristic—diversity of gifts—is what makes collaboration imperative. The intended communion of life and truth and love only achieves its fullness in the presence of all the various gifts. Paul’s development of the body imagery in First Corinthians tries to make this same point. The body needs the diversity of all its members to be a body. No part of the body can be the whole body, no part of the body can be excluded by the other parts, nor can any part of the body excuse itself. The foot cannot say “because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body.” Nor can the eye say to the hand, “I have no need of you.” Incorporation into Christ through baptism gives all members of the body an equal dignity—alive with the same life—that cannot be upset by the diversity of gifts Paul compares with body parts.

The third characteristic of a trinitarian-based ministry is that the gifts are given “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). The variety of gifts enables the body to offer many kinds of service, a rich communion of life, truth, and love. There can be no distinction between those who serve and those who are served; all
serve and all are served. Paul’s understanding of love as the greatest gift provides the context for the exercise of all the gifts.

What Can Be Lost?

While such theological reflection can enrich the themes of the Rublev icon which engage the eye, the viewer can also consider with profit how much the scene depends upon the carefully orchestrated harmony of the different parts. Confronted with the struggles in his native Croatia to hold equal human dignity together with ethnic differences—and then work together—Miroslav Volf develops powerful reflections on this issue—which he also recognizes as trinitarian in its roots (Volf, 1996). The delicate balance of life in a trinitarian model can be easily undone by human weakness and sinfulness. All three characteristics of trinitarian life must be held faithfully in tension for our lived experience of Church and ministry to be reflective of God’s life, truth, and love.

When equality is compromised, the other can be seen as inferior or not normal, not really one of us. Inclusion suffers because all the opinions do not really count in the consensus. Work can speed up because “we” do not have to consult “them.” Some are dominant, others are subordinate.

When distinct identity is compromised, the other can be either assimilated or abandoned. In assimilation, one gender or ethnic group or stance becomes normative for all. Male experience is normative, white is normative, etc. Here the decision makers may insist on the equality they practice without recognizing their presumption that others process information and reach decisions just as they do. In abandonment, the other is ignored, forgotten, even, literally, kept out of sight. Office assignments and seating arrangements are interesting exercises for dealing with equality and differences.

When mutual sharing of life is compromised, independence can be maintained and interdependence avoided. Distinctions may be acknowledged and equal dignity may be affirmed as a value, but these understandings never become principles of action. Efforts at working together reveal people with “self-enclosed identities”—people who cannot open themselves to genuine giving or receiving from others, but deal out their time and energy in contractual arrangements for what they expect in return (Volf, 176).

What Can Be Learned?

In theological reflection, the Rublev icon of the Trinity yields both profound traditional themes about characteristics of the life of God, and also a darker theme about the fragile quality of human relationships. Praying with the icon is both instructive and challenging, at once inspiring and overwhelming. But this
reflection and prayer move through insight toward action. How do these lessons play out in the lives of ministers and ministry?

Not-without-the-other

Miroslav Volf contributes a useful phrase to this discussion—“not-without-the-other”—which he roots in the trinitarian doctrine of the mutual indwelling of the divine persons. “Perichoresis (mutual indwelling) suggests a dynamic identity in which ‘non-identity’ indwells the ‘identity’ and constitutes it by this indwelling. The Father is the Father not only because he is distinct from the Son and the Spirit but also because through the power of self-giving the Son and the Spirit dwell in him.” Volf explains this self-giving in the Trinity as “a way in which each divine person seeks the ‘glory’ of the others and makes space in itself for the others” (Volf, 180–81).

What does this divine model suggest for the life and work of ministers? What would it mean to make space in oneself for the other? Volf considers ways in which we deal with our relationships, especially around differences like gender. People can decide to get beyond these differences of gender by using tactics like “neither-one-nor-the-other” or “both-one-and-the-other.” But these efforts create a neutered result that either erases or synthesizes the differences. Volf argues instead for “complex identity” which he characterizes as “man-not-without-woman” and “woman-not-without-man.” “The irreducible duality is preserved and made part of a complex identity in which each, in its own way, always already contains the other” (Volf, 187).

Here is a working principle for living the trinitarian life in our communities and in ministry—“not-without-the-other.”

No-head-without-members

The program for new pastors and pastoral life directors in the Seattle Archdiocese stresses the importance of joining the parish. New leaders need to go to everything that happens—meetings, receptions, dinners, work parties—just to see what happens. In Rublev’s view, they join the circle of the community.

In one small parish where a new pastor had been at work for six months, the transition review with the parish staff revealed dismay at a consistent pattern of behavior. The pastor was showing up at all sorts of groups and meetings—this was applauded—but he invariably interrupted the proceedings at some point to announce, “I am the pastor, you know!” They did know, but they were also witnessing the struggle of their new “head” to become part of the body.

Our history has emphasized the priest—even if not the pastor—as head of the parish. Priestly ministry was seen to be the pastoral care of the people in the Church. The ministry of the lay person—more often referred to as an apostolate—was understood to be the transformation of the world.
Now in a report from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Subcommittee on Lay Ministry, conclusions are given on the way toward a new theology of lay ecclesial ministry in partnership with priestly ministry. Here the roots of lay ecclesial ministry are defined as the sacraments of initiation and gifts of the Spirit, not delegation from the pastor or bishop. And the work of these called and gifted lay people is properly “ecclesial ministry”—“publicly recognized and authorized action within a particular ecclesial community” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, NCCB, 1999, 16). Trinitarian categories are invoked in this developing theology, but the praxis of equal dignity of ministers will still take time.

Greeting people after Sunday Mass at the parish where James and Victoria worked together, James was asked, “Are you the priest named on the front of the bulletin under the parish staff?”

“Yes, that’s my name—Father James Eblen—right after Victoria’s name.”

“That’s the problem, Father. How come her name is first?”

“Well, actually, she has the care of the whole parish as the Pastoral Life Director. I’m only here to preside at the liturgies on Sundays.”

“But, Father, you’re the priest. . . .”

This visitor to the parish could acknowledge that the liturgy was prayerful. Victoria had been the preacher that week—that was not the problem. But somehow years of Catholic education about respect for the clergy seemed to be overturned in the ordering of personnel on the parish bulletin.

Such emphasis on the head occurs even when a lay person is appointed by the bishop to provide pastoral care and leadership of the parish. When Victoria began her new assignment as Pastoral Life Director, both staff and parishioners and leadership expected her to make all the decisions—from the color of the new roof to the goals for the parish. At least one staff member kept referring to “her church.” The Pastoral Council was very hesitant to make any decisions fearing that they would just be vetoed, not realizing that it was possible for all to work together toward goals and decisions.

The presence of trained lay ecclesial ministers in parishes can lead to a decline in ministry involvement from all the parishioners. In many cases, a hierarchy develops which excludes others and their gifts. Instead of all the members gathered around the table in harmony and mutuality and equality reflective of Rublev’s icon, some minister or ministers become more important than the others and the others are forgotten or deemed inferior.

**Honoring distinctions**

 Does equal dignity mean that leadership is not important or that trained ministers are not necessary? Of course not, though it does mean that the leader and other ministers must always keep the other in mind and heart. A minister is
always not-without the other ministers. No ministry exists by itself; no minister is capable of all ministries.

What then about the distinctiveness of priesthood? Like all ecclesial ministries, priesthood is grounded in baptism, and, like all ministries, it is distinct from other ministries. Episcopal Bishop Rowan Williams holds the common grounding and the distinct ministry together when he writes: “Priestly ministry is something concentrated in the person and act of Jesus, communicated in baptism, then focused and made public in certain people who are there to speak and represent to the baptized what their common calling is” (Breyfogle, 302).

Susan Wood develops this understanding in her argument that the distinctive claim of ordained ministry cannot be the traditional phrase in persona Christi (in the person of, on behalf of Christ). All Christians are conformed to Christ in baptism; all live and minister in the person of Christ, whether as members of the body, as ecclesial lay ministers, or as priests. She finds the distinction of ordained ministry, instead, in the understanding that the ordained act also in persona ecclesiae (in the person of, on behalf of the Church). “From this sacramental understanding of representation, headship can be understood—not as domination over—but as standing in the place of the community on behalf of the community” (Wood, 115).

To argue that some stand apart in persona Christi capitis (in the person of Christ the head), as if this gave an identity separable from the body, would neglect the understanding that one must first stand in persona ecclesiae in order to stand in persona Christi. In their document on preaching, the American bishops clarify an understanding of the priest as “representative of Christ” by noting: “This way of thinking is true, as long as we remember that one represents Christ by representing the church, for the church is the fundamental sacrament of Christ” (NCCB, 1982, 9).

As the Archbishop of Seattle, Raymond Hunthausen visited the parishes each year for confirmations. To celebrate the occasion most parishes followed the service with a reception for the newly confirmed, their families, and other parishioners to provide an opportunity for meeting their Archbishop. As the parish priest on the sidelines at these receptions, James experienced parishioners more than once coming over to him and asking, “Is that man in the black suit and collar really Archbishop Hunthausen?”

“Of course. Why do you ask?”
“He seems so ordinary. He shook hands with my kids and wanted to know their names. He thanked us all for stopping by to say hello. I couldn’t believe this was the archbishop.”

Suddenly the term “local ordinary” took on new meaning for these people meeting their archbishop. His distinctive role in the community did not become a stance of separation from the ordinary lives of the people. But is not every ordained person “ontologically changed”? Should not he be different?

In recovering an understanding of the triune God, Catherine LaCugna argues that the category of personhood (someone toward another) has taken priority over the category of substance (something in and of itself). In applying this argument to the issue of “ontological change” as effected by ordination, she notes: “Given the principle that person is more ultimate than nature or substance, an ontological change would be not a change in substance but a personal transformation and renewal, and a new capacity for relationship, so that our true nature may be more perfectly expressed” (LaCugna, 404).

Ordination does not set the priest or bishop apart from the community. Rather, through ordination, the priest receives a capacity for broader and deeper relationship with all the members of the community. “Pastors rank good relational skills as the most important criterion for a parish minister” (NCCB, 1999, 38).

**Integrated relationships**

Perhaps the most radical lesson that one takes from praying with the icon of the Trinity is the integrity of the teaching. That is, one can focus on the equality of the angelic visitors or on their distinctiveness or on their interaction around the table. But the icon is teaching a more integrated lesson. In the life of the Trinity, these three characteristics are continually present and active in carefully balanced tension with one another. When ministers carry this lesson from prayerful reflection to active service, the result should look like the same integrated and balanced interaction of the three characteristics.

It would be easier to work, for a week, on tactics for holding ministers in absolutely equal dignity, then turn to ways of honoring the distinctive gifts in each, and so on. But the dynamic interrelationship of the characteristics does not allow such a piecemeal approach. Or perhaps better, because the pieces are integrally related, making an adjustment on one aspect of relationship will shift the others as well.

Paul’s metaphor of the body of Christ suggests precisely this kind of organic relationship, a belonging together quite different from a mechanical arrangement. The parts of a tool shed—walls, shelves, ceiling, shingles—fit together with fasteners, an arrangement that allows for additions or replacements without involvement of parts that are not adjacent. Organic relationships are different, as Paul notes. “If one part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it” (1 Cor 12:26).
Conclusion

Ministry and ministers enjoy this kind of organic relationship. In action, these integrated relationships embody the Rublev icon. Indeed, in living out the relationships of ministry, ministers are drawn into the life of God, taking their place at the table of divine communion.

When Victoria set up her office with the chairs in the room extending and continuing the circle of the three persons around the table in the icon, it was to acknowledge that all are invited to a place in ministry and in the divine communion. Not past inaction, not past hurt, not present fear—nothing can separate us from our call to live and minister in such a way that we reflect the Triune God—even if only in a mirror darkly.

References


